

Metaphors of Atonement

What is a metaphor?

A figure of speech in which a word or phrase is applied to an object or action that it does not literally denote in order to imply a resemblance¹

Such as

John saw Jesus coming toward him and declared, "Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!"

(John 1:29)

The word 'metaphor' comes from the Greek *metapherein* meaning literally 'to carry across' - the meaning of a word is 'carried across' to something it does not directly refer to. Arguably nearly all language is metaphor, at least in origin. It seems at least reasonable to claim that abstract language is metaphor, where concrete images and experiences are used to express abstract ideas. And all language - indeed all knowledge, must have roots in the concrete.

But if this is basically true of language in general, it must be even more true of theological language. Here we must not get confused between metaphor and analogy. Analogy is the application of an abstraction from human experience (strength, love, knowledge) and applying it to God, acknowledging that the word as it applies to God is not being used in the same way as when it is applied to created reality. Metaphor is the use of a concrete to communicate an abstract. "He is an ass" means he is stupid and stubborn.

Language about God's essence tends to be analogy (though metaphor can be and is used at times). Language about God's action would seem to be best expressed in metaphor.

Metaphor as 'Second Class' Language?

Colin Gunton² notes that metaphor is sometimes treated as 'second class' language, or even as a misuse of language. A rationalist and/or idealist desire for 'clear and distinct ideas' means that metaphor, which is the "application of an alien term by transference"³ is inherently suspect. Hobbes lists metaphor as one of the abuses of language, describing it as "when men use words... in other senses than that they are ordained for"⁴ (*Leviathan*) But ordained by whom? The use of 'ordained' here seems to be a metaphor! (29)

Is it the case that metaphor is a lower grade of language than the 'literal' use of words? Is it true that metaphor obscures a clear understanding of the world? Or is it precisely the opposite, that the use of metaphor actually advances our understanding of the world. As we advance in knowledge, in discovery, we need to find words to describe new things, and the process of doing this is finding words which in some way 'fit'. This happens in science (electrical *field*, light *wave*). Metaphor, by allowing us to speak of and conceptualise new

¹Collins Shorter English Dictionary (London, 1993)

²For this our principle guide will be C. E. GUNTON *The Actuality of the Atonement, A Study of Metaphor, Rationality and the Christian Tradition* (T&T Clark, Edinburgh, 1988). The page numbers in the following text refer to this book.

³ Aristotle, *Poetics* 1475 b7-8 cf. p.28

⁴ *Leviathan* Ed. M. OAKESHOTT, (Collier Macmillan 1651/1962) p.34

experiences, is actually a vehicle of discovery. It allows “accommodation of language to the causal structure of the world”⁵

Metaphor is a key element, perhaps the key element, in the way our language changes as we understand our world more and more.

Words are not ideal, platonic forms outside of the things they describe, but rather are drawn out of our experience of the world in a more Aristotelian sense, which brings us to the problem of the relationship between words and the world.

Language and Reality

If, then, we build up language by use of metaphor, if we find ways of expressing our experience of new things from our existing expressions and understandings, and if this has always been the case, where then the link with the world? Are we still stuck in Kantian dualism? Is language “no more than our imposing of mental constructs on an essentially unknown world” (33).

But do we have to insist that there is an absolute fit between language and reality in order to be realists? And is the language always tied to its original metaphor? The answer is probably ‘no’ in both cases. The fact that a description of reality is imperfect does not divorce the description from reality. And words are not wedded to their etymology.

Rather it would seem there is a constant fluidity, a shifting of the use of words. That which was once a metaphorical use for a word can become its primary meaning, or an equivocal meaning. Thus it seems there is no absolute distinction between literal and metaphorical uses of a word, and the movement towards a literal use does not necessarily abandon the metaphorical aspects.

