

Transcript of James Alison Nomad Podcast

Scapegoat - How Civilisation Harms and How the Cross Heals

Q: One of the main things that trigger my deconstruction or evolution of the conservative evangelical faith that I inherited was my increasing discomfort of a violent image of God, and my image of the cross that underpinned that view of God - that God poured out his wrath on Jesus rather on me. Is that the understanding of God and the cross that you inherited? Because you grew up in an evangelical church, didn't you?

A: Well, although I was brought up in an evangelical family and I guess it was a strong evangelical family, my dad was Evangelical Anglican and John Stott was his mentor and I was baptised as an infant by John Stott, I don't remember the issue of the cross as being central to what made me uncomfortable. It was my ... as I was discovering I was gay, and I fell in love with somebody that I began to suspect that the gospel must be true but something different to what I was picking up. So, if you like, it was less intellectual at that stage. What really impacted me was what I later discovered to be, if you like, a corollary - a necessary corollary - of the penal substitution theory which is the notion of radical depravity and therefore a particular understanding of original sin of which, of course, it was assumed that being gay was simply a manifestation.

So, it was that - it was having fallen in love and the realisation that there must be another understanding of original sin that started moving me on this matter.

Q: Certainly I grew up in that view of the cross and original sin as well that really became the gospel. Why do you think that became so central for so many Christians?

A: Well, there are couple of reasons.

It's quite a recent formulation in its current version. It's very much, I think, that the notion of what you need is a firm clear idea of doctrine and that's what belief actually is. It is in some sense a proposition rather than a relational habit that is produced in you by somebody who likes you. It is quite a different understanding.

But also, I think, that one of the things that penal substitution theory does is that it ties you in to a strict moral sphere that can't be altered. And for some people that gives them a security and a sense of everything is in its place. Because, of course, nothing can be changed since if Jesus paid that price for this bill of goods, then anyone suggesting that this bill of goods is not a list of sins, they're obviously doubting the value of Christ's death.

So that the two hold each other together completely. So it is a complete package. And as a complete package it gives a certain security to people who are scandalised. I associate it with very much the sense of scandal. And I notice how easy it is for those people who hold that package to see themselves as victims and have a slightly conspiratorial sense of the rest of the world against “Christians” - meaning people who hold the same package as them. And how necessary that sense of being persecuted to them - it is a self-reinforcing package.

Q: Is there a particular Catholic understanding of the cross in the way there is in Protestantism.

A: No, there is no doctrinal requirement to understand the way in which Christ’s death saves us. That we are saved - that Christ died for our sins would be Catholic doctrine. But, for instance, St Anselm’s explanation, which is the beginnings of the explanation now known as penal substitution theory, would be considered as one of the ones on offer but certainly not an obligatory one. Strangely enough it is one of the areas where the notoriously uptight Catholic Church actually allows a good deal of discussion.

Q: Do you think for people that are struggling with penal substitution or other mechanisms the way the cross works is it ok to say Christ die for our sins and the mechanisms of that don’t concern me? Is that kind of legitimate view to hold?

A: I think that it can be a good starting place, but where people are ... there are some people that are really tortured by this and telling them to relax is not good enough. So, one of the things I think Rene Girard’s thought has enabled me to do is, and I hope to be able to do it better, is to say: “Actually, all those texts which you put together in a certain way to produce this recipe can actually be put together in a different way that is actually rather more old fashioned and more conservative, and actually more compelling than this comparative modern theory.” And once you look at it that way with exactly the same texts it is possible to hold onto something that is richer. It is not, if you like, a flight into liberalism, or a letting go of something that is untrue to faith. On the contrary it is a way of making faith richer and deeper.

Q: Before we begin to unpack that non-violent view of the cross, perhaps we could start by looking at violence in general. Your ideas are based on a chap called René Girard and his understanding why we desire what we desire. Can you begin to unpack that?

