

The Goodness of our God in Redemption

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Creation – good and flawed

No verse of the Bible is better known than John 3:16: 'For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in him might not perish, but have everlasting life.' In that simple sentence we find what must be the most succinct summary of what the Christian message is all about. *God so loved the world . . .* When we look at the wonders of creation, from the stars of the universe to the most complex micro-organisms, it is not difficult to see why the author of Genesis ended his account of each of the six days of creation with the words: 'God saw what he had made, and behold – it was very good.' Looked at in that way, and seen from that distance, the world is indeed a very lovable place, and God's satisfaction with it is perfectly understandable. But unfortunately, there is another side to the created order, one which touches many of us more closely than any of these scientific wonders. For the world we live in is also a world of sorrow and of deep suffering, some of it caused by human beings but much of it accountable only by reference to the forces of 'nature', which Christians believe is the handiwork of God. Earthquakes, floods and diseases are also part of the reality which God has made, as indeed is human rebellion against him. For even if we accept that God is not responsible for the sins of mankind, we cannot escape the fact that he made the human race as it is, and gave it the freedom to go wrong. How can we claim that God loves such a world as this? And if we are responsible for our own failings, why should God go on loving for us, when we have so clearly violated his commandments?

A human creator whose work goes wrong for some reason very often discards it and starts again. The Bible actually compares God to a potter and his human creatures to the earthenware vessels which the potter makes, but we all know that if a potter finds a flaw in his work he will throw it out, or else recast it. There has never yet been a potter who makes cracked pots and then professes to love them! Yet something like this seems to be what Christians claim about God. We appear to be saying that even though things have not worked out in the way he originally intended, God somehow goes on loving us. Not only that, but he demonstrates his love for us by doing what is necessary to put right what has gone wrong – a task which involves nothing less than the incarnation and sacrificial death of his Son, Jesus Christ. What to a neutral observer must seem like an act of unnatural cruelty is presented by the Christian gospel as the supreme manifestation of God's love, and has become the

foundation-stone of the Christian church. Does such a belief make sense? Can it be justified in a world which has grown so much more conscious of the rights of the individual and the demands of justice? How can a gospel in which God the Father sends his only Son to his death be a saving message to people who regard child abuse as one of the most horrific of crimes?

It must be said at the outset that there is no easy answer to these questions, and none which will compel unbelievers to accept it. The gospel is a scandal to them, and we must not expect it to appear otherwise. Eighteen centuries ago, the Roman world mocked Christians for their absurd belief, to which the apologist Tertullian simply replied: 'I believe because it is absurd.' He did not quarrel with the pagans' initial assessment of the gospel's reasonableness, but only with the conclusions which they drew from it. Today we may think that such a reply is rather too brusque for our liking, but however politely we may choose to put it, it is doubtful whether we shall ever improve on Tertullian's fundamental insight, which after all comes straight from the apostle Paul. The gospel is foolishness to those who cannot accept it, and that will never change, however many rational arguments are adduced in its support. We cannot defeat such objections on their own ground, because human reason will always rebel against the Christian message. All we can hope to do is to explain why the arguments from human reason which are used to discredit the gospel are not compelling, and why Christian believers have always been prepared, as Paul and Tertullian were, to fly in the face of apparent logic. The object of this exercise must be to turn human reason on its head, and demonstrate that the love of God is indeed manifested most fully in a chain of events culminating in the most cruel suffering and an undeserved death.

God's nature and ours

To do this, we must begin with God as he is in himself. Unless and until we understand who he is, we shall never be able to grasp the significance of what he does, or explain why he does it. Both the creation and its redemption are explicable only in the context of who God is. The world which he made is in essence totally unlike himself. It is finite, whereas he is infinite. It is temporal, whereas he is eternal. Above all, it is changeable, whereas he is unchanging in the core of his being. These fundamental differences between God's nature and ours mean that it is impossible to measure him by the standards which we might apply to the universe. This is the timeless message of Job, who after all his suffering was told by God that he was simply incapable of entering into the mind of God. As St Paul later expressed it, the clay pot cannot ask the potter why it was made in a certain way; such a mystery remains for ever hidden in the potter's mind.