The truth of a claim about the world does not depend on whether it is expressed in literal or metaphorical terms, but upon whether language of whatever kind expresses human interaction successfully or not. (35)

We are still left with the question as to how words relate to reality. What is the point of contact? are they just ‘arbitrary’ signs or is there a real link between the sign and the thing? Coleridge (cf. p.36) speaks of destroying

the old antithesis of Words and Things, elevating, as it were words into Things.

And SJ Brown (cf. p. 37) states that

imagery is a witness to the harmony between mind and matter.

This gives metaphor a ‘better’ purchase on reality than more ‘rarefied’ forms of language.

The world can be known only indirectly, and therefore metaphor, being indirect, is the most appropriate form that a duly humble and listening language should take.

(37)

Metaphor is an essential part of the interplay between human beings and the world in which we understand the world in terms of ourselves and ourselves in terms of the world. Imagination is not a threat to understanding rather its necessary helpmate.

⁵ BOYD, “Metaphor and Theory Change” in A Ortony (ed.) *Metaphor and Thought* (Cambridge University Press 1979) p. 358 quoted in Gunton *op. cit.* . p.31

Metaphor and Theology

Although empiricism has been discredited in much science and philosophy, it still casts its spell on theologians (41)

As a consequence much theological discourse tends to ‘collapse into subjectivity’ (41) since God is not knowable ‘objectively’ in Kantian or empiricist thought. Metaphor may still be valuable, but as a way of expressing, in narrative form, the story of the subjective searching or experience.

It is true that the way words refer to God and the way words refer to the world are not the same. Yet are they therefore unconnected? Once again we must go back to the way language works. Are words things which hang around waiting for something to come along that fits them? Or is it the other way round? Are words not rather tags we attach to things in order to get a ‘handle’ on them, enabling us to explore them further? This may be especially true of theological language. Do we know what the word ‘God’ means before we assert the existence of God, or do we discover the meaning(s) of the word through using it?

By attaching a word to a thing or experience we enable the referent to be understood, but also we change the meaning of the word. We fit the word to the reality and the reality to the word. This is particularly true of theological language. Christians find themselves in a different situation as a consequence of the ‘Jesus Event’ and use words (victory, justice, sacrifice) to ‘get a handle’ on this. By doing so they not only come to a greater understanding of the reality of their situation, they also change the understanding of those words. At least that is the theory. Does it work? Can this approach to theological language actually give us a handle on the reality about which we seek to speak? This is the project of Gunton’s analysis of the language of atonement.

Certainly when we come to the atonement we would appear to be dealing with metaphor, indeed three main metaphors:

- Christ the Sacrifice
- Christ the Victor
- Christ the Ransom

In the next three sections we will look at these three metaphors and their development in the history of theology.

CHRIST OUR RANSOM

The Purchase of our Freedom

In Mark 10:45 Jesus says

The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.⁶

This presentation of Christ’s death as a ransom is perhaps a minor theme, but one that is fairly widespread in the New Testament. The more technical term *lutroomai*⁷ ‘ransom’ or

⁶ Parallel in Mt 20:28. Luke (22:26-27) expands on the ‘servant’ motif and drops the ransom motif, however picking it up in a less ‘sacrificial’ manner, see below.

'redeem' is found in two contexts The above quotation in Mark and the following passages link it directly to Christ's death

For there is one God; there is also one mediator between God and humankind, Christ Jesus, himself human, who gave himself a ransom for all. (1 Timothy 2:5-6,)

You know that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your ancestors, not with perishable things like silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without defect or blemish. (1 Peter 1:18-19)

See also Titus 2:14 and Hebrews 9:12

However, especially in Luke, the same term is used in a slightly different way:

Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has looked favourably on his people and redeemed them. (Luke 1:68)

We had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel. (Luke 24:21)

In one of Peter's sermons Luke links it to Moses, comparing Jesus execution with Moses initial rejection:

It was this Moses whom they rejected when they said, 'Who made you a ruler and a judge?' and whom God now sent as both ruler and liberator through the angel who appeared to him in the bush. (Acts 7:35)