A: Yes Girard's understanding, his initial insight is what he calls *mimetic* desire, according to mimesis or *imitation*. In that understanding imitation is something pre-conscious, not in our modern more-or-less conscious sense of imitation. So his notion is that we desire according to the desire of another. It's as we see other people wanting something that we come to want it ourselves. Something which is perfectly obviously to the advertising industry. Basically, publicity works by producing a desire in other people by showing other people enjoying things. Maybe I'll start being sexier, smarter or attractive or whatever, if I drive this car or drink whatever it is. Girard's simply a very much more rigorous understanding of that, as to how in fact desire rather being the individual starting point within us is something produced within us by something that is other than us. With that it becomes clear how quite how good and important a thing imitation is as we grow up and are able to imitate sounds and movements which induct us into language and behaviour and family life and therefore viable adulthood. But also how dangerous it is because the more we imitate each other the more risk there is that we flip into rivalry. It is ok when you're comparatively much smaller than someone much bigger, whom you are imitating because you are not going to be in rivalry with; and furthermore they are not going to be in rivalry with you. But the closer you get to being the same, the more chance there is that one of you will begin to suspect that the other one is getting too good at whatever it is and "I'd better put a spanner in their works".

Q: So if we can conduct an experiment where I have been raised in a vacuum, I would still presumably have instincts to eat and to drink or whatever, but I wouldn't have a desire for a particular brand of ale. Can we make that distinction between instincts and desires?

A: Yes, of course, with humans we can't any longer make that distinction. I think that this would be part of Girard's understanding of the process of humanisation. We are the ape whose instincts have been overrun by desire. That's what desire is. Desire is our instincts now run socially rather than biologically. Which is why we are actually out of touch our instincts. We have to learn how to sleep properly, to learn how to eat properly, we have to learn to have sex properly. All these things which we can see - what we might call less evolved - animals doing instinctively.

Q: This is a very human thing?

A: Desire must have been an astounding upset, a huge crisis as this particular ape, became unmoored from instinct as we became so good at imitating each other that the collective force of imitating each other actually started to inflect our instincts so that actually none of us have direct access to our instincts. It is only from the collective learning - which means the collective dynamics - that we are able to receive how we cope with our instincts.

Q: As I was reading about that two things troubled me a little bit. One was that if desire is so central, if it such a central part of who I am, and if what desire is based on what I see other people desiring, then who am I? Is this an essential me?

A: Well, I think that what is key to this understanding, is that of course, what is essentially you is *your body*. In your body you are entirely different from anybody else. No-one else, not even your twin brother if you had one, has exactly the same physical body as you, born at exactly the same time, occupying exactly the physical space, occupying exactly the same set of relationships. By definition anyone else is not going to share that. I think one of the things we have to recover is that actually: our desires are what make us alike; it is our bodies that make us different. Which is to go back to a much more ancient form of anthropology because it is the soul is the form of the body - not a ghost in a machine. It is not “what I really am is my desire and my body is this encumbrance that I have to bear around”. No. If you like, what myself is, is the capacity to negotiate my bodyliness within the “we” that has brought me into being. Now, of course, that is going to be unique to you over time, and therefore, yes, there is a real project that is you and no one else over time. But let’s not fool ourselves into thinking that just because I desire this thing therefore it is my desire that makes me unique and special. On the contrary that is what other people are counting on to make me a sucker for whatever it is that they are going into. Our desires are how we are like people. It is our bodies that make us different.

Q: It also got me thinking of the idea of free will as well. Am I entirely at the mercy of the desires of other people? You could spend the rest of your life second guessing your desires: “Do I really want this or is it just because I saw such and such wanting it?”

A: Well that is only if you are essentially rivalistic because the most successfully balanced, adjusted people are those who are quite happy to float on other people’s desires, and who kind of know that they are not very original, and kind of don’t mind. Therefore, are able to be very good sponges and absorb all the things that people ... that’s actually what makes people original - it is what they

do with all the stuff they get from elsewhere. Whereas if you are constantly saying “I don’t want to be like you, I don’t want to be like you.” In fact you will end up my mirror image and you will be much less likely (... to be original). So, I think the question is whether you accept your dependence specifically. In which case, actually you have enormous amount of freedom; or whether you try to deny it, in which case you will bind yourself up in to all sorts of conflict.

Q: So it just to accept the inevitability of it and deciding what you are going to do with it really?

A: Yes but inevitability somehow seems wrong - accept the give-ness of it. I think it is the different between pride and humility, going back to a much more ancient moral code. Pride is when “not this, not that, in order to ... I need to cut myself from the branch I am sitting on”. Whereas humility is of course, more realism, “What a pleasure it is to be brought up by these people, to have been inducted into this language, to be living in this kind of climate, which has turned me into this sort of person, what are the interesting things I can do with it?”

