

The Lenten season begins by a quest, a prayer for humility which is the beginning of true repentance. For repentance, above everything else, is a return to the genuine order of things, the restoration of the right vision.

It is, therefore, rooted in humility, and humility is its fruit and end. "Let us avoid the high-flown speech of the Pharisee," says the Kontakion that would normally be sung on this day, "and learn the majesty of the Publican's humble words..." We are at the gates of repentance.

At Matins this morning, after the Gospel, we sang for the first time this Lenten season the troparia which we will sing throughout the entire Lent:

Open to me the doors of repentance, O Life-giver; for my soul goeth early to the temple of Thy holiness, coming in the temple of my body, wholly polluted. But because Thou art compassionate, purify me by the compassion of Thy mercies.

Prepare for me the way of salvation, O Theotokos; for I have profaned myself with coarse sins, and consumed my whole life with procrastination. But by thine intercessions purify thou me from all abomination.

If I think upon the multitude of my evil deeds, wretch that I am, I tremble for the terrible Day of Judgment. But, trusting the compassion of Thy mercy, I shout to Thee like David, Have mercy upon me, O God, according to Thy Great Mercy.

In today's Gospel, we have two men. First, the Pharisee. The Pharisee begins his prayer

"O God, I thank you that I am not like other men..."

We consider this boasting, of course, but a story that Fr. John Peck tells about his experience in seminary where he learned something important about it. His Old Testament professor was Dr. Moshe Zorea, an Orthodox Jew who had become an Orthodox Christian.

He knew the Old Testament very well, and he was a gifted teacher. When they were talking about the parable of the Publican and the Pharisee, he took out his Jewish prayer book, opened it to morning prayers and said to one of the students, “Read this aloud.”

Here is what was read:

“O God, I thank you that I am not like other men...That I am not an extortioner, unjust, an adulterer...”

The ‘thanks’ to God for this was the opportunity to strive for holiness, and this was laudable, and something worthy of giving thanks for. This Pharisee is just saying his morning prayers. In another place, the Gospel says that the Pharisees tithed mint, and dill and cumin from their gardens. They tithed from everything they received! They said their prayers in the Temple every morning and evening. They were leading righteous lives!

We all talk about not judging others but we do. We don’t all say our morning and evening prayers. We don’t all tithe (which is an Old Testament prescription anyway – In the New Testament we must cheerfully give more – tithe +1!) We have an important and humbling lesson from this parable: the Pharisee was better than we are. But by his boasting, he did not receive the blessing of God. But really, he was better than we are.

Now, the Publican was a sinner, like us. He knew he was a sinner. He came to the Temple and did not even lift up his eyes. When we come to church, are we repenting? Are we really, humbly asking God to forgive us for our sins?

This man, who knew his true state, came in hope and faith, but without presumption. He truly repented, and he received God’s mercy.

This is why, during the fast of Great Lent, we make sure to take the time for a holy confession. It is the time of repentance. The Publican said nothing to justify himself at all. Not a single word or self-righteousness. He was set right with God. This is called being justified, because it is necessary to repent in order to receive salvation. Salvation is to be set right with God. It is also often referred to as Atonement.

There are some false understandings about the work of Christ, and theories of Atonement, and this is what I want to talk about today. There are many false understanding of Atonement. Most of these came about after the advent of Scholastic Theology in the west. They don't exist in Hebraic thought, and are not at all Apostolic in their understanding of salvation.

There is the Ransom theory of Atonement

The ransom theory of atonement is based on verses such as Mark 10:45 –

“the Son of Man came ... to give his life as a ransom for the many”.

In this metaphor Jesus liberates mankind from slavery to Satan and thus death by giving his own life as a ransom. Not understanding the metaphor, evidently, some Christians have taken this literally – which then begs the question

“To whom did He pay the ransom?”

Did He Pay the Devil? NO! A conqueror does not go to the jailhouse and pay for the prisoners. He puts his foot on the throat of his defeated enemy and takes whatever he wants.

The reason we don't follow this view is because;

- We understand what a metaphor is, and
- The idea that Satan could be rewarded by God, by paying for the hostages with Himself(!) for his tyranny is blasphemous!

No. Christ is the Victor. He 'paid the price' in the sense that he did what had to be done.

There is the Debt Satisfaction Theory of Atonement

The Debt Satisfaction Theory of Atonement sees Adam's sin as infinitely offending God and his honor. Under this theory of Atonement, God's honor has been infinitely offended by us poor mortals, and in order that Divine Justice be fulfilled, he must punish us with death to restore His honor (I don't know to whom He must

restore it, but that's another point). Here's the problem. Under this theory, in order that it not be seen that God takes sin lightly, God MUST repay evil with evil. Therefore, God is beholden to a greater law than himself – God is neither free nor merciful.

God demands payment of an infinite debt. Obviously, no mortal is infinite (but evidently can infinitely offend!), but Jesus, as the God-Man, has infinite merits, and therefore can pay this debt. This sort of thinking led to the invention of indulgences in the Roman Church.

The temporal punishment must be paid by each soul – despite forgiveness of sins by Christ, and this can be alleviated through indulgences from the Roman Church. As the merits of Christ, and his saints, exceeded what was necessary to atone for each one's sins, they are built up in a 'treasury of merits' which the Roman Church has the ability and right to distribute as it sees fit. This is the Roman doctrine to this day.

