Evangelical Review of Theology

EDITOR: DAVID PARKER

Volume 25 • Number 1 • January 2001

Articles and book reviews original and selected from publications worldwide for an international readership for the purpose of discerning the obedience of faith

Published by
PATERNOSTER PERIODICALS

for
WORLD EVANGELICAL
FELLOWSHIP
Theological Commission

0144-8153 ERT (2001) **25:1**, 53–64

The Preaching Of The Cross Today

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Keywords: Cross, atonement, charismatic, Enlightenment, sin, law, gospel, liturgy, images, faith, interpretation, postmodernism

Today it is by no means self-evident that the cross has a central place in preaching. A few years ago the Dutch Reformed theologian, C. Graafland, pointed out that this is true not only of the more progressive circles within the churches, but also of circles that emphatically call themselves Reformed. All kinds of other themes have taken the central place in preaching: the 'eclipse' of God, questions about the experience of God and the meaning of life, the struggle with evil and suffering, and so on.

Why is this so? According to Graafland this process started rather soon after the Reformation. In Calvin we already observe that besides the doctrine of justification by faith (which he calls the 'first grace') regeneration (the 'second grace') becomes pivotal. This line is continued in Puritanism (Britain), the 'More Precise Reformation' (the 'Nadere Reformatie' in the Netherlands) and Pietism (Germany). God's salvation *in* man becomes the central moment of preaching. The main questions are: Am I reborn? Am I really a child of God? People are looking for *special experiences*.

The main question is no longer the experience of the atonement that happened on the cross, but the experience of inner renewal, of regeneration and conversion, the experience of the reality of God and the personal encounter with God. The work of atonement accomplished by Jesus Christ becomes a kind of natural background music.

The same may happen and does happen in the Charismatic Movement. There is no doubt that Christians associated with this movement regard the cross of Jesus as the place where they were reconciled with God. But their emphasis on the charismatic experience can easily lead to the same effect: the atonement becomes a kind of natural background music.

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In more progressive circles there is another kind of discomfit when the topic of atonement is discussed. Progressive Christians most likely would feel more at home in the view of my former colleague C.J. den Heyer, Professor of New Testament in the Theological University of Kampen, who wrote the following words in his book on the atonement:

> I know the old and familiar religious truths, but they can no longer move or inspire me. . . . The confession of the church says that Jesus' death accomplished the reconciliation with God. But what does that mean? How can the death of someone in the far past mean salvation and redemption for me who lives many centuries later? . . . Rather, this idea raises resistance on my part. Am I not responsible for the consequence of my own words and deeds?[1]

Most certainly, Den Heyer is not the only one to entertain these ideas. I am afraid that many church members increasingly have problems on this score.

Why?

In an article in the Dutch journal *Kontekstueel* the Rev. T. Poot makes an attempt to answer this question. He distinguishes two kinds of causes. In the first place there is the *Zeitgeist*, the spirit of the age, which is moulded by a longstanding change in our western culture. The Enlightenment, which started in the 18th century and aimed at the emancipation of humankind (i.e., it wanted to make people independent of authorities outside themselves), in the sixties and seventies of this century all of a sudden penetrated into all layers of society. Modern man wants to be free and to decide for himself what he believes and what is of crucial importance for his life. This is also the tenor of the quotation from Den Heyer's book.

All this is intensified by the *strong individualism* that characterizes modern society. 'I do what I want to do, and what I do is my personal decision, just as what you do is your decision. It does not concern me what you do and it does not concern you what I do.' In addition, there is the phenomenon that many *other religions* have entered our western countries. Their adherents have quite different perspectives of faith. In the majority of these religions the central tenet is not deliverance from sin and guilt, but they strive after enlightenment so that they may discover the meaning of life. Usually this enlightenment is found by descending into the depth of one's own being where one can encounter the Divine Self. In some of these religions (e.g. Hinduism) the ideas of karma and reincarnation play a dominant part. In other religions (e.g. Islam) obedience to Allah is the decisive factor. Finally, there is the ocean of suffering, which by means of the modern mass media daily floods our minds. Auschwitz, Biafra, Cambodia, Rwanda, Zaire are names that remind us constantly of this *ocean of suffering*. Within this worldwide context of human suffering why would the death of one man about two thousand years ago mean the atonement of all guilt?

