

10: THE DEATH AND RESURRECTION OF CHRIST: An Exploration of the Orthodox Christian Understanding of Salvation as the Paschal Victory of Love

Introduction: The Unity of the Cross and the Resurrection

So far in this Course we have dealt with the "big" themes--our paradisaic state and fall, salvation history and the Church, Man's position in the Cosmos. It is important not to "miss the wood for the trees." However, we now approach the "trees," or rather "two trees in one"—the cross, which is the tree of death, and the resurrection, which is the tree of life. Furthermore, it is vitally important not to separate these two trees, because both the cross without the resurrection and the resurrection without the cross are meaningless. A Saviour who cannot die has not done battle with death. A Saviour who has not risen remains in the thrall of death, together with everyone else.

The preaching of the early Church in Acts 2:23-24—St Peter's first sermon in fact—notes: ". . . this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men. But God raised Him up, having loosed the pangs of death, for it was not possible for him to be held by it." As the Orthodox theologian Jaroslav Pelikan explains in his insightful commentary on *Acts*, these verses offer a key reference "to the mysterious—and ultimately unfathomable—relation between the accountability of human free will and omniscient 'foreknowledge' of God which does not observe human action as though God were a neutral and helpless spectator, but has what is termed here a 'definite plan.'"¹ Make no mistake, we are at the heart here of the Christian gospel. It is God who in the death and resurrection of Christ has saved us and, as St Paul reminds us in *Philippians* 2:12, it is in that faith and life that you must "work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for God is at work in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure." Yet in the midst of our "fear and trembling" we can be confident that God has given to us the Holy Spirit, just as He gave the Holy Spirit to Jews and Gentiles in the first century (*Acts* 15.8). As St. John Chrysostom has pointed out, this process through which each of us can "be working out" our salvation requires "much earnestness and much diligence. . . . [but] if we have the will, then He energizes the

¹Jaroslav Pelikan, *Acts* (London: SCM Press, 2006), pp. 53-54.

willing; He increases our willing. . . He does not deprive us of free will, but He shows that by being rightly purposed we receive more eagerness in the will.”²

When trying to explain the power and the significance of what happened on the Cross and at the Empty Tomb, the Apostles used extremely rich veins of terminology and practice derived from what we know as Old Testament salvation-history and promise. Sometimes they used metaphorical or allegorical language but the reality they described was always flesh and blood—the work of God in and through one singular and unique Person, Our Lord and God and Saviour Jesus Christ. In seeking to unify the diverse strands of meaning to be found in the death and resurrection of our Lord and God and Saviour, Jesus Christ three themes are prominent—sacrifice, justification and redemption.

Sacrifice: The Lamb of God Offered to People and for People

The language here is that of the altar—the holy table that symbolizes the Mystical Supper, the Heavenly Altar, the Throne of the Holy Trinity, the Tomb of Christ and the earth.³ Sacrifice for the Jews was what put them right with God. Each year, on the Day of Atonement (in Hebrew, *Yom Kippur*), animals would be sacrificed and the High Priest (only) would enter the Holy of Holies in the Temple to make atonement for the people (Hebrews 9:7).⁴ By a costly offering of life, God would be appeased. His righteousness would be satisfied by a change in the hearts of His People as they responded to the meaning of the nation’s offering in Jerusalem.

The connection here with the death of Jesus was immediately obvious to the early Church. Sacrificial references to Jesus as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world abound in the New Testament. The tone is set at the beginning of the ministry of Christ on the lips of the Prophet and Forerunner, St. John the Baptist: "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." (John 1:29). In his book, *The Titles of Christ*, Father Matthew the Poor (Father Matta El-Meskeen), the Coptic Orthodox Abbot of the St. Macarius Monastery in Egypt, has pointed out that: “In the Old Covenant, the lamb belonging to people was offered to God, but . . . in the New Covenant . . . the Lamb belonging to God is offered *to* people and *for* people!”⁵ Furthermore, “the Lamb mentioned here by John the Baptist as the Lamb of God is in the

² Homily 8 in J. P. Minge, *Patrologia Graeca* [PG] 62:257, col.239.