The term 'ransom' or 'redeem' has its roots in the idea of 'setting free' especially in the purchase of a slave to set that slave free, hence 1 Peter's mention of 'silver and Gold'. There is also another term used for this 'transaction, the more prosaic *agorazo*⁸ meaning 'buy'

You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slaughtered and by your blood you bought for God saints from every tribe and language and people and nation; (Revelation 5:9 cf. 14:3)

Paul, using the explicit image of liberation from slavery uses this theme:

You were bought with a price; do not become slaves of human masters. (1 Corinthians 7:23, cf. also 6:20)

And also by 2 Peter

But false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive opinions. They will even deny the Master who bought them -- bringing swift destruction on themselves. (2 Peter 2:1)

In the medieval period this metaphor of 'purchase' or 'ransom' was mythologised: "The Devil, it was held, had obtained, as a result of the fall, certain rights over humankind, either on his own account or by divine permission. Freedom from this bondage was won by means of the payment represented by the blood of Christ"⁹ It was this idea that St. Anselm was reacting against in *Cur Deus Homo*, in which he seeks to understand this metaphor. We shall return to this shortly. Suffice to say that 'ransom' is a metaphor taken primarily from the slave market; God, in Christ 'buys' our freedom and the 'cost' is his blood.

⁷ the verb *lutrovomai* and its derivatives the nouns *lutrōn* (ransom, means of release) *lutrōsi*" (redemption, setting free) and *lutrothv*" (liberator)

⁸ *ajgoravzw*, linked with *ajgorav* meaning 'marketplace'

⁹C. E. GUNTON *The Actuality of the Atonement* (T&T Clark, Edinburgh, 1988) p. 87

A Marvellous Exchange

Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 5:21:

For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God..

Paul expresses a similar idea in Galatians 3:13

Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, “Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree”

In a sense this is only an expansion of the formula “Christ died for our sins”¹⁰

Unfortunately these verses do not help us to see clearly what precisely is meant for this. Crude models of justice suggest that sin is a ‘crime’ which must be ‘paid for’. But it would seem to be an offence against justice that an innocent person should be required by God to suffer in the place of the guilty. This is the issue that Anselm seeks to address.

Cur Deus Homo?

St Anselm states the question thus:

The unbelieving often question..., and the faithful wonder... for what reason, and by what necessity, God was made man, and by His death.. gave life to the world.¹¹

Anselm, as we have already said, is objecting to the idea that the ransom is somehow ‘owed’ to the devil, as if the devil were an independent and autonomous agent over against God in a dualistic sense.¹² For Anselm sin could not confer rights - either to the Devil or anyone else. So Anselm sought an alternative explanation

The Problem

- Man was created by God for eternal blessedness
- This blessedness requires the perfect and voluntary submission of Man's will to God. (Freedom is to love the limitations appropriate to one's being)
- But the whole human race has refused to make this submission (and has thus lost its freedom)
- No member of the human race can restore this lost blessedness, because even perfect obedience cannot now make up for lack of obedience in the past
- Therefore the created universe is deprived of its true harmony, and in the absence of external aid, the whole human race has irrevocably forfeited the blessedness for which it was created.

The necessity of a solution

- God's purpose in the creation of Man and the universe has been frustrated.
- But it is impossible that the purpose of an omnipotent Being should be frustrated.
- Therefore a means of redemption must exist

¹⁰I Cor 15:3. Paul more usually states simply that Christ died 'for us' e.g. 1 Thess 5:9-10

¹¹*Cur Deus Homo* I.i

¹²Cfr. GUNTON *op. cit.* p. 88f

The solution

- To restore the lost harmony and blessedness, an offering of obedience must be made, equal too or greater than all that has been lacking in the past.
- Only Man, as the offender, *ought* to make this offering, but no man can do this, because he already owes God all and more than all he has to offer.
- Only God *can* make this offering which transcends the whole unpaid debt of past offences; but God ought not to make it, because the debt is Man's
- Since only Man ought to, and only God can, make this offering, it must be made by one who is both Man and God.
- Therefore a God-Man is necessary for the Redemption of the whole of Creation¹³