Besides all this there are various *theological factors*. During and after the Second World War we increasingly came into contact with the world of Jewish thinking. Here God and man are seen as covenant partners who need each other and are mutually dependent on each oth-

[1] The book is also published in an English translation by SCM Press: C.J. den Heyer, *Jesus and the Doctrine of the Atonement*, 1998.

er. In Jewish theology there is also an increasing appreciation of the person of Jesus. He is seen as one of the many suffering *tsadik*, or righteous people, who are found during all of Israel's history.

Many people of our day have *little awareness of sin and guilt*. If there still is such an awareness, it has a collective rather than a personal character, and represents a feeling of powerlessness rather than one of guilt. Many people are deeply troubled by their own fate and by the need of the world as a whole. They cannot understand the part God has in all this grief and suffering. Poot also points to the remarkable fact that many *modern movies* have their setting in deserted factory premises with dilapidated buildings and broken windows or in dark underground car parks or on lonely, wet and glistening bitumen roads. These movies clearly show how 'unheimisch' and sinister the world has become for modern men and women.

Quite often preachers associate themselves with these feelings of their parishioners and consequently the questions they deal with in their sermons are quite different from Luther's famous question: 'How do I find a gracious God?' Of course, we should remember that in asking this question, Luther also associated himself with the spirit of his own day. People in the Middle Ages were burdened with the question of guilt. We can still see it today in the great medieval cathedrals with their very large picture of Christ as the Judge of the whole world right over the entrance to the cathedral (cf. also the medieval hymn *Dies irae, dies illa* from the Requiem Mass). There is therefore no reason whatever not to deal with the questions that burden modern man, provided that we do not forget to move on to the great question God puts to us and the answer he himself has given to that question.

Law and Gospel

But how can one preach God's atonement of sin and his reconciliation with us through the cross of Jesus Christ to people who have hardly any sense of guilt? Should we perhaps in the line of Luther and Lutheran theology in general give much more attention to God's law and in particular to the accusing function of the law? Before we preach the gospel, should we perhaps evoke a sense of guilt on the side of the hearers by first preaching the law in all its threatening power?

To be honest, I have my doubts here. Surely, in our preaching we should not ignore the second function of the law (cf. Lord's Day 2 of the *Heidelberg Catechism*: Question: 'How do you come to know your misery? Answer: The law of God tells me.'), but we would be making a big mistake if we transform the relationship between law and gospel into an order or sequence: first the preaching of the law and only after that the preaching of the gospel.

I believe we must start at the point where the people in the church are. They live in a secular world and often are more influenced by secularization than they realize themselves. They are burdened by the questions of suffering, both personal and collective. They are vexed by their own fate and God's role in it. They are troubled by their feeling that God is so inconceivably great and so elusive; they are also concerned that they notice so little of his presence in their every day lives. We must not

ignore these questions.

But even so the question returns: How should one in this situation of confusion preach about the cross and the atonement that took place there?

Changes in the liturgy

In my own country the situation is aggravated by changes in the traditional 'Christian year'. In many congregations the so-called 'passion period' is replaced by the 'forty day period' of fasting and preparation for Easter. This replacement is more fundamental than people usually think.

The idea of a passion period, covering the six Sundays before Easter, is typical of the Reformation and in particular of the Reformation in the Netherlands. In the ancient and medieval church (and it is still so in the Roman Catholic Church of our own day) the period preceding Easter was first of all a period of fasting and of repentance and penance. Only the so-called Holy Week was devoted to the suffering of the Lord. A change took place at the end of the Middle Ages. The mendicant orders of the 13th and 14th centuries introduced the Lenten sermons with their prominent passion theme. In the Netherlands the Reformed Church followed this lead and did away with the idea of a fortyday fasting and decided that during this period the churches should concentrate in their preaching on the suffering of the Lord. The provincial Synod of Assen (1619) decreed that 'every year during the seven weeks before Easter the ministers shall preach on the passion of the Lord.'

In the period after World War II there was yet another shift in the liturgy of the morning service. Since the Reformation it was customary to read the Ten Commandments as the first Scripture reading. After the war this was replaced by a prayer of repentance, a word of grace and a reading of some portion of the law. In this way the congregation prepared itself for the encounter with God in the reading and preaching of his Word. In recent years this preparation has been replaced in many churches by a so-called Kyrie prayer, followed by a hymn of praise (the so-called *Gloria in excelsis*). This is quite a different beginning of the service. The emphasis is no longer on our own guilt and that of the whole world, but on the needs of the world and of ourselves. The transition from this emphasis at the beginning to the preaching of the cross is much less 'natural' than when we start with a prayer of repentance.

