

Hymn: Great God of Justice (Revd Robert Gardiner)

I was asked to write a hymn putting forward an alternative to penal substitution as an explanation of the atonement. There are of course many such models as a perusal of Paul Fiddes' excellent summary *Past event and present salvation: the Christian idea of atonement* (1989) makes clear.

In my hymn the first 2 verses point out the illogicality of penal substitution: that a Father should execute his own loved and innocent Son to satisfy his wrath is morally repugnant. Such a God is simply not credible as a God who saves. Instead I suggest that God was judged by man and found guilty: we crucified the Son (in the words of the parable) so that the vineyard should be ours. Like the tenants we used violence to assert our independence, and like those tenants we have done ever since. Every act of violence re-enacts the crucifixion of Jesus in our culture and in our age. When Cain slew Abel it was to "punish" God.

By sending his Son God makes himself vulnerable to our hate. But the willingness of Jesus to absorb our violence and not allow his love to be destroyed by it demonstrates the indestructibility of the love of God. This is, of course, affirmed by the resurrection. Thus the broken body of Jesus reveals the ever beating heart of God's love. Jesus commands us to carry our cross daily. The kingdom does not come by crucifying – or by any other violent means – or by playing power games; it comes through cross bearing, absorbing suffering into love. It is in this sense that Jesus "bore our griefs and carried our sorrows." He bore the squalor of death with the nobility of God. Paul tells us that the mind that was in Jesus should be ours too. This mindset did not seek equality with God but accepted slavery, and ultimately death on a cross. The way of the cross is the authentic route by which we all travel. This we embrace willingly through faith, as Christ did.

A few words about the form of the hymn:- It is in the somewhat unusual metre of DLM which allows for long sentences. It is also marked by a number of deliberate half rhymes, especially sometimes in key points: e.g. peace – grace, will – nail, sin – man, God – dog, thrall – law, fate – spite, war – power. Half rhymes create an unease, a jarring in the smooth run of words. In this hymn they are meant to prevent us from feeling that we can box the atonement into a formula – the amazing grace of God that triumphs over our rebellion must never cease to surprise us and the awkward corners of the cross should never be totally planed out. The other device used is enjambement, where the sense is carried over a line break – throwing the emphasis forward. This is particularly evident in the last verse – e.g.tore

Open your body

I was trying to create a picture of the body of Christ being torn apart like bread at communion.

Great God of Justice

Great God of justice, mercy, peace
Who rules the world in matchless grace
How could it be your sovereign will
That evil men should take and nail
Your son upon a cross of wood
Shatter his body, drain his blood
Release a terrorist instead
Happy to see your Jesus dead?

Is this the way you punish sin
Condemn to death earth's greatest man?
Leave him, rejected with the poor
Naked, unloved, alone, unsure
Forsaken by his Father God
To die in darkness like a dog?
Surely our sins were multiplied
As yet another good man died.

Or was it you we killed that day,
Your blood we coldly poured away?
Slaying in hate like Cain of old
Our brother sent to love and hold;
Holding the world in terror's thrall
By bomb and bullet, loveless law,
Condemning millions to your fate
Seeking to strangle love with spite.

Was it not nails but love that tore
Open your body, like a door
Through which, by faith, we see your way
To turn earth's hells to heavenly day
Renouncing violence, hate and war
To walk more humbly, finding power
In patience, kindness, loving care
Till justice makes this sad world fair.

Words ©The Baptist Peace Fellowship (2007). Churches, groups and individuals may reproduce for personal/ internal use provided acknowledgement of copyright (BPF) & author (Robert Gardiner) is given.