How Are We Saved by Christ?

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In Lent we await the passion of Jesus. We pray, "Save us, savior of the world, for by your cross and resurrection, you have set us free." This is our basic confession. Christ has set us free. *As God's Son*, he has freed us from everything that might hold us back from union with God. And *as a man*, he has shown what it means to be perfectly obedient to the Father. In him we are free to turn to God whole-heartedly.

Tonight, we will look at the church's understanding of salvation by Christ. In particular, we will look at three key themes: sacrifice, satisfaction, and justification.

- Sacrifice comes first. By offering his life as a sacrifice, Jesus expressed his love for the Father. Jesus had received his human nature as a gift from God, just as we have received our lives from God. And when his preaching led him into conflict with the authorities of his time, he offered his life, freely returning to the Father what he had received. By raising him from death, God showed the salvation offered to us all. Jesus is the first-fruits of an eventual harvest that includes us.

- If sacrifice is our first theme, the second is satisfaction. The Catholic tradition teaches that the death of Jesus made satisfaction to the Father for the sins of humanity. In other words, the death of Christ satisfies the Father. It restores the proper relation between God and humanity that God intended from all eternity. The death of Jesus makes satisfaction by offering to God glory and praise from the Son. He represents all of us, the people being transformed by God.

- Justification. Our final theme in expressing the church's doctrine of salvation is justification. We know that, when Christ freed us, he did not simply grant us pardon. We are not simply guilty people whom God has forgotten or neglected to punish. No, the freedom we have been given is changing us. God is at work with us, the followers of Christ, inspiring us, enlightening us, making us just and good.

So our prayer this Lent is a great and holy one. "Save us, savior of the world, for by your cross and resurrection, you have set us free." Christ has indeed set us free.

The Church teaches that the crucifixion is the "cause" of our salvation. This does not mean, of course, that Jesus' act of dying on the cross changed the mind of an angry God who meant to destroy us. Death on the cross was not a price that Jesus had to pay to assuage God's anger. Nor does it mean that the obedience of Jesus Christ blinds the Father to our wrong-doing. God does not simply shut his eyes to the sin in which we are trapped. No, we are saved because God is at work in Christ. He has set us free in reality, and not merely in appearance.

Christian theology has interpreted the key terms in the doctrine of salvation – the key terms of sacrifice, satisfaction, and justification – in a variety of ways. So tonight we will see what these terms are. We will see what they have meant in the past, how they are interpreted in the present, and how we might understand them now.

The Sacrifice of Christ

Let us begin with the first theme in our teaching, the theme of Christ's sacrifice. The New Testament speaks at many points of the death of Jesus as a sacrifice. For example, in the Letter to the Hebrews, we read that Jesus "appeared once for all at the end of the age to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself" (9:26). Implicit in this is the parallel between the death of Jesus and the offering of animal sacrifices in the Book of Leviticus. God requested Moses and the chosen people to offer sacrifices to "make atonement" (Lev. 1:4) for sin. Jesus offered himself for the sins of the world.

But then a question arises. In what sense is the death of Christ a sacrifice? Certainly the Roman soldiers who put Jesus to death did not act as priests. They did not stand around an altar – they stood at Golgotha. The crucifixion was not a liturgy – it was an execution. Only later, as early Christians reflected on the death of Jesus, did they understand his words at the Last Supper. As Jesus passed the cup of wine, he said, "Drink of it, all of you; for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins" (Mt. 26:28). Jesus regarded himself as an offering.

But what does his offer mean? One way of looking at it would be to say that the death of Jesus was a substitution for our own deaths. He died in our place. By dying, he transferred our guilt, the guilt we had incurred by our sins, onto himself. He suffered the punishment that was really meant for us. We call this the substitutionary view of sacrifice. He substituted for us. Our sins were transferred to him.

There is ample reason in the New Testament to view the sacrifice of Jesus in this way. In the Second Letter to the Corinthians, St. Paul wrote, "For our sake he [God] made him [Jesus] to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (5:21). Jesus became a substitute for our sins. Theology calls this a "vicarious" sacrifice. We should have died but Jesus was our substitute. He actually "became sin" and was punished for it, so that we might be saved. He endured the punishment that was, properly speaking, our punishment.

