

About this book . . .

'Why did Jesus have to die?'

'Won't *someone* explain to me just what "He died to save us all" really *means*?'

This small volume, packed with much radical and revolutionary material, is a most significant treatment of the reality and power of the Cross. It is also in the form of a most unusual testimony, of how the answer to this cry came to the heart of a puzzled Christian.

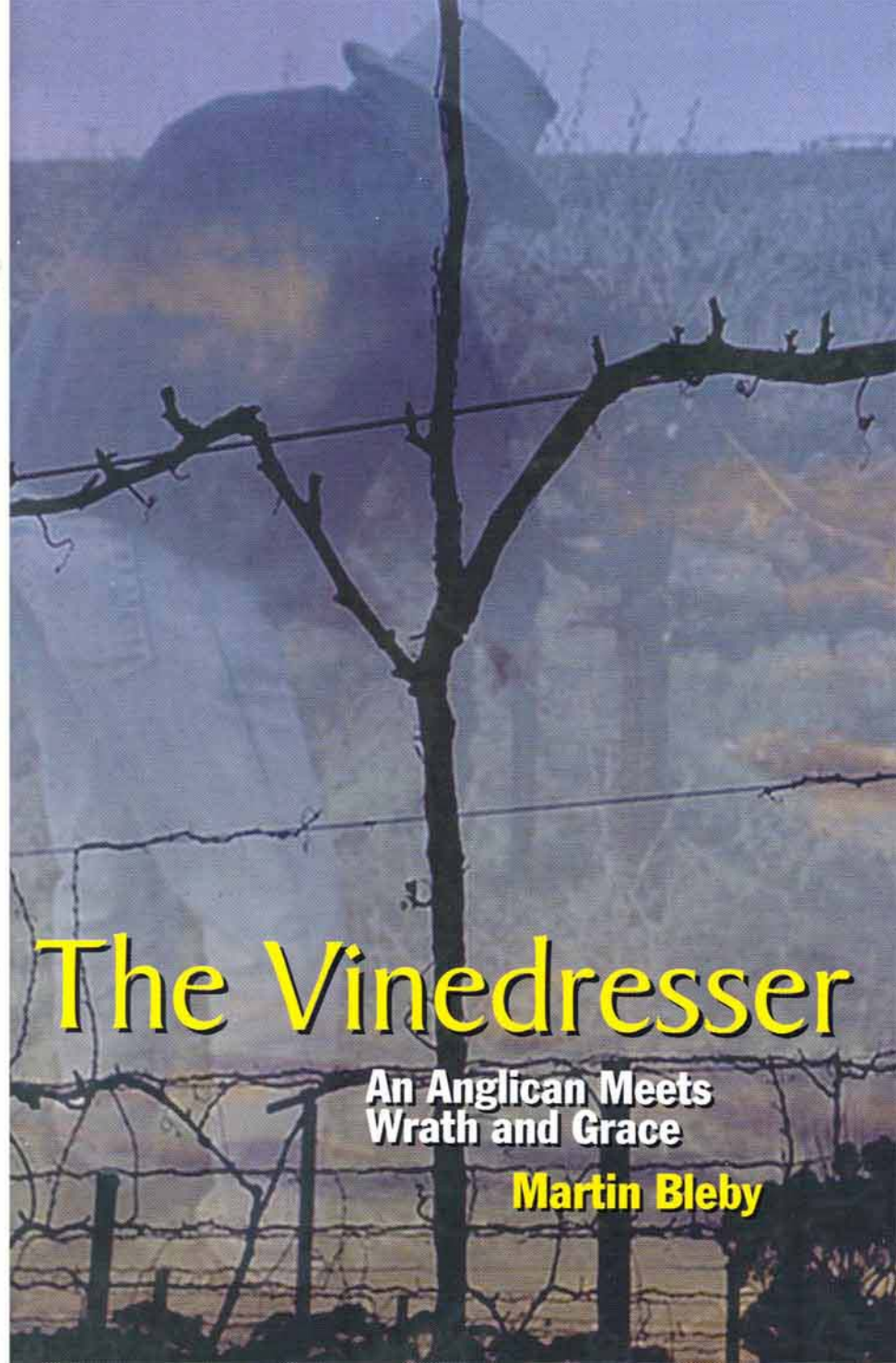
Martin Bleby, Anglican minister, trained in fine family tradition, has discovered the freedom which comes to a human being via the Cross and Resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. Like P. T. Forsyth, from whose writings he liberally quotes, he sees the Cross as solving the seeming dilemma of God's Holiness and His wrath. What he discovers is not only significant for himself, but also for the whole Christian community and indeed for the confused world in which we live.

After twenty-seven years of parish ministry in country,

outback and metropolitan South Australia, Martin now has a Bible-teaching ministry amongst all the churches, on the team of the New Creation Teaching Ministry, based in the Adelaide Hills.