³ David J. Melling, “altar” in Ken Parry, David J. Melling, Dimitri Brady, Sidney H. Griffith and John F. Healey (eds.), *The Blackwell Dictionary of Eastern Christianity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), p. 20.

⁴ See Alfred Edersheim, *The Temple: Its Ministry and Services as They Were at the Time of Jesus Christ* (New York: James Pott, 1891), now available free on the web at: www.forgottenbooks.org.

⁵ Matthew the Poor, *The Titles of Christ* (Rollinsford, NH: Orthodox Research Institute, 2008), p. 206. Emphasis in original.

Church, the paschal lamb as proclaimed by the Apostle Paul in a loud voice: ‘For Christ, our paschal lamb, has been sacrificed (1 Corinthians 5:7).’”⁶ Thus through the sacrifice of the Lamb of God, Christ’s kingdom is completed, as set out in the Book of Revelation, when “the marriage of the Lamb has come and His bride [i.e. The Church and all the faithful] has made herself ready” (Revelation 19:7).

The theme of sacrifice is entwined with expiation—with the process of making amends for a wrong. This is reflected in the apostolic writings: "... He is the expiation for our sins, and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world." (1 John 2:2). However, it is important to recognise that this verse does not teach universalism (i.e. that all people will be saved regardless of their behaviour on earth), but rather that we each have the strength, or as St. John Chrysostom has phrased it above, “He energizes us” to make a choice in free will to receive Christ in faith.

There is something richer here than forgiveness, although it certainly includes forgiveness. The sacrificial death of Christ opens up our access to God universally. It is our reconciliation. The tearing in two of the Temple curtain is its most eloquent symbol (Matthew 27:51; Mark 15:38). The New Temple is now the Church of Christ’s Body and Blood through which there is direct access for all who repent, believe and are baptised. The writer to the Hebrews takes up a large section of his letter showing how the sacrifice of Christ is both the fulfilment and replacement of Old Testament sacrifices that it far exceeds in power, depth and range. Furthermore, it is Christ Himself as our great High Priest who offers himself on our behalf. Therefore, in so far as He is both Priest and Victim, we have a radically new understanding of the sacrifice of God, offering Himself to Himself, for the love of mankind whom He wishes to forgive, cleanse and restore.

Can sacrifice then be both key and context for a Biblical understanding of salvation? Not on its own, no. Sacrifice has no need of resurrection anymore that we would expect an animal sacrificed to live again to validate its sacrifice; and we have seen how the resurrection cannot be left out of the frame when searching for the key to an understanding what God in Christ has done as a whole.

⁶ Matthew the Poor, *The Titles of Christ*, p. 214.

Justification: The link with Sanctification as One Continuous Process

The language here is a metaphor from the court, but not as in a merely human court of law. This metaphor sees Man standing, as it were, "in the dock," hopelessly condemned by his failure to maintain the covenant relationship with God. The remedy enacted by God, however, cannot simply be understood in terms of the theory of "substitutionary atonement," that distorted but much beloved doctrine of our Protestant brethren.

According to this theory, all Christ has to do is to substitute himself for us, take our punishment for sin, and allow us to walk free. This degraded version of justification is unsatisfactory because it glosses over in a formalized, even mechanical, legal transaction the human and sacrificial elements of the death of Christ that are so vital to its converting power. Justification means, "making righteous." We lose sin and gain righteousness, not in legal transactional terms but in a personal inward manner, and that involves a titanic struggle against the evil forces that enslave humanity. If, therefore, justification remains connected to the historical dimension of sacrifice, (as it does in St. Paul's letters), then the legal metaphors are very useful. However, justification by itself cannot provide both the key and the context to a holistic understanding for the same reason that sacrifice cannot. The resurrection is not an integrated part of the vision of Man made whole in this scheme either.