In the Ransom theory, the debt is paid to the devil.

In the Debt Satisfaction theory, the debt is paid to God Himself, as if we were held in bondage by the Father!

The Debt Satisfaction theory became the dominant theory of Atonement in western Christianity, and remains so to this day, despite its obvious and glaring problems.

There is also the Penal Substitution Theory of Atonement.

After the Debt Satisfaction theory, protestant reformers invented the Penal Substitution theory, based on the false understanding of mankind's total depravity after the fall – stating that Jesus who died for us, was punished in our place by the Father – it is related to the Debt Satisfaction Theory.

In this theory, all the individual punishments for sin, every sin, fell on Jesus. More sin, more punishment! Only then could God be satisfied that his Divine Justice has been fulfilled. God cannot just forgive sin, and leave it at that. We believe that God is love and that his love is unconditional.

We do not believe that God's wrath can only be appeased by killing his own Son. We do not believe that God must himself be healed of his passions and wrath by the blood of His own Son. If so, it appears that God Himself needs healing, and needs the blood of his own Son to heal him! This is not the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, but Zeus! This is a bloodthirsty God!

On a popular level, these three theories are combined so that Christ, by his death on the cross, simultaneously paid the price to the Devil, and to the Father, and receives the punishment for our sins. Add this to the idea that if Jesus suffered the punishment for our sins, then we don't have to suffer at all. Hence, the introduction to this way of thinking of the Prosperity Gospel!

There is one other theory that came about as a reaction to these distorted theories of Atonement: the moral exemplar theory of atonement. In this theory, Christ merely shows us the way to be good. There is no really change in us because we can refuse to follow his example. There is no existential change in us because of Christ's redeeming work.

This de-emphasizes Christ's redeeming death on the Cross, and indeed, the whole Incarnation. In other words, Christ didn't actually accomplish anything. He was just a good example for us. Orthodox reject it out of hand.

If all of these are wrong, what is the teaching of the Church?

Atonement is therapeutic to the soul. We see Atonement as genuine and effectual to us individually. We don't perceive that God looks at us, but only 'sees' Jesus righteousness, as if he was easy to deceive via a divine 'peek-a-boo' game. We believe atonement heals us. Restores to wholeness the image of God in us.

The Orthodox Church sees three barriers between God and man: Nature, Sin and Death. God is separated from man by His Divine Nature. We have limited mortal nature, and God is existence beyond existence.

By His Incarnation in the flesh, Christ united Divine nature to human nature, in His person. The glorified, resurrected flesh of the God-man Jesus Christ is 'seated' at

the right hand of the Father to this moment! Christ united the Godhead to humanity in his flesh.

By the cross, Christ destroyed the power of sin – again, in his flesh!

By his Resurrection, Christ destroyed the power of death – again, in his flesh!

The Old Testament Sacrificial system is that life is in the blood. The big question about ‘the blood’ of sacrifice was this:

- Is it a propitiary sacrifice – designed to appease an angry deity?
- Or is it an expiatory sacrifice – designed to effect a change in those offering the sacrifice?

The Church’s answer has always been therapeutic – it is an expiatory sacrifice.

The sacrifices of the Old Testament were also expiatory. They were intended to effect a change in those offering the sacrifice. To help heal the interior person. God himself in many places in Scripture proclaims that he does not desire the blood of bulls and goats. He neither wants nor needs sacrifices – we need them!

For the sacrifice to be complete, especially the Paschal sacrifice, you – with the priest making the sacrifice – had to consume a portion of the sacrifice yourself or you were excluded from the covenant.

Here – is where we offer and receive this sacrifice of thanksgiving. Here is where we eat and drink the Body and Blood of the Lord, according to his holy commandment. When we receive the Body and Blood of Christ, we become partakers of Divine nature, like St. Peter writes about in his epistle.

Now, in every sacrifice there are four necessary elements:

1. The God to whom the sacrifice is made;
2. The Priest who is offering the sacrifice;
3. Those on whose behalf the sacrifice is being offered;
4. The sacrificial victim – that is, that which is being sacrificed.

Christ fulfills all of these in his flesh.

- He is, in the flesh, God Almighty, Yahweh, the Eternal Word.
- He is the eternal High Priest who offers the only acceptable sacrifice.
- He is one of us, a member of the human race, in his flesh, and therefore can offer on our behalf for all of us.
- And he is the sacrificial victim. He is the paschal lamb. He is the only acceptable sacrifice received by the Father.

Christ unites us all. Christ heals the rift between God and man, because he IS the healing of that rift. His crucifixion destroyed sin. His death destroys death.

Uniting ourselves to him heals us of every infirmity and makes up whatever is weak and lacking. Christ heals. That is Atonement. That is Salvation. The healing and re-integration of the human person, body, soul and spirit. And to access this grace, we need to access Him. And how do we do that?

Today's Gospel tells us. Humility and Repentance. Access to his grace comes about by repentance and humility.

Ten weeks from today we will be celebrating great and holy Pascha, having completed Great Lent and Holy Week. Let us spend these ten weeks as well as the rest of our lives living lives of repentance and humility.