Two Views of Sacrifice

We see this kind of thinking in the twentieth-century Swiss theologian, Hans Urs von Balthasar. Christ could become sin and die for us through what Balthasar called an "inversion."[1] The goodness of God, in which Father and Son are always in perfect harmony, was inverted. The Father sent the Son on a mission, and the Son obediently accepted it. On this mission, the Son had to "become sin," to suffer and to die. In this, God rendered his judgment against sin and evil. Jesus, understood as humanity's sin, was

[1] Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory*, vol. 4, *The Action*, translated by Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1994), vol. 4, p. 191.

banished to hell. But then the Father raised up the Son and restored him. Balthasar's inversion, the reversal by which the Son "became sin," was upended and made right. So in Balthasar's understanding, Christ's sacrifice was a substitute for the sacrifice of ourselves. Our guilt was transferred onto Christ's head.

This interpretation is troubling. First of all, it asks us to take St. Paul literally and to conclude that the sinless Christ actually "became sin." We have to understand that the Father sent the Son to be the scapegoat for all humanity. He was a substitute for us. Further, we have to imagine a division within the Godhead. The Father and the Son, who should enjoy a perfect communion, must separate in order that Christ might become sin and be punished. The Father in effect has to alienate the Son, turning him into sin, so that God can judge it. This transfer of the sin of humanity to Jesus is hard to understand.

Vicarious sacrifice has been challenged in recent years by the German Jesuit theologian, Karl Rahner. He has questioned it in the name of human freedom and God's goodness. To say that the execution of Jesus was a punishment of human sinfulness by God seems to diminish the moral dignity of Jesus' death. Rahner asks whether the substitutionary view truly reflects (and I quote) "the moral dignity of his [sacrificial] action giving honour to God." In other words, Jesus went to his death in obedience to the Father. He did *not* go under compulsion. To say that he was punished instead of us seems unjust to him. Moreover, it puts God in a harsh and troubling light.

Rahner also wonders about the nature of Christ's crucifixion. He asks about "its factual character as pain and death." How do pain and death offer expiation "to the retributive justice of God"?[2] Was it right for the Father to demand retribution for the sins of humanity by torturing the sinless Jesus? Can the God of justice insist on something that is patently unjust? To be sure, Jesus regarded himself as an offering. He said, "The Son of man also came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mk. 10:45). This clearly shows Jesus' willingness to offer his life to the Father. That differs from a divine demand. The concept of vicarious sacrifice requires that Jesus be punished for us. Rahner shows how difficult this is for us to understand.

In short, the sacrifice of Jesus presents us with an alternative. On the one hand, we have the theology of vicarious sacrifice and substitution. Jesus was sacrificed in our place. He "became" the sin that we had committed in order that God might punish it. Our guilt was transferred to him.

On the other hand, we have a theology that emphasizes the freedom with which Christ offered his life to the Father. He died, not in our place, but as an example to us, as the "pioneer and perfecter of our faith" (Heb. 12:2). The Father did not punish him, but sent him to show us the union with God for which we were created. So let us begin by looking at these alternatives, namely vicarious sacrifice (or sacrifice on behalf of others)

[2] Karl Rahner, "Salvation, Section IV, Part A: Redemption," in Rahner (editor), *Sacramentum Mundi: An Encyclopedia of Theology* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1968), vol. VI, p. 427.

and self-sacrifice (Jesus' offering of himself as a sacrament and sign of our own gift of self). What do they mean? Is one preferable to the other?

The Doctrine of Satisfaction

In considering how we are saved by Christ, we must also consider the doctrine of satisfaction. This is the second of our themes tonight. According to this doctrine, the death of Jesus restores the order of justice that had been disturbed by human sinfulness. We find this expressed in St. Paul's treatment of the resurrection of the dead:

> For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die so also in Christ shall all be made alive (1 Cor. 15:21-22).