New Creation Publications Inc.



The Vinedresser

An Anglican Meets
Wrath and Grace

Martin Bleby

**THE
VINEDRESSER**
An Anglican Meets Wrath and Grace

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INTRODUCTION

Dear Martin,

Of all my friends, your theology seems to have undergone the biggest sea-change over the years. Does it surprise you, I wonder?

So wrote one of my friends to me recently. 'Sea-change' is described in *The Macquarie Dictionary* as 'a complete or radical transformation'.

The following is something of an explanation to family, friends, fellow clergy and others who may have been puzzled, alarmed, or interested by my 'sea-change'. They may, in truth, find it to be simply an instance of God's continued faithfulness to me over many years.

This material was first given as an elective in the New Creation Teaching Ministry's Summer School at Victor Harbour, South Australia, in January 1985, and is now made available more widely. In what has been happening to me, it could be that God is saying something to the Anglican Church in Australia as a whole, and beyond.

Perhaps a sea-change is what we all need.

*Martin Bleby,
Cooper Pedy, S.A.
July 1985*

PART ONE

THE WORD OF THE CROSS

BACKGROUND AND ROOTS

I was born in 1946 in the small country town of Strathalbyn, fifty kilometres south of Adelaide, South Australia.

My father is an Anglican priest, as his father and my mother's father were before. So I have been raised very much in a clergy family, in which church has always been an important and natural part of life.

I was born and bred a 'Diocese of Adelaide Anglican'. In shorthand, the expression, 'upper-middle high church' captures something of that, but there is a depth and fullness in that stable and stately yet homely tradition which such partisan labels can never reflect. As in any Christian tradition in which grace operates, I found there—or rather, was found by, and nurtured in—a relationship with the Father, through the Son, in the Holy Spirit, which is the most precious thing on earth. But I have also come to see that 'Adelaide Anglicanism' (like any Christian tradition which has

become isolated from other Christian traditions) has its limitations, deficiencies and blind spots, which come to be compensated for with unnecessary supplements and accretions. I received my call to the priesthood at the age of seven. I think it came then because it might have had -more trouble getting through later on. It was still there waiting for me when, after a period of unresolved doubt and drifting in matters of faith, though still very much a part of the church, the time came for me to take it up. After four years at Adelaide University and three years theological training at St. Barnabas' College, Belair, I was ordained deacon and subsequently priest in 1971. Married to Vivien in 1972, and now with four children,. I served in country parishes in the Dioceses Of The Murray and Adelaide. I am at present Bush Church Aid Society Missioner for Coober Pedy and the Far North-West Mission in the Diocese of Willochra, Province of South Australia.

EARLY IMPRESSIONS

My first contact with the cross of Christ was when I was baptised at the age of three weeks. After water had come over me 'In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost:, the sign of the cross was made on my forehead with the words:

We receive this Child into the congregation of Christ's flock, and do sign him with the sign of the Cross, *in token that hereafter he shall not be ashamed to confess the faith of Christ crucified*, and manfully to fight under his banner,

against sin, the world, and the devil; and to continue Christ's faithful soldier and servant unto his life's end. Amen.

I grew up seeing the Cross on altar and steeple, and I was aware of it as Jesus' 'sign' or 'trademark'. I was told the story of the crucifixion at home of course, but I remember that when I was in Grade 3 and a devout and enterprising State School teacher told us the story of Good Friday .and Easter, I was thinking that they had killed Jesus on a cross, .because that was his sign — not the other way round ! These things get sorted out as you go along.

Good Friday was very important in our family, and to me as a boy. I was drawn to its celebrations. There were several services during the day—morning, three-hour service in' the afternoon, and evening. prayer— and I would want to be at them all. An atmosphere of gloom prevailed, sombre, solemn and bare. I sensed that something terrible had happened there on that cross, for which we were somehow responsible, and we ought to feel bad about that. But then on Easter Day, with its flowers, lights, vestments, joyous music and Alleluias, it was wonderful! God had done something to reverse the whole ghastly thing—He had raised Jesus from the dead. Thank God for that (and we ought to be grateful). Anyway, it was a relief, and we could all breathe easy again—at least till next time.

THE PUZZLE OF THE OFFENDING CROSS

As I grew older, I began to sense an element of play-acting about all this—something false, artificial, or at

one remove—at least in the way I perceived it. In my student days I wrote the following poem, entitled ‘Good Friday’:

Around the cross, His friends and mother mourn,
While priests are mocking, soldiers casting dice;
The guilty smite their breasts and turn away
To where the Galilean women weep.

And there are others, further off in time,
Some who, devoutly looking at the scene,
In knowledge of the truth and joy to come,
Respond with loving service to their God,
With penitential tears and active praise.

