

# St Luke's in the City

## **Celebrating at the Crossroads** **21<sup>st</sup> Sunday after Pentecost, 21 October 2007**

Dear Friends,

SALVATION is christian business. For christians salvation is about Christ, who Christ is and what Christ does – that is to say, Christology. Salvation is that special branch of Christology which is called Atonement. Entire libraries have been written on atonement, and I make no effort to sum all that up here! There is no Christianity without atonement. The idea of the Divine-human relationship in some way requiring reconciliation, and God's work in Christ to restore a separation, is atonement. All orthodox christianity agrees on this much. But atonement has a chequered history. Though the councils of the church and creeds have never attempted to define the method by which God-in-Christ accomplishes what God accomplishes, the church since the time of St Anselm of Canterbury has been infected by a particular theory of atonement, the basic contours of which are instantly recognisable. In short, it goes like this: God made a good world, but humans were disobedient ('original sin'). God the judge requires that a just payment must be paid for the price of the sin (a 'penalty'). Unfortunately the sin was so heinous that no human could pay the necessary price. So God sent his only Son to pay that price (as a 'substitute'). The necessary blood sacrifice appeases God's demand for blood ('satisfaction'). The shorthand description for this theory of what God was doing in Christ is known as "penal substitutionary atonement". My term "theory" is deliberate. This idea is merely a theory.

Tragically, this theory - because it is founded on medieval Scholastic legalism, and because it has immense power as a means of control - has enslaved many christians. Some christians demand absolute allegiance to this theory of atonement. The truth is that this theory of atonement is violent, has fuelled and justified violent, repressive, coercive and unjust human behaviour wherever it takes hold, and is utterly inconsistent with a Christlike God. Furthermore, this violent theory places no responsibility whatsoever on us in relation to others and the creation. All that is required is belief in the theory, up in the head, by gloriously isolated, though mutually self-assured, 'saved' individuals.

Overcoming this violent and manipulative theory of atonement may be the most pressing agenda for us, since I have no doubt that many good people are repelled by christian faith not because of what they perceive in Jesus but because this virulent atonement theory is both intellectually scandalous and behaviourally outrageous. Liberation from slavery takes no easy path, just as Israel's liberation from Egypt involves many years of meandering uncertainty. There are no easy answers, though there are a great many worthwhile ideas in exploration. What may help is to re-connect mind and body, as God re-connects heaven and earth, flesh and Spirit, in the Body of Christ. Whatever atonement is, it is certainly not merely an idea, a theory, a proposition, a belief. Atonement can only be known as an experience, a fleshy and down-to-earth experience.

With my love,  
David