Anselm has been accused - perhaps rightly in some respects - of being over rational, though this summary does rather emphasise the logical argument.¹⁴

Anselm takes his main metaphor from the world of law, specifically from the medieval feudal order, and this has led some - including Gustav Aulen - to accuse him of being too legalistic and/or rational:

We find in Anselm... the alternative stated: *either* a forgiveness of sins by God, which would mean that sin is not treated seriously and so would amount to a toleration of laxity *or* satisfaction. No other possibility is regarded as conceivable... This rigid dilemma fastens the doctrine of the atonement into a juridical scheme.. The relation of man to God is treated by God as essentially a legal relation.¹⁵

Possibly - but what kind of legal relation? The feudal system, at least in its ideal form, was one in which "it was the duty of the feudal ruler to maintain the order of rights and obligations without which society would collapse. Anselm's God is understood to operate *analogously* for the universe as a whole: as the upholder of universal justice."¹⁶

Thus it is simply not possible for God to overlook sin, since to do so would make the universe an unjust place, and so the God responsible for it would no longer be God.

when [this creature] does not will what he ought he... perturbs the order and beauty of the universe

A 'perversity' which can be

turned aside by the highest Wisdom into the pre-ordained order and symmetry of the universe [by] spontaneous satisfaction for perversity or ... exaction of penalty from one refusing satisfaction.

This must happen because otherwise

there would be caused... a certain deformity from this violated symmetry.. and God would seem to fail in His government. (I.xv)

Note that Anselm makes a clear distinction between *penalty* and *satisfaction*. Christ is not being punished for our sins on Anselm's view; rather he is making satisfaction for them, putting the balance right, getting the world back on to an even keel. For Anselm these are alternatives.

¹³ This summary is taken in its entirety from R. W. SOUTHERN, *St Anselm: A Portrait in a Landscape* (Cambridge University Press, 1990) p. 206. *Cur Deus Homo* is treated in pp. 197-227

¹⁴ "This bare sketch can give no idea of the subtlety and power of Anselm's argument, but it will suffice to trace its rigour." SOUTHERN *op. cit.* p.206

¹⁵ G. AULEN *Christus Victor* (SPCK, London, 1970 p. 89f. Aulen deals with Anselm's argument on pp. 84-92

¹⁶ GUNTON *op. cit.* p. 89

This satisfaction is in order that God can complete the work that was begun in creation, it is thus primarily an unmerited free act - since it is tied up first of all with God's free creation of the world, and the goodness of that creation. It is "an act of the triune God in the unity of his personal being... It is not a legal transaction, but an act of unmerited grace".¹⁷

Human depravity is infinite, since it is an offence against the goodness of God, therefore there is nothing human beings can do to restore it. But the life of the Son of God is of infinite value, and hence is capable of making satisfaction - indeed it is more than enough.¹⁸

The underlying metaphor of 'Christ as Ransom' is really the Justice of God. Gunton identifies two basic sides to this metaphor. Firstly a universal aspect which he calls the 'Greek' concept in which God maintains the order of the world by punishing offenders, and the 'Christian' view which "God exercises his justice by revealing our sin, by bearing it and by destroying its power".¹⁹

This can, of course, be presented as a victory over sin.