And others gaze uneasily at the scene,
And on their cushioned kneelers think of pain,
And think how really dreadful it must be;
And clichés like ‘He died to save us all’
Benignly drift around their empty minds.
With mournful pious face they make for home
And warm the spicy hot cross buns for tea.

On Easter Sunday faces quickly change:
Joyous relief is shown where sorrow was,
Nice feelings now replace the nasty taste,
And that’s all over for another year.

While not denying the genuine devotion with which I was surrounded ‘as I grew up, I think at that stage I placed myself among the third group, those who, though still loyal to the cause, found the cross a perplexing and somewhat uncomfortable-puzzle.

I am sure this was partly my own resistance to the action of the cross itself. But it was also partly the teaching that was abroad at that time, and still is now, in our tradition. Perhaps I draw a caricature of what

was really taught, but a caricature can sometimes bring out salient features. We were taught about the atonement in confirmation classes, etc. But there was a certain avoidance of the cross as being necessary -to deal with-the seriousness of sin. The emphasis was almost wholly on Christ’s positive offering of perfect obedience. There was no wrath, and no real need for it. Really we were saved by the Incarnation. Somehow by doing the right thing in our flesh, Jesus made it right for us. It was a pity he had to die, but that only showed how far he was prepared to go.

HALF A CROSS

The stumbling-block to this approach comes in the cry of Jesus from the cross: ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’ But there are ways round it. It is said that of course Jesus, as the beloved Son, was never really forsaken by the Father, but he just felt like he Was. Or ‘he was meditating on Psalm 22 and quoted it aloud to draw our attention to the fulfilment of prophecy. Or even that things were going so badly for Jesus at that time, with the sin of the world piled against him, that he had every right to feel that he was forsaken by God. What we don’t want to do is take those words at face value and say that our Lord was actually and deliberately forsaken by God in the action of the Father’s wrath against sin, and that our sin required nothing less than the horror of. all of that.

Without that, we are left with half a cross: with Christ as the fulfiller of all righteousness, obedient

unto death, but not the bearer of all sin, the one in whose flesh all sin was rightly and necessarily condemned. Half a cross ends up being no cross at all. Because if sin is not finally and totally dealt with and destroyed on the cross, then it is still hanging around in our consciences, doing its damage. It will appear to respond to the treatment of ceremonial catharsis—the enactment of Good Friday and Easter liturgies and the repetition of penitential rites—but it will still be there, and it will reassert its nagging dullness. Not just that: if we do not see the *wrath* of God fully worked through on the cross, we will find it active still in our own lives; we will fear it, seek to evade it, and pretend it is not there.

NO CROSS AT ALL

When I was in theological college we used, in chapel, a version of the Psalms which had the ‘cursing verses’ in brackets, and we omitted these in our monthly recitation of the Psalter day by day. Intellectually, I think I did the same with the whole Bible—every passage that made reference to God’s wrath or judgement I placed in mental brackets. One problem with this is that half the Bible ends up in brackets—not only in the Old Testament, but in the New Testament as well. I may not have been the only one who did this. At times we were encouraged to do so by the use of such condescending terms as ‘primitive religion’ or ‘the Hebrew way of thinking’. ‘Of course, people *used* to think that God was like that, but we know nowadays. that He is really

a God of love.’ This begs the question as to what love really is. Half a cross is no cross at all, and so it ends up being left out altogether. I remember one in authority in the church at that time saying something to this effect:

The notion that our forgiveness depends in any way on the death of Christ is a horrific doctrine much to be scorned. God forgives because He is a forgiving God. We receive forgiveness simply by turning to Him.

He was only mouthing what had become standard teaching in many pulpits and classrooms. In teaching materials officially published by the church, there can be whole lessons on forgiveness which do not mention the cross once.

The Anglican forms of confession and absolution certainly encourage this omission. There is no mention of the cross in any of them. Often the sign of the cross is made with the absolution, and this is a redeeming feature. But the weekly repetition of these forms contrives to give the impression that forgiveness comes in weekly installments, and is effected by virtue of the act of confession and absolution itself.

THE FAITHFUL WITNESS

Fortunately we still had other parts of the liturgy to bear witness to the fullness of the truth:

Almighty God, our heavenly Father, who of thy tender mercy didst give thine only Son Jesus Christ to suffer death upon the Cross for our redemption; who made there (by his

one oblation of himself, once offered) a full, perfect and sufficient sacrifice, oblation and satisfaction for the sins of the whole world...

We also had the Scriptures. But I do not remember hearing any sermons on I Peter 2:24: 'He himself bore Our sins in his body on the tree'; 2 Corinthians 5:21: 'For our sake God made Christ to be sin who knew no sin'; Galatians 3:13: 'Christ redeemed us from 'the curse of the law, having become a curse for us—for it is written, "Cursed be every one who hangs on a tree" ' (Deuteronomy 21:23 makes it clear that such a person is cursed *by God*); Romans 8:3: 'sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, God condemned sin in the flesh'; or even the words of Jesus himself when he applied the ferocious prophecy of Zechariah 13:7 to his own person: 'it is written, I [God] will strike the shepherd [Christ], and the sheep will be scattered' (Mark 14:27).