The New Testament

It is quite obvious that in the New Testament the passion and the death of Jesus has a central place. This clearly applies to the *Gospels*. At the close of the previous century the famous German theologian Martin Kähler called the Gospels *passion stories with an introduction*. As a matter of fact, already in the introductions of the Gospels we encounter the first onset of Jesus' suffering. In the socalled prologue of the Gospel according to John we hear threatening undertones: 'He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him' (1:11). In that very first chapter John the Baptist points to Jesus with the following words: 'Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world' (1:29). In the nativity stories of Matthew and Luke we also observe the shadow of the cross: the massacre of the inno-

cent children of Bethlehem and the flight to Egypt (Matt. 2) and Simeon's words to Mary: 'A sword will pierce your own soul too' (Luke 2). Jesus' baptism is also a preparation for his suffering and death for in that act, he, who is without sin, identifies himself with all the sinners who were baptized by John. The refusal of the three temptations, in which the devil tries to keep Jesus away from the road to the cross, means that Jesus deliberately accepts this road. The conflicts with the Jewish leaders start soon after his first public appearance (Mark 2:1-12).

How central the preaching of the cross was to Paul appears from what he writes in the first letter to the Corinthians: 'For I decided to know nothing while I was with you except *Jesus Christ and him crucified*' (2:2). In the same letter he summarizes his own preaching in the expression: 'the message of the cross' (1:18). In all his letters these fundamental thoughts recur. By all kinds of images he tries to make clear to his readers what the death of Jesus means. And in all cases the underlying idea is that of *substitution*: he died 'for us', 'for our sins', at times even: 'in our stead'.

This last idea had a very prominent place in the form that was read at the beginning of the Lord's Supper service in the Reformed Churches in Holland. It said:

> We remember that all the time he lived on earth he was burdened by our sin and God's judgment upon it; that in his agony in the garden he sweated drops of blood under the weight of our sins; that he was tied in bonds to set us free forever; that he suffered disgrace and ridicule to give us the dignity of being children of God forever; that he, the innocent One, was condemned to death to have us, guilty ones, acquitted at the judgment seat of God; that he took upon himself our curse that we might be filled with his blessing; that he humbled himself into the deepest desolation and agony of hell, when on the cross he cried: 'My God, my God why have You forsaken Me?', so that we might never be forsaken.

(It is very regrettable that similar words are no longer used in the contemporary services.)

The depth of our Fall

At the same time the cross shows the depth of our fall into sin and guilt. It shows that we have fallen into an horrific abyss, from which we can never extract ourselves. As a matter fact, we see this not only in the cross, but also in the suffering preceding it. Gradually all people turn against Jesus: the religious leaders (appealing to the God of Israel they pronounce the death sentence, Matt. 26:65); the representatives of the government (Pilate and Herod); the multitudes (when Jesus enters Jerusalem on 'Palm Sunday', they all sing 'Hosanna!' but a few days later it is 'Crucify him!'); the disciples (Judas betrays him, in the garden they all abandon him; Peter, who had confessed him as the Messiah, denies him three times). Finally, even the Father turns against him and in the agony of death and hell he can only cry with the author of Psalm 22: 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' This terrible cry reveals the fathomless abyss under our existence.

The depth of our fall becomes particularly clear in the attitude of the religious leaders. Of course, they are very pious. They do not want to put the blood money of Judas into the temple treasure (Matt. 27:6). They refuse to enter the court of Pilate, for then they would not be allowed to eat the Passover (John 18:28). They do

not want the bodies left on the cross during the Sabbath (John 19:31). But here human piety and the keeping of the law is like a foul stench, ascending to heaven.

