

Thought for the Day in Lent, focusing on tricky words in the Bible

Monday 15 – Sunday 21 March by Forbes Mutch

Monday 15th - Tricky word No. 29 – Atonement



'God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement through the shedding of his blood – to be received by faith.'

(Romans 3. 25)

When I was a young boy in primary school, I fell over in the playground and hit my head on a concrete block. When asked by the head teacher what had happened, I accused the school bully of pushing me over. He was made to stand up in assembly and apologise, which was very humiliating for him. I left that school the following term but, before I did, I apologised to this boy and said that I knew he hadn't been responsible for my fall. That was my attempt at atonement.

Atonement is the concept of a person taking action to correct a wrongdoing, either through undoing the consequences of the act or to express remorse.

Most major religions include a form of ritual atonement, where believers seek forgiveness from their deity. Yom Kippur is the Day of Atonement in Judaism, while Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism all have similar versions.

Atonement is one of the most important concepts in Christianity. It provides the answer to the question, why did Jesus die?

As Christians, we believe that humankind was once separated from God because of our sin. But Jesus' death upon the cross has made a way for us to be reconciled again with the Lord by being forgiven for our sins. We should remember this when we celebrate Easter in three weeks' time.

*Loving Father, when our faith is weak
and our wrongdoing gets in the way,
may we be reminded that you have created a way back home.*

Tuesday 16th - Tricky word No. 30 – Glory



'Then Jesus said, "Did I not tell you that if you believe, you will see the glory of God?"'

(John 11. 40, NIV)

Glory is a word that has many meanings, depending on the context of its use.

One definition of glory is when someone or something is accorded great praise and recognition for doing something important or looking splendid. A sunset can be glorious. A building, too, can reflect the glory of an architectural style. A person - maybe a politician, an athlete, a rock musician, a film star - can chase glory by seeking honour, praise and distinction by common consent.

In my home town, we refer to 1975 to 1982 as the Nottingham Forest 'glory years' because of the team's achievements in football (including winning the European Cup twice).

In the Bible, the word glory appears over 280 times. Jesus refers to Solomon 'in all his glory' when describing radiant attire, and Solomon himself built a glorious temple where 'the priests could not perform their services... for the glory of the Lord filled his temple' (1 Kings 8. 10). And that, after sifting through the uses of the word in the Bible and our liturgies and services, is the most common meaning of glory. It reflects power and might.

Glory, in the phrase 'for the glory of the Lord', is the most exciting use of the word. It summarises everything we believe our God to be - providing control, supremacy, authority and dominion. What a glorious thought.

*Look upon us, O Lord;
turn thy face unto us and show us thy glory.
Then shall our longing be satisfied
and our peace shall be perfect.*

(St Augustine, 354 - 430)

Wednesday 17th - Tricky word No. 31 – Immortal



'For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.'
(John 3. 16)

Martin Luther described the 25 words of John 3. 16 as, 'The heart of the Bible, the Gospel in miniature'. Who could argue with that? There are 12 words about God; 12 about you (or me, or us), with Christ symbolically in the middle. Arguably, no written text has ever offered more. It promises that a belief in Christ offers us immortality.

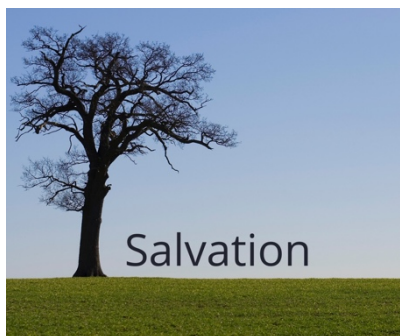
In the secular world, the idea of everlasting life has been debated since ancient times. Greek philosopher Plato's *Affinity Argument* explains that the visible, mortal and physical things of our life are different from the invisible, immortal and spiritual things. Our bodies are of the former, while our souls are of the latter so, while our bodies may die and decay, our soul can continue to live.

Equally, immortality has been a popular concept in fictional culture for hundreds of years, as it explores humanity's deep-seated fear of death. Immortal beings abound in fiction, from the Wandering Jew, a mythical immortal man whose legend spread in Europe in the 13th Century, to Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* and, more recently, tales of superheroes.

But in terms of our faith, there are two aspects of immortality that we can and ought to remember. First, God is immortal, the eternal King of all things. He does not change. He does not move. He is constant. And second, by believing in the words of the risen Spirit of Jesus Christ, God on Earth, we subscribe to the idea that God will welcome us home when we die physically. That's a comforting thought for today.

*Loving and everlasting Father,
help us to believe that our faith
will lead us to a life eternal in your loving embrace.*

Thursday 18th - Tricky word No. 32 – Salvation



'I trust in your unfailing love; my heart rejoices in your salvation.'
(Psalm 13. 5)

Our world is full of thousands of different religions. And these religions have their own ideas of what salvation is about and how people can gain salvation. Even within Christianity, there are different ideas and views about salvation. It can cause confusion, division and doubt in anyone's heart.

Christians believe that Jesus' death means that salvation is on offer to everyone. It is a free gift. It cannot be earned. Anyone who puts their trust and faith in Jesus Christ, turning from their current way of life and declaring Jesus to be the Son of God, will receive salvation. As Paul says in his epistle to the Romans, 'Anyone who calls on the name of the Lord [Jesus] will be saved' (Romans 10. 13).