It is indeed a horrific doctrine. None of us want to think that sin is bad enough to require *that* treatment. So, as Paul says in I Corinthians 1:23, .the word of the cross is offensive to the religious, and nonsense to the intellectual.

A CRY FROM THE HEART

This is the tradition I was in, that I accepted and was very much a part of. After ordination, although I enjoyed preaching, I found it most difficult to preach on Good Friday and Easter. I guess that if there was any lack in what I had to say, that is where it would show

up most sharply. But the cross still worked its way in me. I found recently some words I wrote; again, I think, in my student days:

To me, the passion has always been a terrible puzzle. Yet people talk about it quite benignly as if they know exactly what it meant. Which leads me to think they understand no better than I do, and .they are sheltering their ignorance under clichés like 'He died to save us all'. I don't mind saying it—I don't understand it at all. *Why* did he have to die? *Why* did he have to be so damned complacent about it? And won't *someone* explain to me just what 'He died to save us all' really *means*?

Apart from the immature student-like passing of judgement on my elders and betters, many of whom may well have understood exactly what they were saying, this was a cry from the heart. And as with all such cries, the Father in heaven, who especially delights in revealing to his children the cross of his Son, heard and answered that prayer.

FAILURE

My first appointment was as assistant curate in the parish of Mount Gambier in South Australia's south-east in 1971. It was a case of being thrown off the deep end, especially with regard to a very demanding religious instruction programme in schools, for which I was poorly equipped. Just as I thought I was drowning, in the middle of that first year, I sensed the solid ground underneath me, lifting me up. At the end of 1972 I went to my first appointment

on my own, the mission district of Meningie-Tailem Bend-Karoonda, about 8,000 square kilometres near the mouth of the Murray River. The faithful were few, and 'scattered, the church was struggling to survive, and there were no traditional props—none of the helpful adjuncts such as choirs and altar servers that are an accepted part of the scene in larger, more established parishes. I had grown up as a Christian in the post-war boom of the fifties, when churches were flourishing and full of people, with confirmation classes of 50-100 each year, and youth groups so large they had to divide in two. I now tried to do all the same things I had seen my father and others doing then. But it didn't work. Since that time we had been through the questioning of the sixties and the 'death-of-God' theology of the seventies. There had also been a great sociological decline in church-going, which was still continuing. Nothing seemed to be quite as successful as it used to be. I needed a theology to cope with that, and I had not been given one.

I may be deluding myself in attributing all this to sociological factors. The plain truth of the matter may well have been that I was a rotten failure as a parish priest. If that is true, then I needed a theology to cope with that, too.

ENCOURAGING DEVELOPMENTS

It was at Meningie that we came into contact with, and entered into, the charismatic renewal. That was a great encouragement. When 'you come to the end of your

'own' resources, and discover the Spirit's boundless resources, you quickly find where your true strength lies. And it is good to know that God is real, after all.

There I also had opportunity for the first time in my life to relate closely with 'evangelical' Anglicans and others, with their emphasis on Jesus as our personal Saviour and our need to relate personally to him as the one who has taken responsibility for '*my sins*'. Anglicans are good at Calling Jesus 'our Lord'. They are not always so comfortable with calling him '*my Lord*'. So that was most helpful.

'TELL HIM ABOUT THE CROSS'

I became rector of Kapunda, an old country town in a productive agricultural district, eighty kilometres north of Adelaide, in 1977. Here I still had plenty more growing to do. And for all I had learned and experienced in Meningie, there was still something missing.

Don Priest sensed this when he came to live in the parish some three years later, to be a Maths Senior at the Area School in a nearby town. Don was a former Area Secretary of the Australian Fellowship of Evangelical Students, a theologically-literate layman, and an experienced Bible teacher. He too had been at Meningie, after we had left. Our similar experience and interests, and Don's own need for some rehabilitative ministry when he first arrived, brought us together as friends.

Some months later, Don was talking with his friend and mentor Geoffrey Bingham, a seasoned Anglican

clergyman and former prisoner-of-war, missionary, Bible College principal, and writer of short stories and theological works, now engaged in an itinerant Bible-teaching ministry. I had met Geoffrey Bingham one afternoon at Meningie, when he had come by invitation to teach us about the Holy Spirit. While nothing startling had seemed to happen at the session he gave, I reflected ten years later that virtually all my teaching in that time about the Holy Spirit, and my avoidance of many of the pitfalls of charismatic renewal, had grown from what he imparted on that day. Now Geoff and 'Don were talking about me and my ministry at Kapunda. 'Don sensed that, while I may have been on the right track, I was still following a number of blind leads. 'What can I do to help him in his ministry?' he asked. 'The wise 'old Bible teacher 'replied, 'Tell him about the Cross.'