But did not they all do it in *ignorance*? Does not Jesus, hanging on the cross, pray: 'Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing' (Luke 23:34)? Literally these words apply to the soldiers, who drove the nails through his hands and feet and a little later decide by lot which part of his clothes each one of them will get and who will have the seamless undergarment (John 19:23, 24). But I believe that in the context of the entire passion story these words apply to all persons involved. Sometimes this ignorance is interpreted as a kind of 'excuse', but I doubt this very much. I think we should read it as an indication of the depth of our alienation from God: it goes so far that even in ignorance we commit sin. Apparently there is a permanent breach between God and us. But he, the innocent One, takes this guilt also upon himself and intercedes for the people then present and also for us.

A variety of images

Den Heyer is undoubtedly right when he points out that the New Testament uses many images and metaphors to show us the significance and meaning of Jesus' suffering and death. My problem with his book is that in a typically postmodern fashion he selects one image (Jesus' death as that of a righteous Jew) and ignores the rest.

In my opinion we must take all these images seriously. This means that our preaching of the cross is also very inadequate if it is restricted to a continual repetition of the terms 'for us', 'for our sins' or 'in our stead'. Undoubtedly, these are very central concepts in the New Testament, but preaching that is limited to them becomes monotonous and after a while it is taken for granted by the hearers: 'Of course, Jesus died for us and everything is fine now!' There are many colours in the rainbow of the atonement as pictured in the New Testament and we need them all for a good understanding of the meaning of Jesus' death.

I will briefly mention the main images and metaphors.

(1) The term *ransom*. This word is used quite often in the Septuagint as the translation of the Hebrew *kopher* and refers to the restoration of a balance that has been disturbed by a crime. This restoration could take place in two ways: according to the rule 'an *eye* for an *eye* and a tooth for a tooth', or by the payment of a ransom. Such a ransom could also be paid for the release of a captive or a slave. In Mark 10:45 and Matt. 20:28 Jesus uses the term for his own life that he will give as 'a ransom for many'.

(2) Related to ransom are the words *to buy* and *to pay* (1 Cor. 6:20; 7:23; cf. 2 Peter 2:1; Revel. 5:9; 14:4). These words are derived from the socioeconomic sphere of life. The question to whom the price is paid is never asked. All emphasis is on the costliness of the price. It cost Jesus (and God) so much to purchase our freedom (cf. 1 Peter 1:18f.).

(3) *To save, salvation.* This terminology can refer to salvation from a dangerous situation (cf. Matt. 14:30; 27:40, 42, 49), but quite often it refers to salvation from the divine judgment (Rom. 5:9; 8:4).

(4) *To redeem, redemption.*

These terms refer to the practice of buying back something that formerly belonged to the purchaser, but for some reason has passed out of his possession. It is applied to the suffering and death of Christ as a means of redeeming us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us (Gal. 3:13; cf. also Rom. 8:21; Heb. 2:15 and 9:15).

(5) *To atone, atonement.* The words that are used here have their background in the cult and carry the meaning of propitiation (Heb. 2:17; 9:5; 1 John 2:2; 4:10; Rom. 3:25). In the sacrifice of his life on the cross Jesus made atonement for our sins.

(6) *To reconcile, reconciliation*. These words have their setting in the social sphere of life and have the meaning of bringing together two estranged parties (Rom. 5:10; 2 Cor. 5:18-20).

(7) Closely related to the previous terms is the word *Mediator*. We encounter the term already in the Old Testament, especially in reference to Moses. In his case the function appears to be doublesided: he is the representative of God in the presence of the people and of the people in the presence of God (Ex. 32:11-14; 30-32). In the New Testament Jesus is called the Mediator of a new and better covenant (Heb. 8:6; 9:5; 12:24) and he also has this double function.

(8) *Sacrifice, lamb, high priest*. This terminology is very prominent in the letter to the Hebrews, but we encounter it also in John 1:29; Rom. 3:24; Revel. 5:6-9.

(9) *Blood*. This term is closely related to the idea of sacrifice and is an apt summary of the mystery of Jesus' death on the cross (cf. Mark 14:24 and parallels, John 6:53ff., Acts 20:28; Rom. 3:25; 1 Cor. 10:16; 11:25f.; etc.).

(10) Christ's suffering as an *example* for the believers. In his suffering Christ left us an example: we should follow in his steps (1 Peter 2:21ff.; cf. Eph. 5:2). In both passages, as appears from the context, the exemplary character of Jesus' suffering is directly related to the substitutionary nature of this suffering.