A DIVINE AND HUMAN VICTORY

Paul writes

Death has been swallowed up in victory "Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?" The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. (1 Corinthians 15:54-57)

But in what precisely does this victory consist, where does the struggle, the battle lie? Again there has been a tendency to mythologise the metaphorical. On this model God is seen to 'deceive' the devil by taking on human form and thus enticing the devil to attack, not realising that it is really God whom he is attacking. Thus the Devil is 'caught' in the 'trap' set by God. Quite apart from the image of a deceitful God this presents, it seems that the demons had no trouble recognising who Jesus was.²⁰

Victory over the World

Although we began with a quote from Paul, it is in the Johannine literature that the 'victory' motif is most clearly present. John's recording of Jesus last words illustrate this:

After this, when Jesus knew that all was now *finished*, he said (in order to *fulfil* the scripture), "I am thirsty." A jar full of sour wine was standing there. So they put a sponge full of the wine on a branch of hyssop and held it to his mouth. When Jesus had received the wine, he said, "It is *finished*." Then he bowed his head and gave up his spirit. (John 19:28-30)

¹⁷ GUNTON *op. cit.* p.92

¹⁸ Here I would agree with SCHMAUS up to a point, who argues, with others that referring to human offence as infinite is unhelpful, and anyway by the same token any service rendered to God would be infinite. *Dogma 3* (Sheed & Ward, London, 1971) p. 86f. However to remove these categories does not, I think, fundamentally undermine Anselm's argument

¹⁹ GUNTON *op. cit.* p.112

²⁰e.g. Mk 3:11. Cf. GUNTON p.63

Note that the same word, *teleo*, is used for “all was now finished”, “fulfil the scriptures” and “it is finished”. By ‘finished’ is meant ‘accomplished’ completed ‘fulfilled’. So this cry from the cross is above all a cry of victory, and the cross itself becomes a symbol of victory:

And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself. (12:32)

Certainly there seems to be a kind of ‘struggle’ in John, and in the prologue puts this in terms of light and darkness But there is no doubt as to the outcome. In John those who oppose Jesus are those who do not recognise him, because they are ‘children of this world’ In a few places this conflict takes on more ‘cosmic’ proportions when Jesus opponents are described as children of the devil:

Why do you not understand what I say? It is because you cannot accept my word. You are from your father the devil, and you choose to do your father's desires. (8:43-44)

Jesus speaks of the victory already won:

In the world you face persecution. But take courage; I have conquered the world! (16:33)

And in John that victory is not merely the cross, but the whole project of Jesus' life.

The theme is continued in 1 John, though here the victory belongs to the believer:

Whatever is born of God conquers the world. And this is the victory that conquers the world, our faith. Who is it that conquers the world but the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God? (1 John 5:4-5)

What is this ‘world’ that is conquered? It would seem to be a world in some way ‘enslaved to sin’ The force opposed to Jesus is personified as ‘the ruler of this world’

The Cosmic Struggle

The Motif of struggle becomes considerably stronger in the book of Revelation. Basically the whole book is a placing of the struggles of the Christian community in the context of a greater ‘cosmic’ struggle between Good and Evil, and the victory is linked to the death of Christ, for the image of Christ is the sacrificial lamb, so Rev 5:6

Then I saw between the throne and the four living creatures and among the elders a Lamb standing as if it had been slaughtered, having seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth.

Of course, the motif of victory is not restricted to the Johannine literature. We have already seen it in Paul, and he expresses our human sharing in this victory in Romans 8:37:

In all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.

The Motif also occurs also in Hebrews:

Since, therefore, the children share flesh and blood, he himself likewise shared the same things, so that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, (2:14)

And in a perhaps more subtle way in the Gospel of Mark, in which the entire career of Jesus is a failure, and yet Chapter 13 (and the very existence of the document) testifies to its future 'conquering' of these difficulties.

Who Defeats Who?

The victor is variously identified as Christ, and the Christian, and the foe defeated is variously sin, death, the devil or the world. As the idea of a 'battle' is once again a metaphor, these are all valid expressions, but can we get to the root of the meaning?

The Victor

The victor is clearly Christ. But Christ as God or Christ as a human being? obviously the two cannot be divided. And yet Aulen would want to see it as a wholly divine victory,²¹ against Anselm who asserts the importance of Christ's humanity for the victory. The New Testament evidence would seem to support the latter. One aspect of the victory is Christ's overcoming of temptation depicted in the Gospels both in the Wilderness and in Gethsemane. The human element cannot be separated from the divine here.