HOLY LOVE AND LOVING .HOLINESS

Soon after that, unaware of what had transpired, I was faced with organising some Lenten studies. Lenten studies were not my forte, and I had flunked on them badly the year before. God said, 'Don Priest will take the Lenten studies this year.' So I announced the studies in the parish paper and went to ask Don to take

'H'm,' said Don, 'I think I'll do a series on Jesus' words from the cross.'

'Fine,' said I.

So it was that a small group of us met each Wednesday -

night in Lent after a service of Holy Communion at Eudunda, and Don Priest led us through the words from the cross. I remember a number of valuable points he made:

1. **'Father, forgive them...'** (Luke 23:34). A number of passages in Scripture appear to be contradictory on this. For example, Exodus 34:7, where God is 'merciful and gracious... forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty'. How can he be both? God can never just 'forgive sin, in the sense of ignore or condone it. Forgiveness can come only through judgement. Jesus is praying: Father do that in me which is necessary to enable forgiveness to flow freely to all.

'... for they know not what they do.' There is such a thing as the 'deceit of sin' (Hebrews 3: 13). Sin covers its own tracks, and has its own. inbuilt self-justification. We will never of ourselves see our sin for what. it really is, or acknowledge that we are sinners.

2. **'Jesus, remember me when you come in your kingdom'** (Luke 23:42). According to Mark 15:32, both the thieves crucified with Jesus reviled him. Here one of them had a change of heart. What brought him to acknowledge the justice of his own condemnation, and the total innocence of Jesus (Luke 23:41)? Was it the powerful kindness of Jesus' first word?

'Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise.' Paradise is the garden, in which man enjoyed uninterrupted communion with God before the Fall. For this to be possible, all sin and' defilement

must have been totally purged.

3. 'Woman, behold your" son! ..Behold, your mother!' (John 19:26-27). The words with which Jesus commends his mother to the care of the beloved disciple. He calls her 'Woman', not 'Mother', indicating that he is her Saviour before he is her son (Luke 1:47). Though not related as mother and son, Mary and John become so at the foot of the cross. A whole new family is being formed right here—holy and blameless through the taking 'away of sin, eager to do the Father's will (Ephesians 1:4-5, 3:14-15, Mark 3:35, I Timothy 5:1-2).

4. 'My God, my God, why did you forsake me?' (Mark 15:34). At this point, if anywhere, my friendship with Don could have burst apart. I remember this night listening with detached interest, carefully monitoring everything he said, but also seeking to enter into it. He spoke of how the Son, sent by the Father in love for his creation, willingly offered himself to suffer God's righteous wrath against all sin, knowing that he would be going to the place of not knowing, where he would suffer deeply the total separation from the Father, which must be the judgement upon all sin. If he had not himself occupied that place, it would still be waiting there for all of us. There he sucked out the poison of the whole human race into himself. There, as in some vast black hole, all our evil was swallowed up, consumed and destroyed forever. Guilt in the human heart and conscience, with all its pain, anguish, distortion and defilement, is the curse of sin, the action of

God's wrath. Christ bore this out to total exhaustion • and extinction. All of this is nothing more nor less than the whole action of God's holy love, working in loving holiness to purge, purify, renew and fill his creation. In those three dark hours, God establishes his utter holiness at the heart of his creation, for all time, and for eternity.

Somehow, our friendship did not break. Given all that I brought to 'it, I should have found what he said to be quite unacceptable—obscurantist, facile, ridiculous and improper. But after the next day spent in quiet prayer with the Scriptures, any questions I had of Don were trite and unimportant. Even if I still did not understand it fully (who ever could?), the truth of what he said had confirmed itself in me, and was secure.

5. 'I thirst!' (John 19:28). God, as the source of all our being, is an everflowing river, a 'fountain of living waters' (Jeremiah 2:13). Cut off from him, we have nothing left. Although structured in his image to flow with 'the issues of life' (Proverbs 4:23), of ourselves we are nothing, and return to our dust. Jesus, separated from the Father, absorbed all man's terrible dryness, so the waters could flow again (John 7:37-39, Revelation 22:1-2). The vigour of the cries that follow, indicates that Jesus at this point was deeply refreshed, not only physically by the vinegar, but also 'made alive in the spirit' (1 Peter 3: 18), with a sense of accomplished victory.

6. 'It is finished!' (John 19:30). N.B. 'a loud cry' (Mark 15:37). The work of God is completed. All God's

action in previous history is with a view to this cross, all his subsequent action flows from what was completed there. Our faith is in the finished work, which we shall see by sight in the new creation.