The biblical revelation does not deal in theoretical possibilities, nor does it offer explanations for the fundamental causes and conditions of our existence. Instead, it takes things as they are and tells us first, what has gone wrong with the world which God has made and second, what we have to do to put matters right. Why this is so we do not know, but it forces us to be practical in our thinking, and that may well be part of God's goodness in dealing with us. Constructing worlds which do not exist may be an attractive intellectual pastime, but it does not help us deal with reality. Being restricted to the circumstances which confront us (and thus forced to deal with them) is actually a kindness on God's part, because it makes us face the need to solve our problems and not merely contemplate why we have them.

Before we consider the nature of the human problem which has cut us off from God, there is another aspect of his being which we have to understand. Even as God is totally different from us in terms of his nature, so he has made us like him in one very important respect. Genesis 1:26-7 expresses this by saying that God created us in his *image and likeness*. In theological terms, this has been expanded into the concept of *personhood*, which is the way in which we share something of God's being. It is as persons that we relate to him, and just as importantly, it is as three divine persons that he relates to us. Moreover, personhood cannot be seen merely as an expression of some underlying nature which it cannot change or escape from. On the contrary, the person (human or divine) is in some mysterious way greater than the nature (again, human or divine) which makes it possible for us to transcend the latter's limitations and establish meaningful contact with a being who is otherwise totally different from us. The second person of the Godhead did this by becoming a man in Jesus Christ. He did not deny or suppress his divine nature, but rather *added* a second, human nature to his divine being. In a not dissimilar way, Christians believe that conversion to Christ produces a transformation in us which is equivalent to being 'born again'. In other words, we transcend the limitations of our mortal nature and embrace eternal life, which is ours not because our flesh and blood have somehow become immortal, but because our persons have entered into a new and saving relationship with God, which is sealed in our hearts by the Holy Spirit, the third person of the divine Trinity. In this way, God not only establishes a new and eternal relationship with us, but integrates us into the already existing Trinitarian relationship inside his own being. His love for us, in other words, goes beyond sorting out our difficulties as creatures and leads on to something else altogether – union with him in an eternal personal relationship. This is the factor which makes God's plan of redemption not only meaningful, but necessary, since without it, the union which he desires would be impossible. If we do not understand this ultimate purpose we shall be in danger of failing to grasp why redemption has taken the form that it has, and therefore misjudge various aspects of it.

Once we have grasped this, we can go on to look at the nature of the human problem which God's plan of redemption is designed to resolve. This problem is not just one of separation from God, but of an alienation which has been caused by our disobedience. Disobedience is the fundamental cause of sin, and unless we can accept that, we shall never be able to understand God's work of redemption.

When God created man, he gave him dominion over the rest of creation, but there were two things which he withheld. The first of these was the knowledge of good and evil, and the second was immortality. It is possible that had Adam and Eve obeyed God, he would have preserved them in the garden of Eden without any major change to their status, though we cannot know this for certain. What we do know is that Satan tempted our first parents with the possibility of becoming like God himself, by eating the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. They succumbed to this temptation, and as a result became more like God than they had been before. At that point, God stepped in to prevent them from going on to acquire eternal life, by barring the way to the tree of life and by expelling them from the garden. However symbolic or 'mythical' this account may be in some of its details, its basic outline corresponds to the way human beings are now. We all have a knowledge of good and evil; we are all sinners in the sight of God, unable even to live according to that knowledge which we have received; and none of us has eternal life. Whatever protection against physical death Adam and Eve may have enjoyed in the garden has been removed, and the Bible tells us quite clearly that sin is the cause of this. This sin and its effects have been inherited by all the descendants of Adam, making the entire human race one in God's sight – rebellious!

Overcoming human rebellion

This is the problem with which God had to deal in order to realise his purpose of making us one with him. The innate rebelliousness which characterizes every human being has to be overcome and replaced by a relationship of obedience. But the nature of the relationship which God wants us to have with him precludes any 'waving of the magic wand' on his part. Sin will not disappear simply by divine decree, because we who have committed it are too important for that. God respects us too much simply to sweep everything we have done under the carpet and forget all about it, and because our relationship with him matters to the extent that it does, it can be put right only in a way which demonstrates just how serious it is. This is yet another indication of God's love towards us; he takes us with the utmost seriousness, and deals with our faults as if they really mattered – which of course they do.