The death and resurrection of Jesus Christ began something that will be fully realised at the end of times, when a new heaven and a new earth will be established; a place where there is no violence, no mourning, no crying or pain.

The concept of salvation through belief in Christ's sacrifice on the cross is probably too complicated to explain fully in 200 words, so just hang on to this simple truth - salvation means that all things in heaven and on earth will be reconciled (or restored) through Christ.

But there's one other thing to bear in mind. The peace that is made through the cross is not only peace between God and humankind. It is a peace that extends to everything in the world, all of nature, all creatures, all that exists. Salvation means, ultimately, peace within the whole of creation. That's a comforting thought.

*Lord, we understand that the road that leads to the cross
is a road that only makes sense when seen through your eyes. Amen*

Friday 19th - Tricky word No. 33 – Lamb of God



'The next day John saw Jesus coming towards him and said, "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!"'

(John 1. 29)

Nine-year-old Sarah, in a Sunday school in America, sums it up beautifully: 'In Bible times when a person sinned, they would take a lamb to the temple to sacrifice. To be called a Lamb of God means that God gave Jesus to be killed like a lamb for our sins so we could live forever.'

Need any more be said?

During the run up to the crucifixion and at the time of Christ's death, the sacrifice of lambs played a very important role in Jewish religious life, being integral to the sacrificial system that was established by God in the Old Testament.

It's no coincidence that Isaiah foretells of one who would be brought 'like a lamb led to the slaughter' (Isaiah 53. 7) and whose sufferings and sacrifice would provide redemption for Israel and all people. He was, of course, prophesying the death of Christ.

At the time of Christ, the Passover feast was (and remains) one of the main Jewish holidays and is a reminder of God's deliverance of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt. In fact, the slaying of the Passover lamb the night before they fled and the application of the blood to doorposts of the houses to protect the people from death (Exodus 12. 11-13) is a great picture of Christ's atoning work on the cross.

So, Sarah, aged 9, you got it right.

*Jesus, Lamb of God,
remind us often
that you made the ultimate sacrifice
to set us free. Amen*

Saturday 20th - Tricky word No. 34 – Sacred



'We ourselves heard this voice that came from heaven when we were with him on the sacred mountain.'
(2 Peter 1. 18)

In the literature of our faith, the word 'sacred' is most often used as an adjective to describe someone or, more commonly, something that is dedicated to the divine; is worthy of respect, something venerable, something that represents God.

Sacred descends from the Latin 'sacer', referring to that which is 'sacerdotal' (priestly) or 'consecrated', 'dedicated' or 'purified' to God (or gods in Roman times) or anything in their power.

Not surprisingly, it is a word that appears nearly 130 times in the Bible (mostly in the Old Testament). Sacred stones, sacred garments, sacred places, sacred mountains and so on; they're all in there.

In fact, and of course, we would not be wrong to describe the whole Bible, particularly the New Testament in which Jesus speaks to everyone, as sacred. In order to live a life of faith and devotion and gain entry to heaven and eternal life, we believe we ought to abide by the Word and so treat it as sacred.

If you look through the literature of all religions, searching for those things that are sacred, one of the most common objects will be a sacred tree. We have our own tree: *'In the middle of the garden were the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil'* (Genesis 2. 9).

I like the idea of sacred trees being used as symbols of faith - with roots, and growth, branching out and providing shelter. That's something that is truly sacred.

*Lord, somewhere a miracle occurs;
Your word is sown in fertile ground.
It germinates, it grows, it blossoms
And it bears a sacred harvest.*

Sunday 21st - Tricky word No. 35 – Merit



'Then Pharaoh said to Joseph, "Since God has made all this known to you, there is no one so discerning and wise as you."'

(Genesis 41. 38)

Many of us during recent months have avoided stepping on the bathroom scales, fearful that the lockdown pounds are winning the battle for a healthy BMI. Scales - they give us a measure of good and bad, too much or too little.

In medieval and Renaissance art, and in the frescos on ancient church walls, you will find scenes of final judgements, with an angel weighing souls on the scales of divine justice. There he is, the fiery Archangel Dokiel (or the warrior Michael) weighing a person's sins against the merits of their faith, determining, not their diet for the coming week, but the fate of their souls for all eternity. It is, of course, a myth.

The word 'merit' does not feature often, or at all, in biblical texts, but the rewards for being meritorious are commonly cited. When Joseph meets Pharaoh for the first time, the ruler of Egypt says: *'There is no one so discerning and wise as you. You shall be in charge of my palace, and all my people are to submit to your orders'* (Genesis 41. 39-40).

Merit can mean something good, or deserving a consequence, or it can be the mark of a distinguished examination result. This person merits a pay rise; this case merits reinvestigation; this thesis is awarded a mark of 'merit'.

Our faith may not compare favourably to that of Joseph's. But when it comes to weighing our souls, as believing Christians, God sees the merit in all of us. God created us and so we all merit a place in His world.

*Lord, balance my sinfulness
with the gracious waters of your forgiveness
that, having washed,
I might know the merits of your release.*