7. 'Father, into your hands I commit my spirit' (Luke 23:46). No one takes his life from him (John 10:17, 18). At the right time, in accordance with the Father's purpose, he lays it down. He offers it complete to the Father, loving to the end (John 13: 1), untarnished by the foulness of sin (Hebrews 9:14), a fully pleasing sacrifice (Ephesians 5:2). Sin has been taken, the sting and power of death has been removed (1 Corinthians 15:56, Hebrews 2:14-15), Christ enters death as into an already-conquered realm, which cannot hold him (Acts 2:24).

PART TWO

THE ISSUES COME CLEAR

The interesting thing was that even before we got to the fourth word, something was happening in me. Don was speaking on Wednesday evening and I was getting up to 'preach on Sunday morning and seeing things in the Scriptures that I had never acknowledged before. It was not that I was aping or parroting Don in any way, it was just that the Spirit was doing something in us both at that time. A number of issues came clear to me over the weeks and months that followed.

FORGIVENESS AND FORBEARANCE

Paul in Romans 3:23-26 makes a distinction between God's forgiveness (justification) and God's forbearance. Forbearance is the passing-over of sin as if it is not there. Forgiveness is the action of expiation/ propitiation by which God deals with sin once and for all on the cross, and effects that in our hearts by the

Holy Spirit through the gift of faith. God's forbearance is only ever with a view to God's forgiveness (2 Peter 3:9). How could God promise to Noah, for instance, that he would never send another well-deserved flood on the earth (Genesis 9:11); when man's heart and behaviour remained essentially unchanged? Because he knew that he would be dealing righteously with all sin in the deluge of the cross. It is only by virtue of the cross that the sun comes up each morning, the grass and trees still grow, and we are secure to live each moment of our lives.

I realised that when we ask for God's forgiveness we are often only asking for his forbearance. We are asking him to pat us on the head and say, 'That's all right; only don't do it again.' God can never say 'That's all right' to sin. Deep down we are glad that he cannot, and we could never respect him or feel secure ourselves if he 'did. But such is the deceitfulness of sin that we never of ourselves ask for that total, radical, cleansing, redirecting judgement of Christ in the cross that is our only true forgiveness.

THE SOVEREIGNTY OF GOD

Acts 2:23 burst upon me when I realised that the cross was something God did, more than something man did: 'this Jesus, *delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God*, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men.' That fine straightforward theological statement, without diminishing in any way man's full responsibility for the evil of the

cross, sees it primarily as an action of God. *God is in control*, even over sin! The most appalling and shameful crime ever committed by man was God's central action in history, bringing forgiveness.—This was the apostles' message, shot through with prophecies from the Scripture to bear it out. God has never been at anyone's mercy. God has never been taken by surprise. Never at any time did God ever say 'Oops!' The cross was not a contingency plan. It was there before the foundation of the world (1 Peter 1:19-20).

GOD AND HISTORY

I had been trained as a historian at university to view history in terms of 'political *trends*', 'economic *forces*', 'sociological *pressures*' and 'military *movements*'—*all* impersonal or mechanistic images. I found that many Bible commentaries and histories spent much effort reinterpreting Bible history in the same way. But I knew the Bible itself did not. The Bible spoke in terms of God's personal action in all the events of history. Not just with Israel, but with all the nations. 'Primitive superstition' and 'the Hebrew way of thinking' could be used to rationalise that away. And if we did that with the events of history, we could also do that with the events of our own lives, and consider ourselves free from any direct action on God's part.

Called upon to preach on 2 Chronicles 36:15-23, I was faced with a choice. That passage sees 'the whole history of the prophets, the exile and the decree of Cyrus, including the conquest and slaughter of men

and women, young and old, as happening by the hand of God, personally acting in forbearance, judgment and blessing. I opted not to reinterpret that passage, but simply to spell out its implications for our own lives. I was free to do so now, because I now saw at the centre of history, on the cross, the Lord of history himself, working in all that happens, through forbearance, judgement and blessing, to draw all men to himself, in a relationship with his Father that is never cold and mechanistic, but always warm-blooded, intimate and *personal*.

THE BRACKETS COME OFF

Thus I no longer needed to reinterpret the Bible. I could come to it on its own terms. Because I now saw all God's wrath worked through' in the Son on the cross, I could now face it wherever I found it in history and personal life, and see it as the action of love. The mental brackets came off all the references to wrath in the Scriptures, and these passages took their place, alongside the others, as part of God's plan.

Then I saw, as Jesus and the apostles had seen, that everything in the Scriptures is speaking about the cross. It became my delight to search the Scriptures, 'beginning with Moses and all the prophets', to see how it was 'necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory' (Luke 24:25-27; see also 44-49). To take one example, Psalm 1.45:20:

*The Lord preserves all those that love him;
but the wicked he will utterly destroy.*

Where else are both parts of that verse fulfilled but on the cross, in the One who perfectly loved God, and fully identified himself with the wicked? Fulfilled also in all who by faith are in him.

