

Critique of David Sinclair's teaching session February 23 2008

David Sinclair is a church warden at Holy Trinity Church, Cannes. Towards a career in the Anglican Church he gave a Teaching Day on "The Cross of Christ-Its significance and meaning" starting at 09.45 and ending at 15.30. (a marathon session!).I attended in the morning. The following is my personal views on the content of the first part of his presentation.

David gave a talk which would be regarded as orthodox teaching of the Anglican church and can be summarised briefly:

From the time of Adam & Eve, mankind has sinned. God is full of wrath and has punished mankind because they have broken his laws. God made covenants with the Jews through the agency of Moses and Jeremiah but the Jews broke them and were punished .

In order to placate God for their sins , every year on the day of atonement the priests sacrificed an animal by cutting their throats and spilling blood on an altar, burning it and offering a "burnt sacrifice"

Also a goat called a "scape goat" was let out into the wilderness. The rational behind this ritual was that sins would be transferred to the animals from the worshipers . Thus God was placated and his wrath was expunged (presumably for another year!).

When Jesus gave his life on the cross he was a "sacrificial lamb" .This meant God now forgave us our sins for all time in a new covenant. For the Jews this meant that the atonement ritual was no longer needed.

I asked a question as to whether the Jews still practiced the ritual and David said it was discontinued after the fall of Jerusalem in 70AD. I then asked why a gentile in the 1st century AD would want to become a Christian based on the Jewish ideas of atonement. This was leading to another question , which I would have asked if I had had the mental energy and enthusiasm to stay on to the afternoon session: what relevance has these ideas today some 2000 years later ? The following are my views:

The Jews believed that God punished mankind because they had sinned.

This punishment took the forms of :

Death and the cessation of immortality.

Disease (eg leprosy) ,early death & pestilence (eg plagues of locusts).

Birth defects (eg withered limbs).

Demons inhabiting the body and causing mental disorders.

Adverse weather leading to drought and failure of crops and famine.

Floods leading to extermination of large section of the population.

Military defeat by other tribes, occupation of their territory ,the sacking of their cities, and being taken into bondage.

I can understand why they thought this way. They were unaware of what caused these events. They had to be caused by God because of his wrath. What other explanation could there be: it was all very logical and well explained by the prophets .

But we live in the 21st century!

Let's deal with the list of punishments in a modern way.

Death :Without death ,evolution would be impossible. Man is descended from mammals which survived the extinction of the dinosaurs (presumed to be caused by an asteroid collision).Modern man, homo sapiens, originated several hundred thousand years ago from more primitive creatures. At no time was man immortal and the Garden of Eden story is only an interesting piece of mythology. It didn't happen and it doesn't explain "original sin"

Disease: this can be caused by bacteria & viruses. The advent of antibiotics and antiviral medications, vaccines and better sanitation and hygiene, the provision of clean water, knowledge of nutritional deficiencies have eliminated most diseases. A prime example is leprosy (when Jesus healed the leper; he said "your sins are forgiven") Leprosy is not caused by people sinning; it is a contagious disease caused by a certain bacteria which infects a proportion of the population. People who get it are unlucky.

Pestilence; we know many of the organisms which infect and destroy plants. Pesticides are now used. The climatic conditions which lead to plagues of locusts are known and their origin understood.

Birth Defects: These are caused by genetic abnormalities in DNA and passed on by the parents irrespective of whether they have sinned.

Demons: a great deal is known about mental disease and there are now medications which are used to treat it (eg schizophrenia, epilepsy).

Mental disease is caused by the faulty working of the human brain not by demons. One day it will be possible to treat or eliminate disease such as Parkinsons and Alzheimers.

Other diseases: our knowledge of what causes cancer, heart disease, strokes, diabetes increases year by year. The provision of anticancer treatment, anti coagulants, statins, insulin & oral anti-diabetic drugs have done much to prevent and alleviate these diseases , most of which have a genetic component not caused by the ancestors sinning.

The weather: weather can now be predicted in the short term including storms and floods. Many of the factors which affect the weather are known and satellites are particularly useful in weather forecasting.

Weather forecasters would howl in derision at the suggestion that the weather was caused by God or was the result of sin.

Military defeat: the ability to defeat or be defeated by your enemies has depended on many factors eg increases in the population of young men , development of superior military techniques, the belligerence and ambitions the leaders. It is unfortunate that Israel is a country which is difficult to defend being at the cross roads of the Middle East .

Sometimes the Israelites won; sometimes they lost. It is the story of mankind!

They didn't lose because they sinned.

In conclusion, what people who lived 2000 years ago thought is no longer applicable to life here and now. Scientific discovery has provided reasons behind these "punishments" which were thought to be due to the wrath of God.

The wrath of God does not and has never existed.

It is outdated and in any case the rituals and thoughts behind it are barbaric .It is impugning to "God " a human image of our own faults which surely "God" does not deserve.

Thus the idea that Jesus "died so that our sins could be forgiven" has no meaning today.

You may wonder why with such thoughts I still consider myself a Christian. It is for other reasons such as : agreeing with his philosophical view of life ;wanting to follow his example in promoting a better life for mankind.