

Now is the time to vaccinate ourselves against the virus of atonement theology, which threatens to afflict our vision and restrict our ability to see Jesus. I'm afraid that the various strains of atonement theology are about to infect our journey through Lent and Holy Week.

So, before we are blinded by proclamations of blood-sacrifice, let us vaccinate ourselves, lest the infection of atonement theology forces us to look away from the realities of Jesus' life and death, in favour of the blood-soaked wet dream of a god which is unworthy of our worship!

Even though you may have already been vaccinated against the various strains of atonement theory, I suspect that the residue of such thoughts about Jesus still lingers and for the sake of our health, we could all use a booster shot to protect us from the very real possibility of rejecting Jesus altogether. Like many vaccines, the inoculation against atonement theory begins with a touch of the disease itself. So, to build up our immunity against atonement theory, let's begin with a familiar dose of the dis-ease, to prime our own antibodies to resist atonement theory.

Do you hear it? That familiar tune? "Where you there when they crucified my Lord?" Absolutely, I was there when they crucified my Lord. For so very many years, my affirmative answer to this quintessential Good Friday hymn was based on what the church taught me about the death of Jesus. I, like many "Christians", was taught that Jesus died upon the cross to save humanity from sin. I was also taught that I am in bondage to sin and cannot free myself. I was taught that I was born in sin, that sinfulness is part of what it means to be human, and that God so loved the world that "He" and I do mean "He" sent his only son to die, because someone had to pay the price for sin. This quid pro quo portrayal of "God the Father," led me to the undeniable conclusion that I was responsible for Jesus' crucifixion. My guilt, my shame, my sinfulness, compelled me to declare, "Yes! I was there when they crucified my Lord! I was there when they nailed him to the tree! I was there when they pierced him in his side! I was there when the sun refused to shine! was there when they laid him in the tomb?" The sheer horror of my culpability in Jesus' sacrifice for my sin, caused me to "tremble, tremble, tremble. I was there when they crucified my Lord." The doctrine of atonement permeated my being. So much so, that even though, I have long since stopped believing that Jesus died to save me from sin, the residue of atonement theories continues to cause me to tremble. Even though I have learned to look beyond the stories found in the scriptures in which various followers of the Way portray the crucifixion in ways which spoke to their particular communities, I still tremble. I have learned much about the motives of the various anonymous gospel-storytellers and I know that the weavers of the passion narratives, were not eyewitnesses to the crucifixion. I know that the anonymous gospel-storyteller which we call John, wrote his interpretation of Jesus' execution more than 70 years after the event. I know that this anonymous gospel-storyteller which we call John, lived in a community which had experienced the wrath of the Roman Empire and lived with the reality that the Romans had destroyed the Temple in Jerusalem and driven the Jewish people into exile.

Scholars have taught us that the fledgling community of followers of the Way had been driven out of Jewish synagogues and were at odds with the Jewish community. Scholars have taught us that the anonymous gospel-storyteller had all sorts of reasons for telling the story of Jesus' death in a particular way, casting the Jews and not the Romans as Jesus' executioners. We now know that crucifixions were carried out in the thousands by the Roman Empire as a means of striking fear into the hearts of occupied peoples. We know only too well, that the idea that the Jews would have shouted "Crucify him" is, in all likelihood, the storyteller's attempt to shift the blame from the forces of Empire onto the Jewish people, the occupied people of Rome. We certainly know that the anonymous gospel-storyteller which we call Matthew has done an untold amount of damage by putting into the mouths of the Jewish crowd, the words, "Crucify him. His blood is upon us and upon our children."

The deaths of millions of Jews, indeed even the Holocaust, can be directly attributed to Christian contempt for Jews malignly accused of being Christ-killers. And so, for years I sang, "I was there. It was I who crucified him. I who denied him." in a vain attempt to point to a kinder, gentler, historically correct version of Jesus' execution. And still, I "trembled, trembled, trembled." Because it was my sin, our sin, from which we needed to be rescued. I could see myself there, watching from the sidelines, knowing full well that Jesus died to save me, and to save you. What my trembling self didn't know, but now knows is that for centuries the atonement theory which cast Jesus as God's sacrifice for sin, for centuries, this theory did not exist in the Christian Church. Indeed, the idea that Jesus was some sort of substitutionary sacrifice for sin was not fully developed until the 11<sup>th</sup> century.