One passage that opened out to me was John 15: 1-17, about the vine. This had always been a favourite of mine. In verse 5 Jesus said:

I am the vine, you are the branches. He who 'abides in me, and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.

He is speaking of the intimate union we have with him. He is the whole vine, and in that vine we are his branches. He is in us and we are in him and everything is cosy and lovely. But there were parts of that passage I had put in brackets. Before he speaks of us being in him and he in us, he says, in verse 1:

I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser

Not the ground out of which the vine grows, note, nor the trunk of the vine, or anything else, but the vinedresser. Verse 2:

Every branch of mine that bears no fruit, he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit.

And in verse 6:

If a man does not abide in me, he is cast forth as a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire and burned.

Jesus is saying, 'My Father comes with a sharp knife to cut and to prune, and his knife falls, first of all, on the

vine. I am the vine. At the heart of his Last Supper discourses, Jesus is speaking of his passion, in terms very similar to Mark 14:27 and Zechariah 13:7. 'And your abiding in me is only in the context of that cross. If you abide in me, through faith in the cleansing truth of the cross (verse 3), then the effect of the Father's judgement in your life will be to prune and cleanse you and make you fruitful. But if you will not abide in me, in whom I am and what I have come to do, then when that knife falls it will cut you off so that you wither and die and are destroyed (for you are as good as dead already).'

We see this working out in practice. When tragedy strikes, those who respond out of faith in Christ are strengthened and ennobled. Those who do not are by that same action destroyed in self-pity and anger. The final bar of judgement is the cross of Christ.

AUTHORITY AND INDEPENDENCE

I came to see that the issue of authority is a deep and vital one. We are made, our beings are structured, to be sons of God. A son is one who is under his father's authority, and dependent upon him. But we do not want to be somebody's son. We do not want to be under anyone, or dependent on anybody. We want to be somebody ourselves, 'in our own right'. Not content with being *like* God, we want to be as God (Genesis 3:5). Thus we go against our true nature as created beings. This infects our whole view of life, God and relationships with others, and wreaks havoc. Only a

revelation of the true Son's willing obedience, and of the Father's love over-reaching the Son on the cross to reach us, showing us we are loved no less than the Beloved Son, will rescue us from that, and enable us to live as true sons in the good of his Fatherhood. 'He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, will he not also give us all things in him?' (Romans 8:32).

I came to see independence as the great sin, and the great lie.

THE PRAISE OF GOD AND THE PRAISES OF MEN

It came to me that I had spent all my life trying to please other people—my parents, my teachers, the latest trends, the system, my clients, my friends. Not so that they would be pleased, but so they would approve me, and I could feel pleased with myself.

Why this anxious need to feel pleased with myself? Underlying this was the uneasy guilt that I was somehow displeasing to God. We all share in this, through our rejection of God's Fatherhood. And we take desperate measures, often at other people's expense, to alleviate it.

True peace comes only through the cross, where the guilt of every sin has been taken by Christ and we find ourselves clean and thoroughly approved by the Father. Knowing we have the praise that comes from the only God, we have no need of the praises of men (John 5:44, 12:43). This can be very liberating, especially in parish 'life.'

THE NEW CREATION

One other thing the cross brought through to me was the reality of the new creation (Revelation 21-22). Not just a vague and shadowy icing on the cake, but the sure and solid goal of God's great plan. Having a 'good' or 'successful' parish here and now ceased to be my objective. I resolved to be engaged only in those things that would last into the new creation (1 Corinthians 3:10-15)—the works of grace, by the Spirit, through faith.

P. T. FORSYTH

I have been greatly aided in understanding these things by the friendship, writings and teachings of Geoffrey Bingham. Of his theological works, *Cross Over The Abyss*, and of his short stories, *The Concentration Camp and Other Stories* have particular bearing on what I have written here.

But on Geoffrey's recommendation I also began to read books by P. T. Forsyth, a Scottish theologian from the turn of the century. As I turned the pages of *The Cruciality of the Cross*, I was amazed. Writing in England in 1909, he was talking about the church as I knew it in Australia in the 1980s! Here indeed was a prophet of the twentieth century. Had he been widely heeded in his day, the history of this century, and of the church in particular, might have been very different. I conclude with some relevant quotations—a difficult task, since every page is crammed with them.

Page references are to the 1910 edition, reprinted in 1984 by New Creation Publications Inc.

