

Thought for the Week

The Cross

Good Friday draws nigh, and again we stand outside this nuclear submarine base at Faslane, gathered in this act of public worship, this 'Witness for Peace' of Scottish Christians Against Nuclear Arms.

We stand – including the Catholic archbishop, a Church of Scotland convenor and me, a Quaker – on this podium drawn from the folds of many different denominations represented here today, the underlying undivided Christian church that prays: *'Thy kingdom come.'*

Not Caesar's kingdom come, but God's; and so Pontius Pilate asked Jesus, 'Are you a king, then?' To which the Prince of Peace replied: *'King is your word.'* And he spoke unto Pilate of nonviolence, saying: *'My kingdom is not of this world. If it was, my followers would fight...'* (John 18:36-37).

Likewise, when the disciple cut off the high priest's servant's ear, Jesus disarmed him, saying: *'Put away your sword, Peter... No more of this!'* (John 18:11; Luke 22:51). Why? Because violence destroys our ability to hear one another. Christ healed the ear and healed our hearing, therefore Easter asks us: *can we hear the deeper whisperings of the Cross?* The Cross of wood and nails encircled with a crown of thorns that stood upon a green hill far away. The Cross of monstrous hulls and thermonuclear warheads surrounded by a barbed wire fence that is this Trident missile base today.

The Bible claims that Christ came 'to give his life, as a ransom' (Mark 10:45; Matthew 20:28; 1 Timothy 2:6), and so, to a central question of the Cross. *Who – is the ransomer of souls?*

Throughout the first millennium the church's main answer was the devil. Christ 'descended into Hell' and his suffering was the ransom price that purchased our whole salvation.

Early in the second millennium Anselm, the archbishop of Canterbury, argued that this gave the devil too much power. Who, then, could be the ransomer of souls? Only one other candidate in town was qualified to take the post.

Christ's death, Anselm reasoned, 'satisfied' a God

whose feudal honour human sin had offended. Later, John Calvin sharpened this up into the penal substitution theory of the atonement. God was 'armed for vengeance', but out of love for the Elect, and they alone, sent Christ to take their punishment.

The problem with such blood atonement is its seeming sanction of redemptive violence. A God armed for vengeance nods too readily towards the blasphemous idolatry of *HMS Vengeance* here at Faslane; and that, beneath a sovereign commander in chief, who doubles as defender of the faith.

What then, for this third millennium, might be the meaning of the Cross? Who, or what, this ransom of souls? Whither a liberation theory of 'atonement'?

I came today from Govan, further up the Clyde, many of my neighbours ransomed unto violence through its face of poverty. That draws me to a single paragraph in a book – *Mon Dieu, Pourquoi?* – where the late Abbé Pierre, a radical French priest, wrote of his wrestling with the ransom question. 'Was it the devil or God?' he'd asked: then came his breakthrough. 'The drug addict,' he wrote:

... is at the same time his own executioner and the victim. He is both the ransomer and the hostage...

It is the same with all human beings. Because we are disconnected from our authentic divine source, we have become our own executioners. We are slaves to our disordered desires, to our egotism.

The Cross, the supreme transformative symbol of nonviolence, absorbs in its forgiveness all chains that bind us. Here is the love that dies for love, yet being of eternity, never dies. And so, 'we call this Friday good'.

Christ said: 'I come to bring fire to the earth, and wish it were already kindled!' (Luke 12:49). Let us listen with our healing ear. What kind of fire? – The fire of Hell, of Trident's holocaust? Or the fire of love?

That is why we witness at Faslane. That is why we bite the bullet, so unfashionably; why we today survey the wondrous Cross.

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Glasgow Meeting

An address at Faslane on Saturday 12 April.

<http://thefriend.org>