Q: Let’s come back to where it can go wrong then. Because on the one hand that can seem like a beautiful thing, it can be an expression of our wonderfully, kind of, social relational communal nature, what it means to be a human, that we are all in this together, but you’re saying this can lead to rivalry and potentially violence.

A: Oh yes, absolutely. In one sense it is not a beautiful thing: it is an ordinary thing. Most of us, most of the time do accept our dependence on what is other than us. I mean, you don’t check the road map each morning to see whether someone has switched the direction of the carriageway. You assume that it was the same as it was yesterday. In other words your ability to get from A to B is something you gratefully accept. You do not get all conflictual about it. So, it’s just to point out something which this is, not “Shall I be conflictual, or shall I be peaceful”. No, most of us, actually, in order to be viable human beings at all, have already learnt how to imitate and receive a huge amount and the space in which we squabble is actually comparatively small even though it is the most obvious. It is worth remembering that.

But yes, I mean, you can imagine what it is like in any situation, the closer people are to each other in terms of strength and size the more there is the risk that an imitation that comes into being unconsciously - is in fact a sign that I actually I

admire you - can come to be seen by you as a threat because I am becoming as good as you at ... it maybe tennis, it maybe computers, or mechanics.

Q: Just don't start your own podcast mate or ...

A: Exactly, exactly. So you can see that therefore I might need to be put down a peg or two and there you can imagine how what was an emulation can turn into rivalry very quickly. Suddenly the people are fighting with each other and they can't work out why. We used to be the best of friends then suddenly ... because no one can actually admit that I was frightened of you ... but that's the problem with how rivalry sets up. It is that none of us can ever admit to it. Because one thing that we can't admit to, especially as a modern I, is that we might conceivably have been dependent on the other in the first place.

The danger of rivalry of course, comes - it can come in one-on-one rivalry of that sort - but particularly true in groups - where once rivalry starts to break out it very quickly becomes contagious. And other people start taking sides and you can then get into a free for all. Whether you are in a primitive tribe or a modern university department that can produce chaos and the risk of collapse of everything, collapse of productivity, collapse of the ability to get grants, ability to get food, whatever, and how do we solve this? Well of course, consciously we don't. But in any society in fact we have learnt that our default is the same. There comes a moment in the frenzy of all against all when, if we're lucky, if we are lucky, mysteriously it turns into all against one. And no one can quite know why? No one can tell who is going to get it. But somebody does.

Q: Can you give us a real-world example of that, maybe a historical or contemporary example where we can see that mechanism happening so we can really understand it?

A: Gosh. Well, of course, all our modern examples are in a sense, too dependent, they're too structured. You can imagine that a Führer haranguing a crowd about their greatness and their wonderfulness and he has brought them all together and how they are going on to great things, if only it weren't for Mr Silberstein the barber. And mysteriously, everybody who paid no attention to Mr Silberstein the barber now starts to find that yes, Mr Silberstein he is really the enemy of the people and he must be got rid of.

Alas, too many modern examples with other great leaders of the orange clad variety, as we go on. In other words, that someone who is a clever politician who distinctively knows how to ride that frenzy and turn it into their favour.

We don't get to see, very rarely get to see, actually a genuine pre-cultural collapse. We get to see the post-cultural variety. We would need to look at something like apes fighting each other to the death and some have seen this where you see a horde turn on one. And that's the hypothesis from Girard's point of view, he suggests that what was happening with our simian forebears was that over a very long time the imitative capacities which did us so much good in terms of enabling us to receive a huge amount of information from each other, and which were held in place by dominance mechanisms and alpha males and the sort, that we can still see in other groups, the more you imitate, the less effective the dominance mechanisms are.

So eventually you reach a stage where everyone is too like each other so no one can keep charge. When everyone is too like each other the ease with which rivalry can break out and actually become fatal. And Girard posits that almost certainly groups will have wiped themselves out. Certainly ... occasionally the Brazilian jungle even when indigenous groups have been found, occasionally the Brazilian government will have to step in to prevent them from wiping themselves out. Because once the mechanism of all against all is unclenched there is no resolution automatically. If they're lucky they'll fall upon the scapegoat mechanism. But it is not guaranteed. So we have this bizarre phenomenon whereby something which is essentially awful - in other words, us ganging up against someone - is actually our violent protection from our own violence.

