

**PALM SUNDAY**  
**APRIL 2, 2023**  
**THE PASSION NARRATIVE ACCORDING TO THE GOSPEL OF MATTHEW**

Atonement. Do you know that word? It is one of the words that express technically the work by which Christ saved us. It signifies the act by which one makes amends or satisfaction in order to bring about a reconciliation (H.F. Davis, “The Atonement,” in John R. Sheets, *The Theology of the Atonement: Readings in Soteriology*, 4).

There are truths at the heart of atonement. First, something has gone terribly wrong. Something has gone wrong with us and with the world of which we are a part. Second, whatever the measure of our guilt, we are responsible. Spare me the sentimental love that tells me what I do and what I am does not matter. Love does not say to the beloved that choices do not matter, for the beloved matters. The Lutheran pastor and martyr under the tyranny of the Third Reich wrote against what he called “cheap grace” which trivializes evil and thereby also trivializes good. Third, something must be done about it. Things must be set right. We cannot go on this way. False gods of positive thinking or stoic exhortations to make the best of it are worse than useless – they are obscene. They are invitations to make peace with a corruption at the core of everything. Better that Job and all the Jobs on the longing bench of history should curse God and die than that they should make their peace with the evil that they know. Such a peace is the peace of the dead, of those who are already spiritually and morally dead. The religious marketplace is crowded with the peddlers of peace of mind and peace of soul. But the narcotic of denial or pretense is too high a price to pay. Better to rage against the night. The fourth truth of atonement is this: Whatever it is that needs to be done, we cannot do it. Each of us individually, the entirety of the human race collectively – what can we do to make up for one innocent child tortured and killed? Never mind making up for Auschwitz, or the coffin ships of

traffickers in human slavery, or the slaughter beyond number of innocents in the womb? We cannot even put our own lives in order, never mind setting right a radically disordered world.

Who is at fault? Who is guilty? From the beginning of time, the wise and the good have wrestled with these questions. The wicked all have excuses. The guards at the death camps, the husband cheating on his wife, the executive padding expense accounts, the physician or nurse giving a lethal dose of drugs in the nursing home – all have excuses. I was obeying a superior's orders; I have uncontrollable needs that must be satisfied; everybody does it; we must relieve the world of useless or inconvenient lives. Name the crime and it is fitted out with an excuse. I was abused; I was deprived; I was spoiled; my genes made me do it.

All the Adams and all the Eves join with the brightest and the best of philosophers to declare that this is just the way the world is. And who is responsible for that? And with that question was born what philosophers call the question of "theodicy" – how to justify to humankind the ways of God. And thus, was God put on trial. If God is good and God is almighty, how did evil come about? If there is evil, how can an almighty God be good or a good God be almighty? In order to adjudicate these questions, we constituted ourselves the jury and the judge. And we put God in the dock. And soon enough we would constitute ourselves the executioner as well.

From every corner of the earth, from every scene of crime, from north and south, from east from west, from the rich and from the poor, every mother's son and every father's daughter gathered. The decision was unanimous. With one voice, poor deluded humanity pointed to the prisoner in the dock and declared, "God is guilty."

The angels were stunned, the stars hid their light, the universe went silent at the audacity of it, the wrongness of it, the outrageousness of it. Here now at last, in all the thick catalogue of human rebellion, is the lie so brazen as to surely bring down upon the heads of the

insurrectionists a punishment swift and terrible. But no, the prisoner in the dock calmly responds, “for this was I born, and for this I have come into the world.”

It is not enough for God to take our part. God must take our place. The grip of human kinds’ lies are broken by the greatest of lies, “God is guilty.”

God must die. It is a lie so monstrous that to suggest it invited instant annihilation – except that God accepts the verdict. This great reversal of everything we think we know is too much to bear. Dark is light and light is dark, right is wrong and wrong is right and a lie is recruited to the service of the truth. The order of things is shattered. Precisely so: our disordered order is shattered so that things might be restored to order. The judgment is so monstrously false that only by submitting to it can its falseness be exposed. By Christ’s submitting to the judgment of the world, the world is judged. Only by submitting to our folly could he save us from our folly.

From the foundation of the world, from before the time when there was no time, God heard humanity’s final verdict: “God is guilty! Crucify him! Crucify him!” The perfect self-surrender of the cross is, from eternity and to eternity, at the heart of what it means to say that God is love. From the beginning God knew what he would do about a humanity he created free to love him, and therefore, free to hate him. The rebellion did not take God by surprise. Redemption was not an improvisation, not an emergency measure in response to an unexpected setback. From the beginning, “God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself.” This is what it means to love; this is what it means to be love; this is what it means to say that God is love.