I believe these are the most important concepts, but they are by no means the only ones. The significance and meaning of Jesus' suffering and death are expressed *in many more ways*, including the following: God gave his only begotten Son (John 3:16); God did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all (Rom. 8:32); God sent his Son into the world (Matt. 10:40; 21:37). In addition, we must not lose sight of the fact that nearly all NT images and metaphors have their background in the *Old Testament*. Augustine said that the New Testament is hidden in the Old and that the Old is opened in the New. The Dutch theologian, F.J. Pop, writes in his biblical dictionary the *fact* that Jesus died for our sins we read in the New Testament, but *how* he did it we read in the Old Testament (cf. the Passover lamb, the sacrifices in the temple, the Day of Atonement, and in particular the suffering servant in Isaiah 53).

'Multicoloured' preaching

The idea that Jesus died 'for us', 'for our sins' or 'in our stead' is nearly always present in the terms and concepts just mentioned. Nevertheless, it would be improper to bring the idea of *substitution* always to the fore and make it the central theme of the sermon. In each text we should diligently search for the particular secret of this specific text. Each text has its own colouring and we should

not stop before we have found this particular colouring.

Take, for instance, the term 'salvation'. The fundamental idea no doubt is to save one who is in distress from the dangerous situation he is in. As a matter of fact, in one third of all occurrences the word has this original meaning (e.g., the disciples during the storm on the lake, Matt. 9:21; the woman who for many years had been subject to bleeding, Matt 8:25; the daughter of Jairus, Mark 5:23). In about one fifth of all 150 texts it refers to the eschatological salvation at the consummation of history (e.g., Rom. 13:11; 1 Peter 1:5). But the New Testament also speaks of salvation that has already taken place (e.g., Rom. 8:24; 2 Tim. 1:9; Tit. 3:5).

That from which we are saved is also indicated in various ways: from sin (once only: Matt. 1:21); from darkness into light (1 Peter 2:9); from alienation to participation in the people of God (1 Peter 2:10; Eph. 2:12, 13); from guilt to forgiveness (Eph. 1:7; Col. 1:14); from slavery to freedom (Gal. 5:1; 2 Cor. 3:17); from fear of the powers of darkness to confidence (1 John 4:17, 18; 2 Tim. 1:7).

The deliverance *from the powers of darkness* played a very important part in the Early Church (cf. Gustaf Aulén's classic book on the subject, *Christus Victor*) and is without any doubt solidly based on the New Testament. Jesus delivered us from the power of death (1 Cor. 15:26, 54ff; 2 Tim. 1:10) and from the power of Satan (Heb. 2:14; cf. Acts 10:38). Many wonderful blessings are associated with the death of Christ: peace with God (Eph. 2:14-17; Rom. 5:1); freedom (Rom. 6:22; 8:2; Gal. 5:1); sonship and adoption (Rom. 8:15; Gal. 4:5; Eph. 1:5); joy (Rom. 5:11); justification (Rom. 5:9), sanctification (Heb. 10:10; etc.

Although salvation becomes a reality only *by faith* on the part of man (Eph. 2:8), it is always *due to the grace of God* (2:5). God is always the *subject* of reconciliation (Rom. 5:11; 2 Cor. 5:18ff.). The *object* is indicated in various ways: we ourselves as ungodly people, as sinners, even as enemies of God (Rom. 5:6-10); the world (2 Cor. 5:19); humanity as a whole (Rom. 5:12ff.); all things, i.e. the entire creation (Col. 1:20); Jews and pagans (Eph. 2:16). The atonement has a universal import and is always focused on a world or on human beings who are alienated from God.

However, we are saved or freed not only *from* something, but at the same time also *unto* something. It is striking how often Jesus' suffering is mentioned in a paranetical, admonishing context (Matt. 11:29; Philp. 2:5ff.; 1 John 2:6). Characteristic of Paul's letters is the fact that the first part is used for an exposition of what Christ has done for us, while in the second part he deals with the ethical implication of Christ's work (cf. Rom. 1-11 and 12-15; Gal. 1-4 and 5-6). This order is significant and decisive. The indicative always comes first and the imperative rests on it. Only in this way can we avoid legalistic preaching.