In Adam all of us have died. From him we inherited a tendency to prefer ourselves to God. Adam's original sin lies upon us. Our personal sins separate us from God.

Now, by the "new man," by Christ, we all shall live. Christ is the seed, as St. Paul wrote, "sown in dishonor," but "raised in glory." From that seed, he is the first fruits. We are the eventual harvest. Christ is the "man from heaven," says Paul (15:49), and we bear his image. It is the image of God, the image with which we were all created. The doctrine of satisfaction teaches that the work of Jesus Christ satisfies the Father. It restores the unity between God and creation.

But this doctrine of satisfaction, like the doctrine of sacrifice, can be understood in a variety of ways. Legal thinking throughout the centuries has influenced the theology of satisfaction. Such thinking can wrongly imply that the relation between God and us is a legal relationship. In the second century, for example, the North African lawyer and theologian, Tertullian, introduced the expression 'satisfaction' into the church's penitential discipline. If Christians had committed public sin, they had to make satisfaction for their sinfulness by doing public penance.

In the eleventh century, Anselm of Canterbury gave the idea of satisfaction its central theological importance. Anselm made the concept of satisfaction juridical. Christ offered reparation, he said, for the offenses committed by humanity. His death propitiated God's anger. An ordinary human being could not undo the sin of all human beings. Only someone whose dignity was equal to God's could make reparation. Jesus Christ, the Father's only Son, died in our place. His life was a payment for human sins. His death was a legal settlement dictated by God.

One problem with this legal theory of satisfaction is that it does not occupy a central place in the New Testament. To be sure, Jesus could speak of his death as a "ransom" (Mk. 10:45). St. Paul could speak of Jesus' death as "expiation by his blood" (Rom. 3:25). But these passages fall short of the juridical concept of satisfaction. The New Testament does not speak of an injury to God. Nor is there an implication that humanity has to make a settlement to an injured party. Ransom and expiation do not suggest that God requires compensation.

Moreover, there is an even greater difficulty about the juridical concept of satisfaction. It can suggest that salvation has to do more with works than with God's graciousness. It can imply that, if human beings can do a wrong to God, they can also make it right. Jesus "made it right" by his suffering on the cross. By dying, he paid the price for all. His death, according to this kind of legal thinking, was a transaction. It was a *quid pro quo*. Such legalism can distort our understanding of God. It can lead us to the false conclusion that, by performing good works, we win our way back into God's favor.

Two Theories of Satisfaction

Modern theology has tried to soften the concept of satisfaction in a variety of ways. One way is to speak not so much about retribution as about atonement. The death of Christ (according to this interpretation) does not compensate God. Rather, it atones or re-unifies God and human beings. Atonement emphasizes the voluntary acceptance of suffering by Jesus. By accepting death in obedience to the Father, Jesus draws down God's grace upon human beings. He honors the Father by aligning his will with God's. Jesus can do this because he is the incarnation of God. His death is understood, not so much as offering compensation for the sins of the many, but as rendering obedience.

This is evident in the theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar, the Swiss theologian I mentioned earlier. For him, the obedience of Jesus to God corresponds to the inner life of God. Within the person of the Holy Trinity, the Son and the Father enjoy a perfect communion. The Holy Spirit is the bond of love between them. Within history, the perfect communion gets expressed as the obedience of Jesus to his heavenly Father. Jesus becomes sin so that God can punish it. Balthasar puts it this way: "The unity lies in the transparence of the one sent who does not do his own will, but the will of him who sent him."[3] Jesus is transparent, in that when we see him, we see the Father. Jesus does the Father's will, not his own. He makes satisfaction by showing the obedience that every person owes to God. The satisfaction achieved by Christ atones or reconciles us.

For Rahner (in contrast to Balthasar), the very concept of satisfaction is problematic, due to its juridical character. It is simply incorrect to conceive of our relationship with God in legal terms. Rahner prefers to follow Eastern Christianity and its teaching about recapitulation. This is the doctrine about Christ at the head of humanity. As physical and moral beings, Rahner says, we are the children of Adam. Adam represents our natural ancestors.

