

Sermon

for us he was unto thee both the Victor and the Victim,
and therefore Victor, because he was the Victim
for us he was unto thee both the Priest and the Sacrifice,
and therefore the Priest, because he was the Sacrifice

...I meditate upon the price of my redemption

St Augustine, on Good Friday
Confessions X, xliii

At first glance this short piece of theologising upon the significance of Good Friday appears impenetrable. It is probably a way of reasoning that is written in a style that is now distant from our own culture.

On the other hand, it consists of only of about fifty words and therefore has the merit of being within the range of Twitter, famous for its messages of 140 characters. Perhaps we live in an impatient age: Twenty-Twenty cricket often seems to take precedence over the truer game.

The passage is broken into two parts and each begins with the same phrase "*... for us he was unto thee ...*" in the opening and third lines.

It is a phrase that encapsulates the meaning of grace. Jesus did something for us: he stood as our representative: "*... for us he was unto thee ...*".

It is a phrase that holds the meaning of the Incarnation. God amongst us, for us.

There is another ancient phrase that comes to mind, written by a fourth century bishop called St Gregory Nazianzus (who lived in Cappadocia, a region not so far from Ankara).

"What has not been assumed has not been healed"

In the context in which it is written, it is a phrase that asserts both the solidarity of Christ with us, but also hints at the purpose of such solidarity and so links with this passage of Augustine's:

*"for us he was unto thee both the Victor and the Victim,
and therefore Victor, because he was the Victim"*

Augustine states that in his death on the cross, Jesus was one who was lost (Ps 22 'My God, why have you forsaken me?'). That lostness, as we reflect on the events in the Garden of Gethsemane, as I tried to explain recently in my address on Ps 44 at the beginning of Lent, was utter. Jesus drank of the cup of the wrath of God's anger (see Jer 25.15 and Isaiah 51:17). There is a depth to this separation within the being of God that is incomprehensible in its awfulness.

Indeed we can only contemplate its significance because Jesus is also victor. As we are blinded by the light after we leave darkness, we are similarly overwhelmed by Christ's victory. Whilst we may reflect that this triumph is, ultimately, the resurrection, we must remember that before we can join in with that shout of triumph, we must remember that on Good Friday there is the cry of victory from the cross "It is finished" (Jn 19.30). In his death, Jesus has reached completion: he has been "... fully obedient to death, even when that caused his death - death on a cross" (Phil 2.8).

Augustine continues:

*"for us he was unto thee both the Priest and the Sacrifice,
and therefore the Priest, because he was the Sacrifice"*

This second part gives Jesus' death greater definition. If Jesus is the Son of God, which is the meaning of the first part of Augustine's passage, then this explores the consequences.

His death was costly - a sacrifice - and was given for a purpose: the priest as mediator between God and His people (which in the context of the cross is inclusive of all (John 12.32)).

Jesus' death was a self-offering. He gave his life to achieve atonement (at-one-ment) which it is beyond us because of our sinfulness to achieve ourselves. His death unites us to God and reveals the love of God in so doing.

So, as with Augustine in his closing remark, we end with contemplating the love of God for the world and for us. We recognise God's graciousness and mercy.

... I meditate upon the price of my redemption.

The careful, precise, approach of Augustine leaves him in a place of wonder and praise.