Preaching and faith

The apostolic preaching tells us in all kinds of ways that the atonement has been accomplished (although we are still looking for the eschatological redemption and consummation). But the fact that the atonement has been accomplished nowhere becomes an 'automatism'. This is very evident in 2 Corinthians 5:18-21. First Paul

says that God has reconciled us to himself (aorist!), but he relates this immediately to the apostolic commission of the 'ministry of reconciliation' (v. 18). In verses 19-21 he gives an elucidation. The ministry is now defined as: 'We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God' (v. 20).

God saves sinners 'through the foolishness of what is preached' (1 Cor. 1:21; cf. Rom. 11:14; 1 Cor. 9:22). The gospel itself is a power of God for the salvation of '*everyone who believes*' (Rom. 1:16). This last aspect is an essential part of salvation. Preaching is not only a matter of proclaiming a new state of affairs, quite apart from faith on the part of the hearers, but it calls them to accept this message in personal faith. What John writes in the first ending of his Gospel holds true of the atonement as well: 'These are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name' (20:31).

The need for 'interpretation'

It is evident that nearly all images and metaphors used by the New Testament writers have their origin in the social, cultural and religious *context of their own day*. This makes preaching on them a rather difficult assignment. For we are not allowed to assume simply that these images and metaphors are directly transparent to people who live in the *context of the first years of the third millennium*. A while ago a minister reported that when he asked his catechumens what association was evoked by the word 'blood', they replied: 'Aids'! Nor should we lose sight of the fact that in our Western culture a shift is taking place from a 'culture of guilt' to a 'culture of shame'. Furthermore, the idea that a human being is always part of a greater entity is no longer taken for granted by modern man. Consequently the notion that the death of someone who died some two thousand years ago on a cross outside Jerusalem can affect us is incredible, even absurd.

How, then, should a minister preach on the topic of the atonement in Christ's death on the cross? First of all, he should not assume that the New Testament (and also the Old Testament) images will be understood automatically by his hearers. He will have to *explain* them *very carefully*. What is a 'ransom'? When is it paid? Who pays it? and so on. What is 'substitution'? Are there any modern images for this idea? We could instance the story of the German pastor Kolbe, who in the concentration camp, asked the German commander to allow him to take the place of a man and a woman who were condemned to die. Are there any modern concepts that could help people to discover something of the mystery of the atonement? Could the concept of 'solidarity' be of any help here? Did not Jesus show his *solidarity* with all sinners when he, the innocent One, forced John the Baptist to baptize him and thus chose the way that eventually led to Calvary? Cannot this concept of solidarity offer some consolation to people in distress: 'I am not on my own in this cruel world'? Does not solidarity also mean that even the most horrible sin has been atoned for?

Of great significance, too, are the *words* which *people* speak in the passion stories. With the help of the principle of 'identification' they offer us quite a clear insight into what is

really happening. Quite often there are three 'levels' in the stories.

(a) The words spoken by the *bystanders* show us the *depth of human sin*. Almost every kind of sin was perpetrated against Jesus. In this way we realize how true the following lines of a well-known passion hymn are:

Who was the guilty? Who brought this upon you?
It is my treason. Lord, that has undone you.
'Twas I, Lord Jesus, I it was denied you;
I crucified you.

(b) At the same time they all, in spite of themselves, speak the *truth* about this man dying on the cross. The soldiers mock Jesus as a pseudo-king, not realizing that he is a real king. Pilate acknowledges that Jesus is innocent (John 19:4; Matt. 27:23). He has a notice prepared in three languages and has it fastened on the cross: 'The king of the Jews' (John 19:20), and so he tells the whole world that Jesus is a king indeed.

(c) In spite of themselves the *enemies* are *serving God's work of salvation*. Caiaphas, the high priest at that moment, who condemns Jesus on purely political grounds, nevertheless prophesies that it is better that one man die for the people than that the whole nation perish. John, the evangelist, adds that he prophesied that Jesus would die for the Jewish nation, and not only for that nation but for all scattered children of God (John 11: 49ff.). Pilate speaks the words: *Ecce homo*—'Look, this is what man is like in God's eyes: a wretched rebel, a failed king'. The people tell Pilate that they have a law and according to this (divine) law Jesus has to die (19:7). Pilate perpetrates the greatest injustice and is himself aware of this, yet at the same time, as the representative of the highest justice (God's justice), he sentences Jesus to death (19:16). This is what all human beings deserve.