I cannot and will not worship a God who demands a blood sacrifice for sin. Reading the accounts of the anonymous gospel-storytellers with eyes opened wide by biblical scholars, historians, and theologians, we've learned to read between the lines and beyond the page and the portrait of Jesus is being remembered in ways which reflect, not the traditions of centuries, but rather the possibilities of Jesus' time and place. We are beginning to understand Jesus the man and this causes me to tremble, tremble, tremble, because Jesus the human being was a justice-seeker the likes of which the world rarely sees. Jesus steadfastly refused to take up arms against his oppressors. Jesus practiced a non-violent resistance in ways that impacted his people and worried his oppressors. Jesus knew God as LOVE and proclaimed that LOVE, even going so far as to teach people to LOVE their enemies. Jesus challenged the religious authorities of his day to see beyond the scriptures and embody the God which he defined as LOVE. Jesus claimed ONENess with God and called upon his followers to understand their own ONENess with one another. Jesus was anything but a pacifist. Jesus was an activist, an agitator who practiced civil disobedience in ways which got him noticed by the oppressive powers of empire. Jesus refused to avoid confrontation with those very powers. Jesus was political, always speaking out on behalf of the poor and the marginalized. Jesus threatened the status quo. Jesus threatened the economic system because it

oppressed the poor and enslaved the wealthy. Jesus threatened the military might of the Roman Empire because of the needless suffering and death which was all around him. Jesus taught a Way of being in the world which encouraged his followers to live life abundantly, and to love extravagantly, pointing to a God who is LOVE.

I tremble just thinking about the kind of trouble Jesus stirred up. I tremble knowing that Jesus loved so fully that he was willing to take the ultimate risk because he believed that death could not conquer LOVE. I believe that Jesus embodied that LOVE, the LOVE which we call "God." I also believe that death could not conquer the LOVE which Jesus embodied and that in remembering Jesus, we experience the LOVE that IS the MYSTERY which we call "God." When I remember Jesus' embodiment of the LOVE which IS DIVINE MYSTERY, I see a full human being who had dreams of what might be; a person who dared to imagine that people could be set free from the ideas and images about God which enslaved them.

I see in Jesus, a person who understood that every act of human kindness connects us with the LOVE which IS DIVINE MYSTERY. In Jesus, I see a person who loved so greatly and taught so clearly and courageously that people were able to see in Jesus the embodiment of the very God which Jesus and his rag-tag bunch of followers defined as LOVE, and that this LOVE lived on in the LOVE that Jesus' followers were able to embody beyond Jesus' death. And so, I tremble, tremble, tremble. I tremble because I know that the crucifixion of the embodiment of LOVE is not over. We are surrounded by crucifixions. Just as surely as Jesus died upon the cross, those who follow the Way of Jesus, the Way of justice and peace, those who embody LOVE, continue to be tortured, battered, abused and hauled up upon crosses and executed by the forces of violence and death, the forces of the empires which continue to enslave us. The crucifixion didn't happen once and for all, way back when. LOVE is crucified over and over again as the ways of empire, the ways of greed, violence, war, and death exact their punishment on the innocent victims of our world. LOVE is crucified all over again when calls for peace through justice go unanswered. LOVE is crucified all over again in the countless lives which are destroyed, by our lust for power and our quest for stuff. LOVE is crucified all over again when Creation is scarred, wounded and poisoned by our arrogance and greed. LOVE is crucified again and again, when we fail to see the face of God who is LOVE in our sisters and brothers of every clan and race and tribe. And so, I tremble, tremble, tremble, because I know that I am there when they crucify my LOVE. I am there, all too often, lurking in the background as they nail LOVE to a tree. I am there, all too often, when I fail to embody the LOVE which IS DIVINE MYSTERY, when I do not speak out, or act up, but cling not to the cross, but to the comforts of the status quo. I am there each and every time and it causes me to tremble, tremble, tremble.

How about you? Where you there when they crucified our LOVE? If you tremble at the truth of the death of LOVE in so many places, in so many ways, over and over again, please try to remember Jesus; a person who steadfastly refused to confront violence with violence, a person who embodied the LOVE which is

God and gave his life to setting people free, a person who pointed beyond himself to the ONE who is LOVE itself, a person who trusted that LOVE is eternal, that LOVE lives beyond death. Remember Jesus and look beyond the crucifixions to the power of LOVE to live beyond the grave. Remember Jesus and see the power of LOVE to transform fear into hope and hope into new life. Let us remember that we were there when they crucified our LOVE, and we will be there when LOVE rises from the tomb. Oh, yes this causes me to tremble, tremble, tremble. We'll be there when LOVE rises from the tomb!