The vanquished

The temptations present us with a struggle with the devil. However, we must be careful to avoid two narrow and literal an understanding of this. The focus should not be on who is doing the tempting but what the temptations are. Ultimately they are temptations to misuse of power and to place personal needs and/or desires above the will of God (seen in its broadest sense)

What are we to make of the theme of 'victory over the forces of evil' which Aulen espouses? A constant theme of the Gospels is Jesus struggle with the demonic. Exorcisms galore. Though in some ways struggle is hardly the right word, since the fight is rather one-sided. Looking at Mark, Jesus has no trouble with demons. His biggest problem is human beings whom he consistently fails to convince. They are either hostile, indifferent, or failures.²² Yet a future world is pictured in chapter 13 where they do, in fact, succeed - a truth also alluded to in the statement

You will all become deserters; for it is written, 'I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered.' But after I am raised up, I will go before you to Galilee.
(14:27-28)

So is the language of demons merely a metaphor for inner-worldly forces of sin and structures of power? Perhaps the use of the word 'merely' in this sentence is misleading. Gunton argues that

The texts present us not with superhuman hypostases trotting about the world, but with the metaphorical characterisation of moral and cosmic realities which would otherwise defy expression.²³

Gunton notes that while talk of demons and devils is not widespread, the *demonic* is used very widely by psychiatrists, philosophers and the media as well as theologians. Our understanding of this evil then must avoid an over mythologisation of the metaphor, which separate the battle from real human concerns. After all even the book of Revelation can be shown to be a depiction of the political forces at the time of the writer. But we

²¹"[The 'Classic' idea of the Atonement] represents the work of Atonement or reconciliation as from first to last a work of God himself." *Christus Victor* p. 5

²²With the possible exception of the 'bit part' characters, some of whom are positive examples, e.g. the Syro-Phoenician woman in Mk 7:24-30

²³GUNTON *op. cit.* p. 66. Emphasis original.

must also avoid an over psychologisation of it which fails to 'do justice to the to the objective reality of evil'²⁴

The Victory

Aulen rightly moves the focus of the victory from a narrow concentration on the death of Christ to the whole of his incarnation, life, death and resurrection.²⁵ This is a consequence of seeing the whole thing as a dramatic struggle rather than a transaction.

But in what lies the victory? Simply a miraculous delivery of human beings? Or something more human? Perhaps the image of Jesus 'moral victory' will help us here, that he remained faithful to his mission despite the difficulties and the opposition he faced. Rahner sees the Resurrection as the vindication of the life and death of Jesus, in which God as it were 'signs his name' at the end of Jesus life. This includes a vindication of Jesus claim to be saviour.

We are saved because this man who is one of us has been saved by God, and God has thereby made his salvific will present in the world historically, really and irrevocably²⁶

Thus the events are not so much the cause of our salvation as the revelation of it.

We must, of course, be careful to avoid a model of the atonement as a simple exemplar, and the way of doing this is to point to the real experience of liberation and forgiveness of the first disciples. The healings and exorcisms of the New Testament seen in this light become metaphors for our own healing. Christ's faithfulness does not just show us how we should be faithful, it liberates us from the forces which prevent us from being faithful.

Gunton also points out that to see the cross as a victory does not just tell us about the cross, it also tells us something about victory. If a cross can be seen as victory maybe this can open our eyes to a wider idea of victory than a highly 'militaristic' one.²⁷

The image of victory over the forces of evil also gives us courage. The fact that Jesus easily overcame the demons and only really had any trouble with human beings means that we need not be afraid of the 'forces of evil' and can simply concentrate on the human dimension of our salvation.