Q: Is Girard proposing then that the violence that can be caused by these rivalries that is the root of violence? Or that is just some forms of violence that we see and this could be going on. Or he is saying this is where violence is coming from ...?

A: He is saying that rivalry is the principle root of violence. It's imitation ... imitation for him is a positive thing because ... mimesis as he calls it, it is a positive thing ... but it is always and everywhere lived by us on the risk of tipping over into rivalry.

Q: Would you be able to sense that, for example, in your own lived experience? You'd be able to sense that desire tends to turn you into rivalry?

A: Yes, I think any of us can see the difference between wanting something and wanting something so that someone else doesn't have it. It is not a hugely difficult thing. In my own experience, one of the interesting things I've had is that, I am a priest, I've lived in religious life and have taken part in various charities, and in sort of university life, but I have also on a couple of occasions

worked for full profit companies. And the difference in the level of the bitchiness is inversely proportional to the amount of the financial reward. In other words, the more you are in a do-gooder type world where the only reward is prestige, the more everyone is fighting after the one thing that matters which is prestige. Whereas if you are actually in a company in which there are salary differentials, curiously, people get along quite well. Because there is something to aspire to which doesn't actually destroy everyone else. It is one of the really strange things. It is how competition can be real and not devastating within groups where there is something to be aimed for. This is one of the difficult things for us as humans that ultimately the only thing to fight about is prestige: "I want to be who you are."

Q: The example which kept coming up when I was reading about this - and it's something that if anyone's got kids, they will have experienced - where you can in a room jam packed full of toys, but you will see two kids fighting over one toy even though there's another hundred toys that they can have.

A: Once one has alighted upon one - it becomes the only thing of value. It is not only kids. A friend of mine did an experiment by going to a drapery store - a store with lots of lots of cloth to be used for making shirts or curtains or whatever, and they very deliberately went into the shop and very deliberately looked at something in quite an ostentatious way and checked it and stood back and looked at it and observed it then moved to the side of the room. And almost all the other people in the shop came and looked at the same thing thereafter and checked it and some bought it and so on and so forth.

Q: You need undercover sales assistants that can do that to try and boost sales.

A: Well of course, the principle - particularly the sports-shoe manufacturers have done this for a long time now, what they call viral marketing. So your Nike, your Adidas will send their scouts to particular high schools in the United States to detect who are the cool kids. And they will then give the cool kids, whatever it is, the latest multi-jewel, fire-breathing, smoke-producing, sneakers. And within weeks they will have sold hundreds just within that neighbourhood.

Q: So they have been reading Rene Girard?

A: They didn't need to. Rene Girard has been reading them, I think. Because they understand that it's models - we desire according to the desire of another.

In other words we are desperate for models because we don't know who we are. Show me who I am to be. That's the great thing.

Q: So you talked about how the violence can be overcome through the choosing of the scapegoat. How is that scapegoat chosen? What characteristics would make a good scapegoat?

A: Well, again, chosen is an odd word, because we are talking about something that works pre-cognitively. But yes, during a frenzy, the notion that people are rational enough to be choosing anything other than how to survive if they possibly can, is seen as bizarre. In fact, when people have been interviewed after having been in a frenzy, they actually said it was like an out of body experience - I didn't actually know what I was doing. So we can become overtaken by the contagion of crowd frenzy much more easily than we would like to think. We would like to think of ourselves as rational people, but in fact crowd frenzy will override our supposedly rationality comparatively easily.

And the question is: "Where will the finger fall?"

Now, over time, we can see - and this is one of the things that Girard studies - that there are certain characteristics that are likely to be found in the scapegoat. They are likely to be people who are either too tall or too short. Too rich or too poor. To have some sort of physical deformity. To be half in and half out. All of those sorts of people are classic people who get it.

One of the key features being that they be people who are sufficiently like us so when it (the scapegoat mechanism) has been done that it actually did produce peace amongst us. Sufficiently unlike us for it to be plausible that they are a malevolent outside force. So that's part of what is going on there. Strangely enough and we have seen this time and time again, generally complete outsiders are very rarely scapegoats. The people who we find most difficult to get on with are people who are quite like us. One of the more modern descriptions refer to it as the narcissism of small differences. The classic one from biblical times would be Jews and Samaritans. Why were Samaritans so seemingly loathsome? Because they were so damn like ... So those tended to be the classic.