At a more profound level, however, we are children of God. Christ is the new Adam. In him we are reborn. God is at work in Jesus Christ, overcoming our human resistance and the effects of original sin. This is the "objective" side of salvation. Christ makes satisfaction by giving us the opportunity to be reborn and rescued. Recapitulation means that he takes his place at our head.

To this objective side we must also add the subjective. We human beings must accept God's offer. We have to hear God's Word and obey it. By doing so we are

[3] Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*, vol. 7, *The New Covenant*, trans. Brian McNeil, CRV, ed. John Riches (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1991), p. 142.

transformed. God sanctifies, justifies, and reconciles us. When God "takes us over," so to speak, we become God's agents. Rahner puts it this way:

> The action of God appears as the possibility and dynamism of the action of the world, which thus moves in self-transcendence to its fulfillment. . . . World history may well be regarded as humanity's self-liberation from self-alienation.[4]

First we must receive God's offer of "objective" salvation. Then, from the subjective side, we become ambassadors of God. With Christ at our head, we act on God's behalf. We help propel the world to its fulfillment. This is Rahner's view of satisfaction. God is prepared to forgive us in view of Christ's death and resurrection. The Son's loving obedience glorified God. Satisfied by that obedience, God forgives and justifies.

So we can see that the doctrine of satisfaction can be interpreted in at least two ways. One way can be called Balthasar's way of atonement. Satisfaction means that Christ reunited us with God by his act of obedience. He obediently died and underwent for us the punishment of death that was our punishment. He satisfied the Father, and in that way made atonement.

The way of atonement stands in contrast to Rahner's way of recapitulation in Christ. In this light, Christ makes satisfaction by becoming the New Adam. He stands at the head of a new humanity. He culminates God's plan to save all human beings. Through his life, death and resurrection, Christ has brought humanity under his headship.

So how do we view the way that Christ has saved us? Are we reconciled to God by the atoning obedience of Christ? Or are we reborn with Christ as the new Adam? Is God satisfied because Christ has atoned for us, or is God satisfied because Christ has become the head of a new humanity?

The Doctrine of Justification

Let us see how far we have come in understanding our salvation in Christ. We began with the idea of sacrifice. Christians proclaim the death of Christ as a sacrifice on our behalf. But this sacrifice, as we saw, can be understood in two ways. Sacrifice can be understood, first of all, vicariously. We saw this in Balthasar's theology. Christ sacrificed himself on our behalf. He had to "become sin" so that the Father could punish it. But there is another view of sacrifice. In Rahner's view, Christ made a sacrifice by offering himself to the Father. Christians offer ourselves to the Father in union with Christ. So I asked you to choose between vicarious sacrifice and self-sacrifice.

Then we turned to the doctrine of satisfaction. Christ, by his life and death, satisfied the Father with his perfect obedience, giving glory and praise. But we saw that this doctrine of satisfaction can be interpreted in various ways. One is Balthasar's way of atonement. Jesus offered satisfaction by his obedience unto death. He atoned for us, satisfying God and reconciling God to man. The other way is the recapitulation of

[4] Rahner, "Salvation, Section IV, Part C: Soteriology," in Rahner (editor), *Sacramentum Mundi*, vol. VI, p. 437.

Rahner. Jesus, the new Adam, brings all humanity under his headship. This satisfies God whose plan to is to save all. So once again I asked you to choose, this time between atonement and recapitulation.

Now we come to the third and last of our ways of understanding salvation in Christ. It is the doctrine of justification. This is the doctrine that St. Paul developed as a response to the legalism of the Pharisees. It teaches that God justifies us insofar as we place our hope in God's Word. When we listen to God's Word and obey it, God is at work in us, purifying us and making us holy. We do not merely obey God's law. We have a relationship. God comes to reside in our hearts, transforming us, and becoming the innermost principle of our lives.

