

The Inlook-Outlook Letter

Of the Prison Ministry of the St. Lawrence Valley Friends Meeting
Religious Society of Friends (Quakers)
Potsdam, NY (August 2010)

St. Lawrence Valley Friends compose this 'Inlook-Outlook Letter' for you, to let you know you are in our hearts and prayers and will always be so. When we look into our hearts we see God and this benefits our outlook. This issue looks at what does the well-known phrase mean "Christ died for our sins"?

What is Meant by the Phrase "Christ Died for Our Sins"?

Christ died for our sins (St. Paul's first letter to the Corinthians (1 Cor 15:3); *We had all gone astray like sheep, each taking his own way, and Yahweh [God] brought the acts of rebellion of all of us to bear on him* (Isaiah 53: 6) (New Jerusalem Bible, 1985)

A member of the prison worship group once told of when as a child he asked his father: "If Jesus died for our sins, why is there so much sinning, why do people keep sinning?" It seems religion didn't make much sense to him; what is the good of it if there isn't any improvement in humanity, some result? His father answered that he wasn't much up on theology, and referred him to a priest. A meeting was arranged. It appears the child's question was taken as an act of willful disobedience, and he was informed he would 'understand' when he became an adult. Alas, another child for whom religion had been spoiled by well-meaning adults!

Our Friend's question wasn't answered immediately in the prison worship group, but it was kept in mind to offer him some reflection later. Unfortunately that was the last time the volunteers saw him. He was transferred. His question is a good one, for there are a number of phrases in the Christian faith the meaning of which is not readily apparent. People are loath to work on such phrases and often some pat, pious answer is given instead, which to some thinking men and women is unsatisfactory. (Remember, Jesus was a thinking man, and so were the many thinking women who were his disciples, such as Mary his mother and his friend Mary Magdalene). What follows is an attempt to answer our Friend's question.

Paul's letter to the Corinthians is where we first see this phrase *Christ died for our sins* in what is now regarded as Christian scripture, but then was a letter in which Paul tried to clarify spiritual issues that were dividing the Corinthian community. First, scholars tell us that Paul is referring to the 'servant' figure described in the Old Testament by Isaiah (53: 6) (The New Jerome Biblical Commentary, 1990). (The NJBC is an ecumenical compendium of up-to-date biblical scholarship). This served as a model for Jesus' ministry to the early Jewish-Christians, who would have sought to understand the shocking death of their leader in terms of the scriptures of the Jewish faith. There we discover that in Isaiah's vision, acts of human self-will and restlessness are brought to bear on the *servant*. He is to bear them, carry them. What is the purpose?

I understand this best by reference to a figure in the Buddhist faith, the *bodhisattva*. He is a sort of man of sorrows, a person who lives his/her life as a servant to God. The *bodhisattva* will not die until each and every human being is brought to his senses and lives a divinely guided life. The servant figure knows God's will and does it faithfully, attracting the scorn of those who (seeing its truth) are uncomfortable with it. His patient forgiving and bearing the mistakes of others will eventually be witnessed, will stir the consciences of some, and they will be brought to God. They will be saved by his example. Saved from what?

Their lives will be saved from ones of meaningless toil and pain and become lives dedicated to the healing of the world's sorrows. They will become, each according to his own measure, *servants* of God's purpose. For God's purpose in the Judeo-Christian tradition is shown in the Ten Commandments, which Jesus summarized as to love God and to love your neighbor as yourself (Matthew 22: 37-40). This is what we are commanded to do. Is it asking so much?

Though this may seem a tiresome way to spend one's life and a terrible responsibility, Jesus reminds us: *Come to me all you who labor and are overburdened, and I will give you rest... Yes, my yoke is easy and my burden light* (Matthew 11: 28-30). Jesus tells us that being a servant of God is not as bad as we might imagine. For one thing, as God revealed to Moses (and therefore to us) in the Exodus: *I shall be with you* (Exodus 3: 12) and if in our ministry we are called to speak, God reassures us: *I shall help you speak and instruct you what to say* (Exodus 4: 12). The spiritual life is one of quiet reflection, listening for God's guidance, and obeying that guidance.

Jesus' death on the cross presents us with two truths that are essential to remember if we are to have a life worth living:

1) We will die some day, and all the good we can do must be done between now and then. Death is a friend; it awakens us to our purpose. The purpose of religion as confirmed in the scriptures of so many religious traditions, is to care for the Earth, God's creation, and bring solutions to human conflict that will enable human beings to live in peace. Paul's letters are a living testimony to this great truth. Paul sought to reconcile differences that naturally arise whenever humans join together to accomplish some enterprise, in this case to bring people to a simple religion of the *servant* as presaged by the Hebrew prophet Isaiah and manifested in the life of the Christian-Jewish prophet Jesus.

2) The religious life is one of sacrificing one's ego for God's cause. We die each day to our wills (our self-centeredness if you will) and when we do, we are born anew with great new knowledge, and find miraculously that we are able to do things we never dreamed we could do before, and we do them with joy. We are truly free and happy.

There is nothing easy about religion; it can be as painful as Jesus' death on the cross, in all its gruesome details. Most of us are not called to make this great a sacrifice, but the dramatic image serves to remind us that *sacrifice, submission* to God's will in *service* to humanity, is at the center of the spiritual life of the Christian.

Paradoxically, it is easier than we thought it would be, when we find the courage to become the *servant* and be an example for others. George Fox, the Quaker leader wrote these encouraging words to his Friends from Launceston Jail in 1656: *Be patterns, be examples in all countries, places, islands, nations, wherever you go, so that your carriage and life may preach among all sorts of people, and to them. Then you will come to walk cheerfully over the world, answering that of God in every one. Thereby you can be a blessing in them and make the witness of God in them bless you.*

May God bless you always. **Anybody who wishes to receive the 'Inlook-Outlook Letter' may request a subscription by writing to the address below.** Be sure to let us know your complete address. You will be put on our mailing list and receive a monthly copy at no cost. Also, please feel free to write us with your comments, suggestions and contributions to the Letter: **St. Lawrence Valley Friends Meeting, P.O. Box 292, Canton, NY 13617.**

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