Girard's beautiful analysis of many ancient myths shows how people of this sort turn up. The classic one would be Oedipus - swollen foot. A classic half-insider, half-outsider. He seemed to come from outside but then turned out to be actually the son of the woman he had married. Had a swollen foot. Was far too important. Classic scapegoat.

Q: You said that it's in a frenzy that the finger will fall on someone. Is it always frenzy? Does it never come as calculated? Do politicians never scapegoat a group as a way of uniting a group?

A: Oh yes. What I am describing to you is, if you like, the archaic function. No, and this is one of the differences that Christianity has made. Think of Christianity as having blown the whistle on this. Christianity effectively, says "Yes, this is the default mechanism. This is why gods and altars and temples and sacrifices: they are a more or less a decorative way of playing that game." And what Jesus was doing by coming into our midst, allowing himself to be crucified, showing what was going on all along, he was saying: "Ok, game's up. I'm actually revealing to you what you do. It will be hereafter impossible for you to carry on doing the same thing."

Q: The mechanism has to be hidden?

A: Has to be hidden for it to work. You have to believe that the one you are casting out is actually responsible for the trouble you are in. Because that is the only way it will bring peace. It's only if you have got the right bastard that you can say: "Yeah, we got the right bastard, now we can have an all-together victory celebration and we can tell it was the right one because we are altogether at peace." Rather than the fact that they have come together in unanimity, killing someone has been what in fact established the peace. You attribute, magically the effect to the killed one as having brought about the peace.

But anyhow, the moment you have, what we have in the gospels, which is an account of a lynch death - a carefully controlled lynch death - being explained as you go through it by the person who is going to be lynched so that the mechanism becomes blindingly clear; and it has been shown that it is not the last word; well it completely undoes the whole system. It's saying: "This is what you are doing." It is, how do you say, complete vanity. The truth is shown in that *this one* (Jesus) is actually wanting to give to you, wanting you to start to learn, to be humans together in a completely different way.

So any modern - in the modern west - we have a tradition of a gradual introduction of suspicion concerning unanimity over and against someone. And for a very good reason. If everyone gets together against someone the chances are we will remember, we will see that person is some sort of Christ figure. And we will say "Oh, so rather than these being the good guys - this sounds like a mixture of the chief priests and Romans." Little by little, that narrative has had the effective of undoing the viability of sacrifice as a good thing.

Well that doesn't stop an awful lot of canny people trying to play the old game, more or less knowingly in the way you described, so politicians do whip up things. And some very malevolently, some more rather more successful. For instance Tony Blair was being a good shaman, as it were, when he managed to persuade the Queen to come down to Buckingham palace to pay tribute, as it were, to Dianna's coffin. Because there were plenty of signs that if someone hadn't managed to redirect the crowd's anger, we wouldn't have a monarchy any longer. Because the crowd frenzy was building up in a way that stunned people who imagined "that that sort of thing didn't happen here".

There are people who can use that to rile people up rather than defuse it. I think that Tony Blair defused it well and the Queen agreed to defuse it well. But there are other circumstances which we are all too aware now. Listen to Viktor Orban's rhetoric in Hungary, and it's all Mr Soros. We are dealing with people who unfortunately know the archaic tune and of course they don't know it innocently anymore.

Q: Before we come back to the cross and unpack that a bit more, are we saying then, civilisation is essentially built on this mechanism?

A: Yes.

Q: You said there are examples of civilisations or cultures or groups of people that have been wiped out because they have not found a scapegoat. The implication then is that civilisation has survived because of this mechanism.

A: Well, yes. Obviously, the root from our simian forebears - there is a huge amount of palaeontology to be done about what it was that enabled us to leave the savannah. What the relationship between Homo sapiens, Neanderthal and then later homo sapiens-sapiens is. But for instance, hunter gatherers - which we were before we started to become sedentary - weren't able to hang out in very big groups without splitting up. They have a very high murder rate amongst themselves, apart from anything else. We learnt how to live together without destroying each other.