The Orthodox perspective on justification and sanctification is "as one divine action . . . one continuous process."⁷ The Biblical foundation of this perspective is that of St. Paul: "You were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God" (1 Corinthians 6:11). As Metropolitan Maximos (Aghiorghousis) reflected:

Justification is not a separate act of God but the negative aspect of salvation in Christ, which is freedom from sin, death and the devil; whereas sanctification is the positive aspect of God's saving act, that of spiritual growth in new life in Christ communicated by God's Holy Spirit.

In contrast to the focus of "medieval Western Christianity with its emphasis on the cross and penal theories of substitutionary satisfaction of the divine justice," Father Theodore Stylianopoulos has emphasized the centrality for Orthodoxy of "the resurrection and therapeutic

⁷ "The Common Statement Issued by the Lutheran-Orthodox Dialogue in North America" in John Meyendorff and Robert Tobias, *Salvation in Christ: A Lutheran-Orthodox Dialogue* (Minneapolis, MN: Light and Life, 1992), pp. 19, 30. Quoted in [Metropolitan] Kallistos Ware, *How Are We Saved: The Understanding of Salvation in the Orthodox Tradition* (Minneapolis, MN: Light and Life, 1996), pp. 48-49.

views of salvation as rescue, healing, and liberation from humanity's true enemies—the powers of sin, corruption, death, and the devil.”⁸ Whereas in the medieval west God was increasingly portrayed as constrained by the supposed demands of his own holiness, and, therefore, wrath in the face of human sin, Orthodox Christianity has always emphasized that the Love of God is under no such constraint and always moves freely through and beyond death to the restoration of both humankind and the cosmos in the resurrection.

In an historical context, it is helpful to remember that the Qumran sect of Judaism on the Dead Sea, viewed justification as an on-going process of sanctification through observing the requirements of The Torah (the body of religious law and learning grounded in the first five books of the Old Testament). The Qumran Community Rule stated: “As for me, my justification is with God. In His hand are the perfection of my way and the uprightness of my heart. He will wipe out my transgression through his righteousness.”⁹ As C. K. Barrett has noted, although the Jewish and Christian terminology differs, the treatment of justification by the Qumran Community “is not remote from Paul’s,” indicating that first and second century Judaism “was a much less uniform structure than was sometimes supposed, and a better knowledge of Judaism in its variety and in its eccentricities cannot fail to be helpful to the student of the New Testament.”¹⁰

Redemption: Liberation from Sin, Suffering, Evil and Death through the Victory of Christ

There are two different words for redemption in the New Testament. The first, ‘lutrow’ means to “buy off” or “ransom.” It has three applications:

(1) ransoming from captivity, as in the release of prisoners indicating that Christ has forgiven our sins by his sacrificial death;

(2) ransoming from debt, as in the forgiveness of money owed in the sense that Christ has dealt with what we owe God from whom we have estranged ourselves; and ...

⁸ Father Theodore G. Stylianopoulos, “Resurrection” in Father John Anthony McGuckin (ed.), *The Concise Encyclopedia of Orthodox Christianity* (Chichester, West Sussex: Wiley Blackwell, 2014), pp.382-383.

⁹ C. K. Barrett (ed.), *The New Testament Background: Selected Documents*, Rev. Ed. (London: SPCK, 1987), p. 229.

¹⁰ C. K. Barrett, p. 218.

(3) ransoming from slavery, because Christ has set us free from the curse of our own moral helplessness and the death that is its due.

Unlike sacrifice and justification, ransom is much more focused on the goal of salvation being our liberation from sin, suffering, evil and death through the victory of Christ. It embraces the resurrection as the crowning glory of Christ's justifying sacrifice for our freedom. Not unsurprisingly, therefore, it is redemption that is most often used by the Church Fathers as the key and context to the experience of salvation in the Church, precisely because it incorporates the other Biblical ideas connected with sacrifice and righteousness in a paschal frame of reference. The great deliverance of humanity from the grip of evil and death was secured at the resurrection but it will not be manifest in its entirety until the Last Day, the Judgement and the New Creation.

