

'If It's Not One Thing' ... It's Atonement

An article from the Cathedral Times
by The Rev. Thee Smith

'If it's not one thing, it's another!' You've heard the familiar proverb. Well I've been thinking how to apply it to a vexing issue in our religious and national life: the issue of forgiveness.

Have I got good news. (!?) Where forgiveness is too often unthinkable, unattainable, even unacceptable for many of us, there's promising recourse available in atonement.

No baseness or cruelty of treason so deep or so tragic shall enter our human world, but that loyal love shall be able in due time to oppose to just that deed of treason its fitting deed of atonement.
—Josiah Royce, *The Problem of Christianity* (1913)

This postulate cannot be proved true, of course, but human communities can assert it and act upon it as if it were true. Christian doctrine ... takes this same postulate as "a report concerning the supernatural works of Christ" — Kelly A. Parker, "Josiah Royce," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*

Wow! What if every one of my dastardly deeds—from careless mistreatment of others to my willful and malicious spite and viciousness—what if they could all be counteracted "in due time" by some "fitting deed of atonement?" What if national sins, communal and collective transgressions and violations of entire populations and classes of people; what if they could also re-emerge as postulated here: as "a report concerning the supernatural works of Christ?"

From our exploitation of workers or neglect of the poor to genocide and every other kind of injustice we could be (we are?) engaged in massive, millennial campaigns of reparation, restoration, and a resulting redemption of our national character and ideals!

Consider this corollary, even more audacious:

Things are not made the same as they were before through atonement, but are in an important respect made better ... [Where] genuine community is restored and all the individuals involved ... emerge as wiser, more resolved servants of their common cause ... "the world, as transformed by this creative deed, is better than it would have been had all else remained the same, but had that deed of treason not been done at all." (Royce 2001 [1913], 180).

Dare we believe despite the implausibility of that claim? Take one people's holocaust or another's; won't my alternative remedies fail: 'If not one thing'—forgiveness in some cases, 'then another'—atonement in other cases? Aren't there cases where neither forgiveness nor atonement suffices?

Rather it's also in such cases that we look to the Cross of Christ as our 'light at the end of the tunnel.' The immensity of that light—the intervention of God co-suffering with us throughout human experience as we declare by faith—suffices to illumine also where other lights go out; where every other illumination is eclipsed by the tragic losses we suffer: the death and destruction of millions, or the loss of one single beloved. As Isaiah 53 still prophesies:

Surely he took up our pain and bore our suffering ...

But he was pierced for our transgressions ... the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed ...

After he has suffered, he will see the light of life and be satisfied;
by his knowledge my righteous servant will justify many ...

Therefore I will give him a portion among the great ... For he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors.

May we do 'Christ-wise' with and for one another, and so propagate the prophecies that follow: "Sing, you barren and desolate ones ... Do not fear, you widows and abandoned ones ... Be comforted and vindicated, all you afflicted ones."

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