It is curious that we get temples before cities, in that sense. In other words, some recognition that's it got to be some sort of sacrifice which would have certainly put a human element to it. As we know from Myths and Legends which describe it quite exactly. So yes, the notion that we are essentially an innocent, peaceful, egalitarian bunch some of whom who have turned a bit nasty and occasionally do murderous things doesn't seem so plausible. The notion that in fact, by death having been given meaning through our ability to

point to something and to become a symbol of what is not us, that we start to have language, binaries: in / out, good / bad, dead / alive. In other words, the things that gave us the possibility of symbolic speech at all. So yes, human culture in its richest sense does seem to depend on violent containment of our violence.

Q: How do you understand the sacrificial systems? Most people listening to this would immediately be thinking of the Old Testament sacrificial system, particularly the Day of Atonement - that's quite interesting isn't it. Because the priest deliberately laid his hands on a goat to transfer the sins of the nation and the goat is expelled to die in the desert. Is that the kind of ritualising we are talking about here? Does that have the same mechanism?

A: It is one of the workings of the same mechanism. But one of the things which we should remember, I think this tends to be difficult for those who come from a strong biblical background. Let's remember that the Hebrew Scriptures are not archaic religion. The Hebrew Scriptures are themselves an enormous advance on archaic religion. In other words, there is present in them already a detection of the scapegoat mechanism such that they begin to turn it around and it becomes the victim who is the innocent one. Which you get in the Cain and Abel story as opposed to the Romulus and Remus equivalent where you have the twins - one of whom kills the other so as to found the city and of course, the god rewards that - you get to be the founder.

So let's remember that already, even the sacrificial rites of the first temple, in which certainly it was two ovines that were slaughtered. There was one that stood in for the Lord, which was the one actually killed. So there were two sheep or goats. The first one was killed because it was the one that stood in for the Lord. The high priest was understood to be the temporary incarnation or emanation, if you like, of the Lord, hence wearing the helmet or the turban with the "name" on it. And gave his life to cover his people. Now that's already showing a savvy about turning around the victimary sense of ancient human sacrifice. It is an extraordinary step.

And in that sense what Jesus was doing was quite literally instantiating fully that - he didn't need the lamb to instantiate himself because this was the Lord in person giving himself. He says, "Ok, up until now it has been the dress rehearsal - it's been a guy in costume and a lamb. Now it is me giving himself. This is what the whole dress rehearsal has been leading up to." So I think what's good about Girard's understanding is that it permits a much less anti-Semitic reading of this because if all you have in your basic anthropology is the Hebrew Scripture you tend to see the Hebrew Scripture as the "bad-old" and the New Testament as the "good-new." Whereas in fact what I think we are learning to see is the recognition of what an extraordinary advance the Hebrew was out of

the “bad-old” and how much closer to its sacrificial roots was the Christian fulfilment of things which are absolutely present in the Hebrew text.

So, for instance, the lamb that stands in for Yahweh in the scapegoat mechanism from Leviticus and the lamb that stands in for Azazel - one that is cast out. And what you get in the New Testament is that Jesus is both of these simultaneously. Because he is both the lamb that is being slaughtered and it is outside the city - he is taken outside the city. So yes, these things in the case of the New Testament are quite consciously brought together. But it's, if you like, the icing on the cake but a huge amount of the cake is a Hebrew cake.

Q: So that recognition of the victim, exposing the scapegoat mechanism, that's unique to the biblical narrative is it? Those kind of progressive revelations towards this?

A: Yes, there are isolated moments of it in other places and Girard in later life began to study some of the Vedas to see how savvy the priests were becoming about what was really going on when they were sacrificing. So yes, there are moments of insight. There are moments of insight in some of the Greek tragedians as well. It's as if they could almost see something and then shy away from it because they see how devastating it would be. Once you've realised that your culture depends on people agreeing to do something that is in fact wrong, it is quite a frightening thing to realise. So actually, that's one of the beautiful things about Girard's reading of some of the Greek tragedians and one of his followers reading of Virgil's *Aeneid*, in the same way. It's an extraordinary insight because you can actually see Virgil coming so damn close to seeing what's going on in the foundation of Rome and what this means to his city and standing back as if in despair from wanting to take it further.

So yes, you get hints of it in other places, but nothing like the progressive picture which you get through the Hebrew narratives. With, of course, many ups and downs in them. But you definitely, I mean, there is unquestionably a movement between, let us say, the Cain and Abel story through the Psalms, some of the Wisdom literature, Job for instance, Isaiah and above all, the Servant Songs and so forth in Isaiah, where it is starting to become crystal clear what is going on.

