

Well, why did Jesus die? That is the real question. Some folk would have no difficulty in giving their answer. 'He died,' they would say, 'because he was a preacher of revolutionary doctrines. He disturbed the conventions of his contemporaries, aroused their jealousy, and exposed their hypocrisy, so they had him liquidated. He died as a martyr to his own greatness.'

Of course, there is truth in this theory, but it is by no means the whole truth. It ignores one great significant fact in the Gospel narratives, namely that Jesus went to the cross of his own deliberate purpose. No man took his life from him. He says 'I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again' (John 10:18). He refused to let Peter defend him in the garden, affirming that if he were to lift but a finger, the Father would immediately send more than twelve legions of angels to defend him. And when Pilate began to be a bit truculent, Jesus quietly said to him, 'You would have no power over me unless it had been given you from above' (John 19:11).

Why did he do it?

If then the death of Jesus was self-determined, what is its meaning? If he was not only given up to death by wicked men, but rather gave himself voluntarily to die, why did he do it?

Many explanations have been given. He died to reveal the inexhaustible love of God for sinners (*eg* Romans 5:8). He suffered to give us an example of patient fortitude under provocation (*eg* 1 Peter 2:18-23). He died to conquer evil by refusing to resist it by force. He also triumphed in the cross over all the cosmic powers of darkness (Colossians 2:15). All these statements are true, but none of them receives the greatest emphasis in the New Testament. The New Testament authors stress the connection between Christ's death and our sins. Had not he himself said, 'This is my blood of the new covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins' (Matthew 26:28)? So Paul echoed, 'Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures' (1 Corinthians 15:3), and the apostle Peter added, 'Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God' (1 Peter 3:18). 'God . . . loved us,' wrote John, 'and sent his Son to be the expiation of our sins' (1 John 4:10).

The New Testament teaches then that it was for the forgiveness of our sins that Jesus Christ died, and that on the cross he achieved something objective and decisive by which the sins of the world may be forgiven.

Wasn't there another way?

But why, someone asks, could not God simply have pardoned our sins without all this fuss and bother? Why was Christ's death necessary? Anselm would have answered, 'You have not yet considered how serious sin is.' Or as another writer put it: 'Forgiveness, which to man is the plainest of duties, to God is the profoundest of problems.' If we sin against a human being it is a purely personal injury, and it is his duty to forgive us. But if we sin against God it is not just a personal

offence involving two private parties: it is an infringement of the divine law. It throws the whole moral order out of gear.

What can God do? God is not omnipotent in the sense that he can do absolutely anything. God can only do those things which are consistent with his nature. He cannot therefore readily pardon the sinner, because he is a God of infinite justice. But neither can he readily punish the sinner, because he is also a God of infinite mercy. Here, then, if we may use human language, was the divine dilemma. How could he pardon the sinner without compromising his justice? How could he judge the sinner without frustrating his love? How in the face of human sin could he be at the same time a God of love and of wrath? How could he both pardon the sinner and punish his sin? How could a righteous God forgive unrighteous men without involving himself in their unrighteousness.

God's solution

There was only one way. In his infinite justice he would exact the penalty for sin, but in his infinite mercy he would accept the penalty himself. Only thus could he express and satisfy both his love and his justice. So in the person of his Son Jesus Christ he entered the world which he had made. He identified himself with man in his need. In the womb of Mary his mother he took upon him our nature. On the cross of Calvary he took upon him our sins. He was first made flesh (John 1:14). He was then 'made sin' (2 Corinthians 5:21). In the silence and darkness of those terrible hours on the cross the sins of the whole world, of every place and of every generation, were laid on him.

One way in which two of the New Testament writers describe this by an Old Testament expression, namely, 'He bore our sins in his body' (1 Peter 2:24), and he was 'offered once to bear the sins of many' (Hebrews 9:28). What this means is that in his own innocent person he accepted the penalty and endured the consequences which our sins should have brought upon us.

Only Jesus Christ could have thus died for the sins of the world. Why? Because only he was Man, and sinless, and God. Because he was Man, he could represent Man, and bear the sins of men. Because he was sinless, he had no sins of his own for which atonement needed to be made. Because he was God, his life was of infinite value (so that it could be offered for the sins of all men), and of eternal worth (so that it could be offered for the sins of all time).

As, then, we look at the cross we cannot tell which is more apparent – the implacable antagonism of God towards sin, or the inextinguishable compassion of God towards the sinner. Both are fully satisfied at the cross.

God has done everything that was necessary for our salvation. What then is there left for us to do? Nothing – but to acknowledge our sin, turn from it, and receive Jesus Christ into our life as our Saviour, committing ourselves personally to him, and asking God for Christ's sake to take our sins away.