The metaphor is also a promise, for while we know that sin and evil and death still abound in the world, yet:

Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died. For since death came through a human being, the resurrection of the dead has also come through a human being; for as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ. But each in his own order: Christ the first fruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ. Then comes the end, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father, after he has destroyed every ruler and every authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death. For "God has put all things in subjection under his feet." But when it says, "All things are put in subjection," it is plain that this does not include the one who

²⁴GUNTON *op. cit.* p. 69

²⁵Cf. GUNTON *op. cit.* p.74

²⁶*Foundations of Christian Faith* (Crossroads, New York, 1986) p. 28f. The whole discussion can be found on pp. 264-285. Rahner wants to focus on the resurrection as the primary soteriological 'event'.

²⁷Cf. GUNTON p. 78f.

put all things in subjection under him. When all things are subjected to him, then the Son himself will also be subjected to the one who put all things in subjection under him, so that God may be all in all. (1 Corinthians 15:20-28)

In the Lord of the Rings, after the ring is thrown into Mount Doom and destroyed, the hobbits return to the shire to find that it, too has been touched by the evil. Saruman, a.k.a. Sharkey, has taken over. But the Hobbits who face this problem are not the same characters who were deeply afraid against Sauron. They are confident characters, sure of their victory. And though they are casualties in the ensuing battle, the victory had already been won before they started.²⁸

Rejoice then, you heavens and those who dwell in them! But woe to the earth and the sea, for the devil has come down to you with great wrath, because he knows that his time is short! (Revelation 12:12)

CHRIST OUR SACRIFICE

Much of the New Testament material that speaks of Christ as victor also speaks of Christ as a sacrifice. This is particularly true of the Johannine writings. Jesus is described by John as the 'Lamb of God' (Jn 1:29.36). He is executed at the same time as the lambs are slaughtered for the Passover with the cry 'it is accomplished'. In the Revelation the victorious one is like a lamb that 'seemed to have been slaughtered' (Rev 5:6, cf. vv 6-14).

Yet the notion of sacrifice in its primitive form is abhorrent to us - we cannot see how a death can make a difference. What follows is a very brief attempt at making sense of it.²⁹

Paul himself makes the link between Christ's death and the Passover sacrifice:

Our paschal lamb, Christ, has been sacrificed. Therefore, let us celebrate the festival, not with the old yeast, the yeast of malice and evil, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth. (1 Cor 5:7-8)

A link that serves to draw attention to the new covenant ushered in by Christ.

However, the most developed understanding is that found in the letter to the Hebrews, where the death of Christ is compared with the Israelite sacrificial practices. We have already alluded to its platonic 'thought world' of Hebrews and this is key to our understanding it here. For the author of Hebrews, it seems, the author is not using the idea of Jewish sacrifice to explain Christ's sacrifice, rather at the deepest level the converse is true - it is Christ's sacrifice that gives efficacy to all other sacrifices. Christ's is the real sacrifice of which the others are just shadows.

For the author Christ's sacrifice seems to be a kind of 'hero-feat' and a feat of obedience, and obedience where others failed. And this would tie in with the 'hero-feats' of the patriarchs and prophets in 11:32ff.

A further NT image that may help us here is the idea that Christians should

... present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. (Rom 12:1)

²⁸ J. R. R. TOLKIEN "The Scouring of the Shire" in *The Return of the King* (Unwin, London 1955/1981) pp.336-365.

²⁹ For a more extended discussion, see GUNTON *op. cit.* pp. 115-141

This sacrifice clearly means a whole-hearted giving of self, and does not necessarily involve death. However, just as with Christ, it can lead to death - martyrdom, and the 'blood of Christ' becomes a powerful symbol of this. And not a mere symbol, for it is the direct consequence of the incarnation in a world tainted by sin. It was the inevitable outcome of the ministry, and so this 'sacrifice' which is freely undertaken by Jesus, is the will of the Father. In Rahner's terms the death seals the life, and so the death is essential to the work of salvation, nor just an accident.

A final thought that might help - Sacrifice in the Old Testament was, among other things, humanity trying to heal the breach with God. Christ's sacrifice is the opposite:

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. (Jn 3:16-17)