The doctrine of justification has a long history in Christian apologetics that we can only sketch here in the broadest strokes. At the time of the Protestant Reformation, Luther rediscovered the doctrine of justification by faith. His study of St. Paul's Letter to the Romans taught him that we cannot hope to earn God's favor by good works. The idea that the Church can sell indulgences was particularly reprehensible. Instead of placing our faith in ourselves and our works, Luther said, we should place it in God.

In 1999, as a result of the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification by the Lutheran World Federation and the Catholic Church, Lutherans and Catholics have buried the hatchet, so to speak, on the doctrine of justification. We can agree that we are saved by faith, that is, saved by the God in whom we put our faith. Justification means that God is at work in us, freeing us from the slavery of sin.

Understandings of Justification

Yet this term justification, like the terms sacrifice and substitution, is susceptible to various interpretations. One way of understanding justification is to see it as the immediate consequence of Christ's redemptive act. Christ died for our sins, according to this point of view, and justification is the immediate effect. We see this in Balthasar's teaching about the essential being of the Messiah. He calls that essential being the "Christ form." Jesus was so perfectly united to the Father in obedience that Balthasar can say that his sacrifice was essentially God's act.

In addition, Balthasar speaks of the crucifixion as a "cosmic liturgy." He says that "The 'cosmic liturgy' was basically nothing other than the act whereby the created 'Thou' gave back all glory to the absolute 'I.'"[5] The "created 'Thou'" is Jesus. The "absolute 'I'" is the Father. The death on Calvary is not so much the execution of a man (for Balthasar) as it is a liturgical action. In it the created Jesus glorified the absolute Father. It was a "liturgy" in the sense that it was an outward expression of the perfect relationship between God and human beings. At the moment of his death, Jesus epitomized that relationship. At that point the redemption reached its climax. What followed were its effects: freedom from sin, rebirth in God, possession of the Spirit, and

[5] Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord*, vol. 6, *The Old Covenant*, trans. Brian McNeil, CRV, and Erasmo Leiva-Merikakis, ed. John Riches (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1991), p. 144.

above all, justification. Jesus' death on the cross immediately established justice. It justified all who live in him.

To speak this way is to view justification in objective terms, as God's initiative. And viewed objectively, justification does have this once-and-for all character. It is God's act, prior to any response by us, and theology usually emphasizes its objective character. By sending the Son, God the Father has expressed his saving will. Our subjective response comes later.

But what does justification or redemption mean to us? This is the subjective dimension. In Rahner's view, redemption, including our justification, means this:

> The constitution by God of that concrete historical situation of freedom in which the will of God to forgive and save is exercised and manifests itself as an offer made to the freedom of man.[6]

Justification is God's offer to forgive and save. God has created the historical situation in which this takes place. God's offer is made to our freedom. That offer is objective. Our reception of it is subjective. These two dimensions form a single reality. So yes, we are justified once and for all in Jesus Christ. But human beings have to appropriate that justification. And that is the work of human history.

Conclusion

Let me sum up. This evening we have examined three dimensions of how we are saved by Jesus Christ. We saw that the death of Jesus was a sacrifice. He had received his humanity from the Father, and he freely returned it. Like him, we are to view our lives in a sacrificial way. We have received a gift. We will eventually have to make a return. As Christians we do so in union with Christ, adding our life to his. Let us make our lives a spiritual sacrifice.

We also focused on the doctrine of satisfaction. We saw that the actions of Jesus satisfied the Father, exemplifying the right relation that ought to exist between human beings and God. Satisfaction does not mean that our relationship to God is a legal one. We are not saved by obeying laws, but by putting our hope in God.

Finally we looked at the way in which God works in us, inspiring us, animating us, and – above all – justifying us. In this, God has taken the initiative, and his sending of the Son is the culmination of his will to save. That is the objective expression of God's will. But in that objective act, God has created a world. In that world we are invited and empowered to respond to God. Let that be our hope this Lent. Let us respond to God's invitation, assimilating the justice of Christ, and acting in union with him. Save us, savior of the world, for by your cross and resurrection, you have set us free.

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[6] Rahner, "Salvation, Section IV: Theology, Part A: Redemption," in *Sacramentum Mundi*, vol. VI, p. 425.