When the Church Fathers handle this theme of redemption, although they talk metaphorically about Christ deceiving the devil by the hook or bait of his humanity as He bleeds and dies on the cross, they are at pains to point out that the ransom was paid neither to the devil nor to God the Father. The heresy associated with the first option is that the devil has rights over God, which, of course, he does not. This is dualistic and anti-Christian. The heresy associated with the second option is that the ransom of the Son offers satisfaction to the Father. This heresy is not as rare as one might think. Anselm came perilously close to it in the post-Orthodox West and bequeathed a dangerous legacy to Catholic and Protestant Christianity in the maturation of the heretical idea that the compassionate Son surrenders himself to appease the wrathful Father.

Metaphors, then, should not be pushed beyond their appropriate range and relevance. Ransom in Christian thought means simply that we are in a mess of our own making; and God has Himself got involved in Christ to set us free. Meeting sin and death on their own ground, He has put both to flight. "To whom is payment due?" is a question that is both irrelevant and unnecessary. Attempting to answer it is dangerous. We are dealing here with deep mysteries, not logical propositions and dialectical reasonings. Our language must not be stretched beyond its breaking point. In the end, human words fall away in silence before the Reality which is God.

The second Greek word, 'agorazo', means to "buy for oneself." This occurs in 1 Corinthians, amongst other places: "Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God? You are not your own; you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body." (1 Corinthians 6:19-20). The phrase, "You are not your own," indicates that because of our ransom from slavery to the devil we are now the servants of God. The mark of salvation is not then merely freedom, but the liberation of total freedom in complete service to the Lord.

This obedience is born, not out of craven fear, but a loving and respectful relationship of trust and confidence in a friend, who is Jesus. (John 15:15). Through Him we have access to the Father in the Spirit. We receive by that same Spirit our adoption as sons of God.

Having reflected upon the meaning of the Greek words for redemption and ransom, it is helpful to consider with Father Matthew the Poor the Hebrew meaning of these words. In *The Titles of Christ*, Father Matthew writes:

In the Hebrew language, the word “ransom” is close to “expiation” in meaning and pronunciation. But it is mentioned that God redeemed us in His Son and offered Him to us as an expiation. When Christ expiated our sins, He redeemed us from death. In Hebrew, both expressions mean “cover.” Redemption is, therefore a cover, a veil concealing death from us. Expiation is a cover, a veil concealing sin. Covering in Hebrew is *kapporeth*, in Arabic *kaffarah*. The word in English is influenced by the Hebrew, hence *cover*.¹¹

In the proskomidi service of preparation for the Divine Liturgy (or Prothesis), before the priest takes the veil for the diskos, censes it, kisses it and places it over the diskos with the bread upon it, the deacon urges the priest, “Cover, father.” Thus the bread becomes for each of us who receive the Body and Blood of Christ a means of redemption from death and sin.¹²

Effortlessly then, the theme of redemption moves us into the heart of the ongoing Christian life that is as much part of the salvation process as that defining Easter event which gives redemption its shape and content. Our final redemption, therefore, awaits us as we walk in the Light of the Risen Christ. We may now complete our understanding of that crucial text in Romans introduced in the third lecture of this Unit 1A when we examined the relationship between the cosmic and the human in the context of salvation:

We know that the whole of creation has been groaning in travail together until now, and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience. (Romans 8:22-25)

¹¹ Matthew the Poor, *The Titles of Christ*, p. 92.

¹² See Archimandrite Ephrem, “Prothesis” in Ken Parry, David J. Melling, Dimitri Brady, Sidney H. Griffith and John F. Healey (eds), *The Blackwell Dictionary of Eastern Christianity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), pp.391-392.

Orthodox Christianity teaches that the term redemption is both the key and the context that opens up and holds together the whole Biblical witness concerning our salvation. This is for the simple reason that both the cross and the resurrection are brought into view; and it is the only interpretation that can include all the aforementioned themes of sacrifice, justification and victory in one coherent message.