But how does God tackle the problem? No human being can be called upon to put matters right on behalf of the rest of the human race, because we are all equally in need of help. A lesser creature can hardly take our place, even though lambs were used for sacrifice in the Old Testament, where they took the place of men. The atoning significance of this was quite clear to ancient Israel, but so was its limitation. The sacrifice had to be repeated every year, and the high priest to whom it was entrusted was just as dependent on it as anyone else. At best, therefore, it was a stopgap solution and not a permanent remedy for the human problem.

To solve the dilemma of human sin, it was necessary to call on a higher being who could do what was necessary to put matters right. In practical terms this meant either sending an angel or a person of the Godhead to fulfil the necessary task. Perhaps an angel could have done some-

thing on our behalf, but even if an angelic being had become incarnate and died for us on the cross, the most that could have happened was that we would have become servants of God in the way that angels are. We would have become like them, enjoying the eternal life of heaven but without any special relationship to God. It is the fact that God wanted us to have such a relationship with him which ruled out the possibility of salvation through an angel, and made it necessary for the work of redemption to be accomplished by one of the persons of the Godhead.

This was achieved by the incarnation of the second person as Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus was fully human and fully divine at the same time, which meant that he could *both* take our place before God's judgement seat and pay the penalty due to our sin, *and* give us God's own eternal life once the penalty was fully paid. It was the decision of the first person of the Trinity, who is revealed to us as the Father, which brought this about, but it is important to emphasize that his decision was accepted voluntarily by the second person, whom we know as the Son (Philippians 2:6-7). There can be no question of the Father's punishing the Son on our behalf against his own will. On the contrary, the Son 'became sin for us', willingly going to a human death, in order to set us free from death. Was this cruelty on the Father's part? Not at all. For one thing, he did not force the Son to do something he did not want to do. It is certainly true that the Bible makes it quite clear that Jesus agonized over his impending death when he prayed in the garden of Gethsemane the night before, but the reason for this is not that he went to his death unwillingly. No psychologically normal human being wants to die, and the Gethsemane story is a reminder to us that in this respect, Jesus felt the same way that any of us would do. But the story also tells us that he was governed by a more important consideration, which overruled his natural human desire to avoid suffering and death. First and foremost, Jesus wanted to do his Father's will, and it was his Father's will that he should take our place in judgement. This was not because of some sadistic streak in the Father's mind, but because it was necessary to deal with our sin in a way which would do justice to its seriousness.

A better way?

The alternative to the Son's death was not some less painful option for him, which would have achieved the same result. The alternative would have been to put us to death. That would have been deserved, and had God chosen to give us our just deserts we could hardly have complained of cruelty on his part. But it is precisely here that God chose to manifest the full extent of his goodness towards us. For instead of giving us what we deserve, he chose to solve the problem of our sinful disobedience by accepting a substitute on our behalf. Had we been treated justly, we would simply have been annihilated and there would have been no hope of redemption at all. But the one who has taken our place is not only able to endure the punishment which our sin has incurred – he can also overcome it, because he is the sinless, eternal God. His suffering was not without hope, nor was his death the final word on the matter. The apostle Paul makes it quite clear that it is the resurrection of Christ from

the dead which is the basis both of our present life in him and of our hope of final redemption. The crucifixion, with all its pain and suffering, was not an isolated event, nor was it the final act in the drama of Jesus of Nazareth. Rather it was the beginning of a whole chain of events which have transformed not only his human life but ours as well. By rising from the dead and ascending into heaven, Jesus of Nazareth passed from death to life, from this world to the next, from the finite and mortal to the infinite and immortal – taking us with him, because we have been united with him in and through these events. In a sense, Christ's death has spared me from dying, but it would be more accurate to say that I have died with him. His death is mine, and his resurrection is also mine. I have been spared the pain and suffering, but not the experience of dying, which is fundamental to my new relationship with God.