To give due place to the wrath of God in the atonement does not mean we have to be unthinking in our formulation of it. On pages 78 and 79, Forsyth is careful to rule out a number of common notions which 'misrepresent God's grace' (emphasis added):

- 1 we can no longer treat the atonement as a *deflection of God's anger*.
2. We can no longer speak of a *strife of attributes* in God the Father, justice set against mercy, and judgment against grace, till an adjustment was effected by the Son.
3. There can be no talk of any *modification* of God. . .
4. . . . or any inducement whatever... *to procure grace*. Procured grace is a contradiction in terms. The atonement did not procure grace, it flowed from grace.
5. We must not think in terms of *equivalent suffering*. Indeed, it does not lie in the suffering at all, but in the obedience, the holiness.
- 6 we must speak very differently about the *transfer of guilt*.
7. We have to be cautious in using the word *penalty* in connection with what fell on Christ. We must renounce the idea that He was punished by the God who was ever well pleased with His beloved Son.

We sense here the rigour of Forsyth's intellect and his driving passion for truth. 'I own I tax you,' he cries at one point, 'and I am sorry, but it has taxed me more' (page 171).

How then does the atonement impress itself upon Forsyth? He begins, and ends, with God's holiness:

Do let us take the holiness of God centrally and seriously, not as an attribute isolated and magnified, but as God's very essence and nature, changeless and inexorable (page 205).

... by holiness is not meant anything so abstract or subjective as mystical absorption, but the whole concrete righteousness of existence, self-sustained at white heat. For our God is a consuming fire (page 159, footnote).

By atonement, therefore, is meant that action of Christ's death which has a prime regard to God's holiness, has it for its first charge, and finds man's reconciliation impossible except as that holiness is divinely satisfied once for all on the cross (page 5).

'Do not think of God's judgment as an arbitrary infliction, but as the necessary reaction to sin in a holy God. There alone do you have the divine necessity of the cross in a sinful world—the moral necessity of judgment (pages 52-53).

.. the cross as the action of God's holy love on sinful man (page 100, footnote).

The holy God alone could answer Himself and meet the demand of His own holiness (page 194).

The action of the cross, then, is that of 'meeting, confessing, justifying a God of holy love with a love equally holy from the side of sinful man' (page 217). In compact shorthand, it is 'divine atonement to infinite holiness through loving judgment' (page 170).

But what of God's love? Forsyth has this to say:

The holiness of God is a deeper revelation in the cross than His love; for it is what gives His love divine value (page 205).

Even a loving God is really God not because He loves, but because He has power to subdue all things to the holiness of His love, and even sin itself to His love as redeeming grace (page 60).

Of the Incarnation, much beloved by Anglican theologians, and pressed by them into the pivotal position of Christian theology, even to the verge of heresy, Forsyth rightly says:

The doctrine of the Incarnation grew upon the Church out of its experience of the Atonement (page 99, footnote).

The divinity of Christ is what the Church was driven upon to explain the effect on it of the cross (page 30. See above on Acts 2:23 under 'The Sovereignty of God').

What of those who have faith, but do not have this understanding? With characteristic pastoral sensitivity, Forsyth writes:

We do ill to force the ripe experience. of the cross on those who can as yet but feel its dawn. Any theology of atonement must be adjusted to the indubitable fact that Christ's forgiveness may and does reach personal cases apart from conscious reliance on His atoning work, or grasp of its theology (page 81).

But he adds:.

... so long as the experience of particular individuals is not made the measure of the message of the Church (page 80)

And he warns:

There is one whole side—the side indicated by the words, judgment, expiation, or atonement, which it is impossible to drop from Christianity without giving the Gospel quite away in due time. Individuals, of course, can remain Christian while they discard it, *but the Church cannot* (page 200, emphasis added).

This lays a special responsibility upon the teaching clergy.

All of this has important implications for our evangelism, our preaching, and our whole stance as a church. My favourite quote:

The feeble gospel preaches 'God is ready to forgive'; the mighty gospel preaches 'God has redeemed.' (page 52)!

A MISSIONARY TO THE NORTH AMERICAN INDIANS

The test of any theology comes in its practice; in how we react under pressure. 'The one thing we need,' says Forsyth, 'is to understand the Atonement, with a life's understanding, with a vital conscience' (page 45). He relates one outstanding example:

A missionary to the North American Indians records that having seen his wife and children killed. before his eyes, and being himself harried in bonds across the prairie amid his tormentors, he 'justified God in this thing.' I do not know a sublimer order of experience than from the heart to bless and praise a good and holy God in despairs like these. It is to this order of experience that the work, the blood, of Christ belongs (page 213).

LOVE'S WORD,

Word into darkness
 (Spirit holding)
 life unfolding
 taming chaos
 naming me.
 Silence broken
 —One has spoken—
 Love's risk.
 Word in outer darkness
 hung
 unsung
 wearing sin
 bearing—me.
 Through the paining
 Spirit straining—
 Love's separation.

Word returning to the Father
 glory taking
 making sons
 waking singing
 bringing me!
 Spirit filling
 all things thrilling—
 LOVE'S ACHIEVEMENT.

Martin Bleby

* Poem written in Retreat, Belair S.A., June 1982.