



Alastair McIntosh Who is the ransomer?

“Blood atonement nods too readily towards the blasphemous idolatry of HMS Vengeance”

Shortly before Easter, Scottish Christians Against Nuclear Arms stood outside the nuclear submarine base at Faslane, gathered in an act of public worship, a witness for peace. We came from many different denominations – our number included a Catholic archbishop, a Church of Scotland convenor, and me, a Quaker – but we stood on a podium as 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 to 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? Who holds us captive demanding payment for our release?

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, Anslem, the Archbishop of Canterbury, argued that this gave the devil too much power. Who, then, could be the ransomer of souls? Only



Peace protest at Faslane nuclear base, Argyll and Bute

‘Violence destroys our ability to hear one another’

one other candidate in town was qualified to take the post.

Christ’s death, Anslem 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 them 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 there 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 ransomer of souls? Whither a liberation theory of “atonement”?

I went to Faslane on that day from my home in Govan further up the Clyde, many of my neighbours ransomed to violence through its face of poverty. That draws me to a single paragraph in *Mon Dieu... Pourquoi?*, where the late Abbé Pierre, a radical French priest, wrote of his wrestling with the ransom question. Was it the devil? he’d asked. Was it God? Then came his breakthrough:

The drug addict 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 witnessed at Faslane. That is why we bite the bullet so unfashionably, why we survey the wondrous Cross.●



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