

Bill(1st year student): Well, Mary, you're just about finished your studies. How does it feel to be two months away from ordination?

Mary: Frankly, it's pretty scary. There is so much I don't know. But I must say, these last few months have sure helped clear up my mind on a few basic questions.

Bill: Like what?

Mary: Well, like the atonement, for example-- for a long time I had trouble making any sense of why Jesus' death was supposed to be good news for anybody.

Bill: I always figured that Jesus was setting us a good example. The good news is that we now know for sure what God wants us to be like. He wants us to be loving and unselfish as Jesus was. Didn't Jesus say: Greater love has no one than this that he lay down his life for his friends?

Mary: That idea is called the Moral Influence Theory of the atonement. A lot of people think that Jesus' death is more than just a good example or good influence on morality. He certainly was a good example, but is that all? There are lots of good examples in history. Socrates died for a good cause, too. Why not follow Socrates? If Jesus is just another good example and nothing more, then he doesn't seem to be such good news for the world. Can his good example give us any help in coping with the powers of evil in the world and in ourselves?

Why couldn't the powerful people or any of us, for that matter, just ignore Jesus' example and say "Nice guys finish last; who needs it?"

Jerry: I hope you don't mind if I join this discussion? I couldn't help overhearing it. I agree with Mary. Jesus died for our sins, and it was a lot more than just a good example. He paid the price that we should pay for the wrong we do.

Bill: What do you mean he paid the price?

Jerry: God is a Just God and cannot simply overlook sin, so He needed a sacrifice that would make up for all the sins people have committed. Nobody on earth could make the necessary sacrifice. As it says in the Anglican Communion service: "Jesus made a full, perfect and sufficient sacrifice for the sins of the whole world". It says that in the old United Church service, too.

Bill: I have a lot of trouble with that talk about Jesus' sacrifice. I can understand that his death was a big sacrifice on his part--he gave himself fully, but surely it wasn't because God needed a human or even a divine sacrifice to satisfy some legalistic requirement in God's head? Do you really believe God needed the shedding of Jesus' blood before he could forgive people? What

about the people of Ninevah? They were forgiven after Jonah preached to them and they repented. What about Jesus' forgiving people before he died? If Jesus could do it without any punishment or blood sacrifice by the offenders, why can't God forgive freely?

Mary: Yes, and what about Jesus' teaching his disciples to forgive "seventy times seven times?" If we are supposed to forgive each other like that why should God need to be satisfied by the punishment of somebody, or by a human sacrifice, before God can forgive us?

Kathy: Can I join in too? I'm surprised at you, Mary. I thought you said your mind had cleared up about Jesus' death. If you don't believe in Jesus' sacrifice paying for our sins, aren't you going against a lot of scripture passages? Jesus said he was giving his life as a ransom for many. (Mark 10:45) At the last supper, he said, "This is my blood of the covenant which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. (Mathew 26:28). St. Paul called Jesus' death "an expiation by his blood". (Romans 3:25). St John also talked about Jesus as "the expiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world". (I John 2:2). The entire book of Hebrews is talking about the fact that Jesus' death was the final sacrifice that made the Old Testament sacrifices no longer necessary. What are you going to say about all the places where the Bible speaks of Jesus' death as a sacrifice?

Mary: One of the things I have finally come to understand is that sacrifice in the Bible never means satisfying God's righteousness or taking punishment in payment for sins. The Jews just didn't think that way about God-- and still don't. They had a sacrificial system in the temple in Jerusalem but the sacrifices were made as gifts to God or acts of commitment and repentance, rather than as a means to get God to forgive them by paying for sins. The idea of paying for sins developed later on in the second and third century after the Christian church had broken off its relationship with the Jewish religion. The writers of the New Testament were Jews like Jesus, and it was natural for them to use the Jewish sacrificial system to help explain the meaning of Jesus' death to other Jewish people. Later on in the Middle Ages, Christians who were not Jewish to begin with interpreted the sayings about Jesus' sacrifice from the point of view of feudal society where making satisfaction for wrongdoing was a basic concept of law.

Kathy: You're making my head spin, Mary. Thank goodness I've got another year to try and get it all together before I have to go out and start preaching about it.

Jerry: Wait a minute, Mary. If you don't agree with Bill's idea of Jesus as example, or my idea of Jesus as the sacrifice for our sins, What do you think about Jesus'

death?

Bill: Yeah! What's the good news that we haven't heard about yet? Have you cooked up some new theory that nobody ever heard about?

Mary: I hope not. I want to be faithful to the Bible and also to the witness of the church over the centuries.

Kathy: I'd like to hear about it if there is another way of understanding Jesus' death as some kind of good news.

Mary: Actually, the death of Jesus by itself was not good news for the early Christians. It was the death and resurrection together that gave people some new hope for living in this world.

Kathy: Hey, that's interesting! Neither Bill nor Jerry mentioned the resurrection as the basis for their view of the gospel.

Mary: Sometimes the cross and resurrection of Jesus are looked at separately, but they have usually been seen to be inseparable-- like two sides of one coin.

Kathy: How does the resurrection change your understanding of the cross?

Mary: The resurrection was the victory of God over the powers that put Jesus to death-- and the gospel is the message that God can still gain the victory over the powers of evil in the world. As St. Paul said in Romans 8, "neither death nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things to come, nor powers, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love

of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Kathy: I'm beginning to see a bit of what you mean. The powers that put Jesus to death were the political forces of Rome, the economic interests of the traders in the temple, the religious interests of the Jews and the personal fears of Pilate and the disciples. They seemed to be in control when Jesus was crucified, but after Jesus was raised the disciples could see that God is able to work for good inspite of the powers of the world. Even when it looks as if they have totally prevailed, God can still be working through the tragic events to achieve some good purpose.

Mary: Yes, the disciples felt a tremendous sense of freedom and delight in the gospel of the resurrection. They knew that they could go out to bear witness to God's kingdom, as Jesus had called them to do, and trust that God would use their efforts even if it sometimes looked as if they were not being successful.

Bill: Are you saying Jesus went to his death with that kind of trust in God? If so, then isn't he an example for us of trusting God, as well as loving our neighbour?

Jerry: Mary, you make it sound as if Jesus' death on the cross were a big failure by Jesus in his work of preaching and bringing in the Kingdom of God. Is that all it was-- a failure that God pulled out of the fire, so to

speak, by the resurrection?

Mary: In some sense, it was a failure by human standards of success. Jesus must have thought it was, too, when he cried out on the cross, "My God, Why have you forsaken me?" But in another sense it wasn't a failure at all. The way Jesus went to his death was in itself a victory over the powers of evil. Jesus never compromised on the message of God's Kingdom even when it conflicted with the interests of the Roman and Jewish authorities. He preached and taught the word of God fearlessly right to the end. And when the opposition attacked him, he chose to be non-violent towards them-- loving them enough to die himself rather than kill them to save himself. This way of non-violent witness seems to be the way God's Kingdom comes, So the way of the cross is not a failure by any means, but the way of real success for the purposes of God in the world.

Bill: I'll have to hear you again on that question of pacifism.

Jerry: I'm still wondering about forgiveness? Where does it fit into your view of the gospel, Mary?

Kathy: And I'd like to hear more about the things in our present world that the Bible called principalities and powers. If the gospel has to do with victory over them I'd like to know what they are,