With redemption in mind, it becomes both necessary and expected that Christ, having done battle with evil and death on the cross, should rise from the dead in order to ransom our souls and bodies from their bondage to death and oppression by evil, within and without. All this is the action of Love that cannot bear to see its beloved humanity languishing under the curse of sin and death. So Christ also descends to Hades to liberate the righteous from before his earthly time from their dark prison. This enduring image of our iconography of Pascha offers real hope to a broken and dying world. Salvation means that we cannot put the pieces back together on our own; but God can. He has done so; and He will do it finally ... if we work with Him and for Him.

Conclusion: Experiencing the Death and Resurrection of Christ

In reflecting upon the death and resurrection of Christ, “the question is not: Who was Christ? but: Who *is* Christ?”¹³ Metropolitan Kallistos (Ware) offers us a balanced theology of the cross and the resurrection:

The mystery of Christ forms an undivided unity. Incarnation, baptism, transfiguration, crucifixion, resurrection, ascension; all the moments in Christ’s incarnate dispensation constitute a single whole. We are saved through the total work of Christ, not just by one particular event in His life. The cross is central, but it can only be understood in the light of what goes before—of Christ’s taking up into Himself of our entire human nature at His birth—and likewise in the light of what comes afterwards, the resurrection, ascension and second coming. Any theology of salvation that concentrates narrowly on the cross, at the expense of the resurrection, is bound to seem unbalanced to Orthodoxy.¹⁴

¹³ Father Andrew Louth, *Introducing Eastern Orthodox Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2013), p. 51.

¹⁴ [Metropolitan] Kallistos Ware, *How We Are Saved: The Understanding of Salvation in the Orthodox Tradition* (Minneapolis, MN: Light and Life, 1996), p. 48.

Building upon this nuanced understanding of the relationship between the cross and the resurrection, we can reach a similar balance in understanding how the cross and the resurrection impact the lives of both early and contemporary Christians.

St. Paul made it very clear indeed that “if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain” (1 Corinthians 15:12-19). Father Stylianopoulos has pointed out that during the formation of the Church, “the fact and centrality of the resurrection constitute the bedrock of Christian faith, attested by more than five hundred eyewitnesses (1 Corinthians 15:5-8).”¹⁵ Moreover, in our own lives and awareness of Christ we can each experience the resurrection of Christ and His victory over sin within us. Rather than struggle with the difficult question of the extent to which the Jews or the Romans were responsible for the death of Christ, we would do well to focus on our own responsibility for the death of Christ, linked to the struggle between sin and grace in our own lives. As Metropolitan Kallistos (Ware) has humbly reflected: “Jesus Christ’s act of salvation, his victory over death and sin through the cross and resurrection, is indeed complete and definite. . . . But, while the Lord’s victory is certainly an accomplished fact, my personal participation in that victory is at yet far from complete.”¹⁶ Nevertheless, as Orthodox Christians on Pascha morning, we can all sing together with conviction, “Christ is risen from the dead, trampling down death by death, and upon those in the tombs bestowing life.”

It is the hope of the co-authors of this first unit of the E-Quip course that these opening ten lectures have provided for you personally a deepening of your own understanding of Orthodox faith and life. May further lectures in this E-Quip course be for you a continuing experience of God’s promise to each of us: “I will instruct you and teach you in this way in which you should go.”¹⁷ Praised be to God!

¹⁵ Stylianopoulos, “Resurrection” in McGuckin, *The Concise Encyclopedia of Orthodox Christianity*, p. 383.

¹⁶ Metropolitan Kallistos [Ware], *How Are We Saved?* p.4.

¹⁷ Psalm 31(32). v.8. The translation is drawn from the beautifully done *A New English Translation of the Septuagint and the Other Greek Translations Traditionally Included Under That Title*, Albert Pietersma and Benjamin G. Wright (eds.), translation of The Psalms by Albert Pietersma (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009). The full text is available free online (with corrections and emendations made in June 2014) at: www.ccat.sas.upenn.edu/nets/edition/ .

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