More than a martyr

In all our preaching on the cross people should hear that Jesus is much more than just a martyr, who dies for a good cause. Undoubtedly, Jesus was also a martyr. He was a suffering Jewish *tsadik*, who in spite of all that is happening to him puts his trust in God. He is the suffering Servant of the Lord of Isaiah 53. But in that very same chapter we see that this suffering goes far beyond mere martyrdom. In particular in verses 5-8 we hear the dark tones of the divine judgment: 'The punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed.' 'The Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.' In 2 Corinthians 5:18-21 Paul follows this line of thought and speaks the mysterious words: 'God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.' These are incomprehensible words and all our imagination falls short here. Luther called this the 'great exchange'.

This exchange was not brought about by us, but by God. We were *totally alienated from God*. The Dutch poet Joke Verweerd expressed the pain of a broken relationship in these words:

Where are you, where are you?
In your eyes that are turned away
I see no recognition.
How shall I ever get used to this?
It is as if I suffocate.

Distance stretches around your soul
like an electric fence.
You are the lord of the manor
and I am banished.

Is it not this that all of us have done to God? Have we not banished him from our lives? But God did not give up. He put his own Son into the balance: he with his unfathomable suffering in the one scale, and we with our incalculable guilt in the other. Indeed, God did even more: he took our guilt and put it also into the scale of his own Son in the flesh!

The great drama between God and man

Postmodern people say that all this is rubbish. The time of the 'great stories' is over. This is also true of the great story of Jesus' passion and the atonement accomplished by him. According to postmodern thinking we all select our own truth to live by. In this way postmodern people draw the logical conclusion of what started in the 18th century *Enlightenment*. Its aim was to free humanity from the tutelage in which we were held by the church and by the Bible, which was regarded as divine revelation. People themselves should determine how they shall live. There is no need whatever to subject oneself to outside authorities, but as an autonomous individual, a person is free to decide what to believe or not to believe.

In our day pure individualism is added to this. There is no longer room for a *larger unity* of which we are part. Nor is there room for the larger unity of the relationship between God, the Creator of heaven and earth, and humanity. But this is exactly the great story of the Bible. It already becomes visible in the first book of the Old Testament. The Voice says to Abraham that 'all people on earth will be blessed through him' (Gen. 12:3). At Sinai this great promise seems to be limited to the nation of Israel. But later on we see that time and again the prophets point beyond the borders of Israel and speak of the whole world and all of humanity as the object of God's saving activity. In the New Testament this great story finds its focus and culmination in *Jesus of Nazareth*, who according to the unanimous testimony of all the writers is the Messiah, who was once promised to Israel, but now appears to be the Messiah of the whole world.

In him the great drama of human history, which is a history of alienation from God, finds its nadir and at the same time its climax. The cross is the *nadir* of history: we, human beings, in blind rage nail the One sent by God, his only begotten Son, on a cross. But the great wonder is that God accepts this broken life as the atoning sacrifice for the guilt of the world. In God's hand this nadir of hatred and guilt becomes the *climax* of his divine mercy.

Many people today wonder how this is possible. How can the death of some one who lived two thousand years ago accomplish my reconciliation with God? From the viewpoint of the Enlightenment this is impossible. I stand before God as an individual who has come of age and who has to battle it out with God, hoping perhaps that he may be gracious to me. Den Heyer has this hope, for he believes that the words of Psalm 103 are true: 'The Lord is compassionate and gracious.' To him this is more than enough. No further atonement through the cross of Jesus is necessary.

But when we listen carefully to the apostolic preaching, as it comes to us in the New Testament, the situation is quite different. Indeed, I am of age and I am responsible for my own words and deeds. But I am more than

an isolated individual. As a member of the whole human race, I am involved in the great drama that is taking place between God and humankind. To say it once more in the words of Paul: 'God was reconciling the *world* to himself in Christ" (2 Cor. 5:19).

The way of salvation is not a purely individual way, let alone an autonomous way. And yet it is a way in which we are *personally involved*, for it is the way of *faith in Jesus Christ*, in whose cruel death on the cross the alienation between God and man was 'solved'. According to the whole New Testament, the great exchange took place once and for all on Calvary. And it becomes reality in my life only when I heed Paul's call: 'We implore you on Christ's behalf: be reconciled to God' (2 Cor. 5:20). Reconciliation is not an automatism. We ourselves must also desire and seek it.