The problems which unbelievers have with this scenario are many and varied, but at the heart of them all is their refusal to accept the absolute character of human sinfulness, and the equally absolute demands of God's righteousness. Putting God and man together again is not just a question of uniting the finite with the infinite, and so on, but of reconciling the good and the bad, the just and the unjust. The only way that can happen is by turning the bad into good, which is what the Christian message is all about. But if a person does not accept this to begin with, if he or she imagines that human beings are basically good and have just gone wrong in ways which are not beyond repair, then the gospel of Christ will not, and cannot make any sense at all. In Christian theology, this is expressed by saying that the first stage in conversion to Christ is *conviction of sin*, without which it will always be impossible to see any real need for redemption – or at least, for the kind of redemption which the gospel offers us. If we can be allowed to express this in medical terms, the gospel is a cure for an otherwise incurable disease, but if the diagnosis is inadequate, the cure will not be felt to be necessary and therefore will never be tried. Christians make it available for all who will listen, and watch it do its work time and time again. But unless and until a person sees that there is a need for God's redemptive cure, the mere fact that it is readily available will mean nothing to those who do not want it.

Becoming part of God's plan

This brings us naturally to the next part of our discussion. So far we have been discussing what might be called the objective side of God's redemptive plan, i.e. what he has done for us. Now we must look at the 'subjective' side, which is not (as one might suppose) what we can do for him, since the answer to that is 'nothing at all', but how this objective redemption is applied to individual cases. This has always been one of the greatest mysteries and most contentious issues in the whole history of divine redemption. For at one level, Christ's death is universal. One man has died for the sins of the whole world, and no-one can justly claim that his sacrifice does not apply to them. As Paul said, 'in Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female – all are one in Christ Jesus' (Galatians 3:28). God has not decided to redeem one section of the human race

(e.g. free male Jews) at the expense of the rest, nor is there one message for one group of people and another for others. In sinful disobedience the human race is united, and therefore God's redemption applies equally to everyone.

But does this mean that everyone benefits from it? Some people have thought that this must be the logical conclusion of the above, and as a result have claimed that the Christian gospel is not merely universal in principle but universalist in practice – all are redeemed, whether they know it or not and indeed, whether they want it or not. Those who proclaim such a message are no doubt well-intentioned, but we need to look very carefully at the implications of what they are saying. If God were to redeem the entire human race, he could be accused of forcing people into heaven against their will. It is sadly true that not everybody wants to have a saving relationship with God, and there are many people who have rejected it when the offer has been put to them. Would it be a loving thing to force them to accept what they do not want? Some would say yes, but what kind of relationship would result from that? A heaven full of unwilling inhabitants would not be a happy place, and it is hard to believe that God wants that kind of tension in eternity! Furthermore, if God were simply to wipe away sin and its consequences without our knowing it, something vitally important would be missing in our relationship with him.

We need to know how important our sins are, because we need to know just how much we matter to God. This is not a question of the sins themselves. Take a simple example. If a dog bites your leg, it is painful and unpleasant, but you would not say that the dog had sinned against you, nor would you make him responsible for his action. Whatever the cause of this may have been, a dog is just a dog. Now if I bite your leg, the pain and suffering inflicted on you will probably be much less, because my teeth are considerably blunter than those of most dogs. From the purely physical point of view therefore, my action would be a good deal less serious than the dog's. But would you scale down your reaction accordingly? I doubt it. Probably you would not only accuse me of wrongdoing, but you would seek some form of compensation as well. At best you might accept that I was out of my mind at the time, but even that implies that I am basically responsible for my own actions. This is how we must understand the seriousness of sin. It is not a question of the harm, real or potential, which our words and actions might inflict – that can vary enormously from case to case. On the contrary, the real issue lies in ourselves and in what is expected of us as human beings. Even if we do nothing particularly harmful, we are still rebels against God and his will. That is not what is expected of us, and therefore we are sinners, guilty in his eyes and deserving of death and destruction. To pretend otherwise, or to fail to see this is not helpful, because if we do this we shall never appreciate what God has done for us in Christ, nor shall we understand the kind of relationship which he now wants us to have with him.