Q: But it really is the gospels - it is the cross - where the veil is lifted and “this is what is happening.”

A: Yes. Think of the cross as the 3D acting out of what has been hinted at all along and has gradually been coming into closer and closer focus. So that it's not, in a sense, an additional thing. It's the whole mechanism revealed as such

and shown to be nothing to do with God. I think that this is the huge shock for St Paul of the recognition of where Deuteronomy says: “Cursed is the one who hangs from a tree” and the recognition that actually makes God curse God. And that means that the whole system was wrong. It was a system of goodness that was wrong. But if there hadn’t been a system it wouldn’t have become visible - what was wrong. So it is not simply knocking it all out. It’s saying: “It goes so far but actually it ends up killing the righteous one. It ends up killing God.” So, hence his extraordinary understanding of how the whole thing has to be turned on its head. You have the law - the law is fine. Leave it be. It’s actually desire that is the key factor in this. As we are given a new desire that we become a new creation.

Q: So for those who have grown up in the evangelical background, the cross was a place where a kind of spiritual transaction took place. So we see sin and death were absorbed, God’s wrath was averted, forgiveness was given, the devil was defeated. Are none of those things compatible with what you’re proposing?

A: Yes, they are all compatible with it because they are all true. But you have to understand who is sacrificing whom to whom. That’s the key. That’s the key question. In the penal substitution some version of God needing some blood to be shed in order to assuage his either real or potential wrath against humanity that has fallen or sinned. And Jesus being, as it were the guy, who turns up and says: “I’ll do it - I’ll pay the price.” And that means being zapped by God instead of humanity being zapped by God. In other words: “I will be the lightning conductor.”

But this understanding - it is the other way around. Yes, there is a group that needs wrath assuaging - it’s us. We are the people who tend to maintain our peace by casting the “someone” out and that very shortly after doing that we have to do it again because our wrath - the threat of rivalry - keeps going. That what we have in the crucifixion is God saying: “Actually, I will come into the midst of your game. I will enter that place of shame, of agony. The place where you cast out other people. The place which the accuser has set up - the accuser being the whisperer behind the lynch. And I will undo his power by showing that actually, it is the innocent one that you have killed.”

So the accuser has been thrown down. That’s what it says, straightforwardly. The accuser of the brethren has been cast down.

“I’ll do that. What does my love look like? My love looks like: my stepping into that place so as to get you out of this bloody scratched disk that is going around and around and around playing the same game.” Bloody in both senses. Over

and over again. Please understand that this is not a non-violent understanding of the crucifixion - you couldn't have a non-violent understanding of the crucifixion - but it's an understanding of the crucifixion that attributes no violence to God. It says, yes, there is some violence to this equation, and it is us. The whole purpose behind it being how somebody utterly non-violent shows love for us so that we are able to share God's non-violent life.

Q: It is technically an atonement theory? because it doesn't make us right with God. It is kind of making us right with each other.

A: And that's what making us right with God means. Well, if you actually read the gospel there is no such thing as being reconciled with God that is not being reconciled with your brother. In Matthew's gospel - perfectly straightforward: "If you have something against your brother, leave your sacrifice at the altar, go and make peace with him first and then come and offer you sacrifice." In other words, there is absolutely no way to be reconciled with God that isn't being reconciled with your brother. That's the only thing ... because actually this is not an ego trip for God. God doesn't need to be worshipped. What God wants is for us to learn how to be happy together. It seems a bizarre thing to say, but it is perfectly clear in the New Testament.

God doesn't come and say: "First of all worship me and then see if you can sort out your silly little squabbles." It's: "You will never learn who you really are until you stop fighting with each other and demeaning each other and pushing each other down. I want to show you that I don't hold any of that against you. But now let's see if we can do something bigger and better." That's what being reconciled with God looks like.

Q: How have these insights affected your understanding of who God is and how you relate to him?

A: Well, it means that God isn't a bore. It means sins isn't very important. Because of course, in the old model sin, as you explained, is hugely important. In fact, sin as it were is God. It is the figure around which everyone dances because they have got to put it right. But in this account sin is a problem for us. It is very easy for God to forgive sins. God is not bothered in that sense. God is only bothered by it in as far as it diminishes us. The whole purpose of the gospel is that we have been forgiven: now what are we going to do with it? So it becomes a much more interesting story. Sin is not such an interesting thing.

