For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate; he suffered death and was buried.

The Nicene Creed

Atonement means at-one-ment; the bringing together of two estranged parties.

The doctrine of the Atonement expresses our Christian belief that God was, in Jesus, reconciling the world to himself; that in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, God made us 'at one' with himself.

But what does that mean?

To understand the atonement we must begin with ourselves; men and women who have rejected God and chosen to please ourselves. In the words of scripture, we have sinned.

Sin

We need only to check the daily newspapers to see that something is very wrong with our world.

A massacre in a refugee camp; a young mother murders her baby; a 12 year old ‘terrorist’ is beaten to death by his captors; another corrupt politician is exposed; yet another 100,000 people die of starvation somewhere in Africa; and behind it all is the maniacal race to destruction by nations already capable of destroying the planet twice over. Something is very obviously wrong.

What is wrong is that we have sinned. We have become separated from God, from one another and from our own true nature. We have sinned. A contemporary writer captures the flavour of sin when he defines it rudely but succinctly as HPtFtU; 'our Human Propensity to F--- things Up'.

Sin is not just 'being naughty' or 'doing bad things'. It is far more serious than that. It’s a disease or sickness that afflicts our very nature. Saint Paul describes the symptoms: ‘...I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do.’

Romans 7:19

But what can we do about it?

It seems we can do nothing about it. We have cut ourselves off from one another, from our own true selves, and from God, the origin and aim of our existence. And it is our profound humiliation that we can do nothing to effect a reconciliation. Only God can do that. And that is what God has done in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

Which brings us up against one of the most basic questions of our faith. If God is good and just and merciful, why did Jesus have to die? Why didn’t Jesus just give us the message: ‘God loves you and forgives you’? Why did he have to die?

Why did Jesus have to die?

Christians have struggled with this question and they have tried to answer it a number of ways.

One would have it that the world was the scene of a cosmic battle between God and the devil. That, because of our sin, men and women were in slavery to the devil and the blood of Jesus was a ransom paid to the devil to set us free.

This theory is still popular among many of the fundamentalist sects but, for the thinking person, it poses more problems than it answers.

Could God really be in contest with another comparable power? Could God ever be in a situation where He would have to pay a ransom to the devil? If so, surely He can’t be the One, Almighty God of the Bible.
Another theory comes from Anselm, a medieval theologian who lived from 1033 to 1109. Anselm started with the principle that wrongdoing must be punished; that before God could forgive us, the demands of justice had to be met. He reasoned that our sin was so massive that we ourselves could never pay the required penalty. Only God could pay it. So God, in Jesus, took the punishment on our behalf.

But is God really bound by such principles? And is justice served by the offender going free while an innocent victim pays the penalty?

Yet another theory comes from a near contemporary of Anselm named Abelard. (1070 to 1142)
Abelard’s view of the cross was relatively simple. He said it was an awesome and dramatic demonstration of God’s love for us; so awesome and dramatic that it shocks us into repentance, thereby making it possible for us to be forgiven and to be reconciled with God.

But if that is the case, what difference did the cross make? Our salvation would depend on whether or not we are shockable.

None of these traditional theories satisfactorily answers our basic question. So perhaps an answer lies, not in theories, but in the message of the New Testament.

Absence and Presence

The writers of the New Testament use many different pictures to stress the importance of the cross to our Christian understanding.

They employ the language of Hebrew religion, the language of the law courts and the language of the institution of slavery. But they all agree with Saint Paul that the basic meaning of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus is that ‘God was, in Christ, reconciling the world to himself’. (2 Corinthians 5:19)

You will remember that sin is separation from God and that the cure for sin is our reconciliation with God. Sin is the absence of God from our lives and our world.

Reconciliation is effected by the presence of God in our lives and our world.

Jesus came proclaiming that the Kingdom of God was at hand, indeed, already beginning. In his teaching and in his actions he demonstrated the power of God over sin and evil. In his presence people were brought face to face with their sin. By his presence people were forgiven and made whole.

In everything Jesus said and did, people were confronted with the presence of God in such a way that those closest to him came to believe that God was present in their lives.

But it didn’t end there. Jesus had to die as an inevitable consequence of his humanity. We all have to die and Jesus shared with us that final consequence of life.

He died a violent death because this world is a violent and sinful place and death is the inevitable consequence of sin. He truly, in the words of the Apostle’s Creed, ‘descended into hell’ and made God’s presence known even in the deepest and darkest realms.

Saint Paul asks: ‘What then shall we say to all this? If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, will he not also give us all things with him? Who shall bring any charge against God’s elect? It is God who justifies; who is to condemn? It is Jesus Christ who died, yes, who was raised from the dead, who is at the right hand of God, who intercedes for us. Who then shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?... No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will ever be able to separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ our Lord.’ (Romans 8:31-39)

Jesus died so that we, living or dying, might be truly at one with God; so that nothing in all creation, not even death itself, will ever again separate us from God’s presence.

Think about it

If Jesus Christ were to come today people would not crucify him. They would ask him to dinner and hear what he had to say and then make fun of it.

- Thomas Carlyle