But if there are serious objections to universalism, what about the alternative, which goes by the names of 'election' and 'predestination'? Many people, including otherwise good Christians, find these concepts abhorrent, because to their minds they appear to exclude large numbers of the human race from salvation whilst at the same time granting eternal life to those who have done nothing to deserve it. The Chris-

tian church has always recognized that election and predestination are mysteries which no human mind can unravel. In specific cases, it is impossible to know for sure who has been chosen for salvation, though we can be given the assurance in our hearts that we ourselves are heirs of God's kingdom. This is a very complex issue, but each of its many twists and turns reveals yet again just how good God is in his dealings with us. First of all, he does not leave us wondering whether or not we belong to him. He puts a conviction in our hearts that we have been redeemed, and that we can rely on him to fulfil his promises at the end of time. Without that assurance we would be totally insecure, and easy prey for those (including church leaders) who would try to make us dependent on them. The world is full of people telling us that if we do what they say or want we shall be all right in the end, and the Christian doctrine of assurance is a protection against this sort of thing.

But at the same time, there is no infallible way of knowing whether what is true of us applies to anyone else. We can be reasonably sure that those whose experience is similar to ours are also among the elect, and in practice we take this on trust most of the time. But we cannot use these criteria to draw a line between the 'saved' and the 'unsaved' in a fixed and immutable fashion. It is not for us to say whom God chooses or can choose, and very often we are surprised by those who come to faith in Christ, because they are the people we would least have expected. But we also come across instances of apparent believers who lose their faith, which is a reminder to us that we cannot rely on anyone in this life except God himself. These things sound harsh when stated in the abstract, but if we think about the real people we know and the actual relationships which we have, then we can begin to see the logic in them. Human relationships sometimes seem quite natural, but often they are a mystery. Why do particular people fall in love? Why do others fall out with each other, when they appear to have so much in common – members of the same family, for instance? We all experience these things, but it is impossible to give a rational explanation for them in every case, and even more impossible to predict in advance what will or will not happen in this way. So it is with God's love towards us. We cannot explain it, and we certainly do not deserve it, but we do experience it. The explanations and descriptions we give of it follow on from that experience, and are never more than a pale reflection of it – as one would expect in any relationship of love. Those who have not experienced it may be incredulous but they cannot simply deny it in the experience of other people, or claim that they are deluded. Too many people, over too long a time and too wide an area have made the same claim for it to be dismissed so readily.

The boundaries of love

Why does God not love everybody equally? Perhaps we can say that in one sense he does. Everyone shares the created order and benefits from the basic gift of life. Even God's punishment can be explained as an aspect of his love, and Christians experience what can sometimes be quite a severe chastening from him even as they grow closer to him (cf. Hebrews 12:10). There is certainly no simple equation

between love on the one hand and the absence of all pain and suffering on the other. Even in human life, love is often seen at its purest in the midst of pain, and those who love most deeply may well have their hearts broken more than once. To call this 'unfair' or 'unjust' seems somehow inappropriate; those who know how it feels in their own experience seldom think in that way. Rather they tend to find that their pain and suffering brings out the full strength of their love, and that good comes out of it in the end. Relationships which are sound to begin with are strengthened by such experiences, whereas those that are shaky or essentially false are weakened and perhaps destroyed. In that respect, pain and suffering in relationships is a way of uncovering the truth about them. That may be hard to accept, especially at the time, but most people who have gone through such a process recognize that it is ultimately a healthy thing. Love cannot live on lies, and while the truth may hurt, it is the only solid basis for spiritual growth.

This does not answer the question of why it is that not everyone is saved, but ultimately that question is as unanswerable as the famous questions asked about creation – why did God make the world like this? We simply do not

know the answer, even though we can observe how people constantly reject God's love. One day, we believe, we shall find out, but for the present it appears that such knowledge is too hard for us to bear. If we knew for sure who was saved and who was damned, we would lose hope, and the love which God wants us to show towards all his creatures would be severely truncated. That in turn would make life on earth impossible, as we learn from the fact that some of the most intractable historical quarrels take place between people (or peoples) who believe not only that they have been specially chosen by God but – just as important – that their enemies have not. God, in his goodness, protects us from this by keeping his knowledge to himself for the time being. We are told simply to be content with our own experience of him, and to get on with the task of sharing that experience with others in the expectation that they too, will come to share it with us. There is no human task which brings greater rewards than this and no joy which is deeper than the joy of seeing one more sinner repent and turn to Christ. With that joy we must be content, until the great day when all our human experiences will be caught up in the greater joy of heaven, and we shall know God, even as we are known by him.