I think, again, it enabled us to understand the death-less-ness, the alive-ness of God which is not troubled by death. Because, after all, that's the account of the gospel. In the gospel the great thing is the triumph over death, rather than the triumph over sin. Sin is mentioned. But death is the last thing. And the whole purpose of this is Jesus showing us that death need not run us. We no longer need to have our lives run by fear of death.

Again, the epistle to the Hebrews, is says, perfectly clear (I can't quote the verse exactly but words to the effect of): "He set them free from the fear of death for the devil would have kept them under tribulation for so many centuries ..." (Hebrews 2:15 ed. note) or words to that effect. Exactly that, yes. Once you see that someone can occupy the place of shame, hatred, curse, damnation without being run by that from the inside. Saying; "Yes, I can be here, and you can be here also. And you needn't be run by it." Well this is what the gift of faith does. Well, death is not a concern therefore I can live to the maximum and try to make sure that I am able to do the things, for instance, for which if I were frightened I wouldn't be able to do - like stand up for justice, or for inconvenient people or for whatever - because I am no longer frightened of being thrown out with them.

Whereas before I would need to join up with the "good" guys to make sure the finger didn't alight on me. So that's the difference it makes. For me it is a completely revolutionary picture of how the gospel actually is good news. Rather than, a moralistic message that one has somehow got to adhere to, in order to be good in a very narrow and frightened world.

Q: And do we see the transforming effect of the cross then as we look from the cross onwards? As we look at the cross and we see the scapegoat mechanism exposed and we understand the victim - how is that transforming us?

A: Well again, I think St Paul explains this beautifully. He talks about how God has made this manifest through Jesus Christ. So that those who believe in this are justified. The moment that you understand that the cast-out-one, the one who is rejected, damned, in the place of shame - rather than being an object of contempt and all that - is in fact what God's goodness looks like. As it were, being prepared to occupy that place. In other words, us at our very worse, the place that we are so damn frightened to occupy that we will put anyone else there. Once you see that's what God looks like - well nothing that you or I have done really matters. So you start to be able to relax. And say: "Yes, I don't need to try to be good. (In good Protestant language) I'm justified by faith through grace, or by grace through faith (whatever the formulation is)." Which means, I can perceive that's what goodness looks like, so I don't need to worry about

whether I'm being good. And the less I'm worried about how I'm being good curiously the more chance that I might actually do some good. Because I will have lost the worry about myself and the need to prove myself right and the need to be in competition with other people, etc, etc.

So actually the possibility of love and all that, and justification, flows from the recognition that the whole world of good and bad is no longer terribly important. Now I can discover what it means to be a son or daughter of God alongside other brothers and sisters who are in a similar journey.

Q: Yet churches are still rife with rivalry, aren't they? With factions and it is not uncommon for the leaders of one tradition or denomination to be scapegoated by another. What practices might we personally and communally engage to keep this understanding in our minds to sort of sharpen our awareness of mimetic desire, scapegoating.

A: That is a very good question, one that I wish I was better at answering. I mean one part of me wants to say that if we don't realise when we celebrate mass that we are participating in receiving the generosity from the crucified and risen Lord in the form of his body and his blood, in other words, we are participating in a certain sacrificial undoing of sacrifice, if you like. If we don't realise that then ... rather like God said to (the rich man in the parable of Lazarus) "If Moses and the prophets ... you have them to tell you and you didn't pay attention ..."

So I don't know. One of the things I would say that is certainly true this is not something that any amount of asceticism (asceticism) can sort out, by nature. We are talking about eruptions of grace into the midst of our sorry cycle of violence. We can learn to create moments of grace within them. We can learn to do countercultural things so when there are particular build ups of hatred against particular groups, might be Muslims, might be gay people, might be Jews, might be African immigrants, whatever it might be. To create protective cordons in some way - and that has happened in some places. But it is that kind of thing. It's like the protestant villagers in Vichy France who hid how many - hundreds or maybe thousands - of Jews right under the noses of the Gestapo ... this is very rare. But it happens.

So it is remembering that's the kind of world that actually we do live in. And that's the kind of thing that actually we have to do.

Q: James thanks so much for your time today ...