

Certificates and Sacrifices

The road to Alexishafen is paved with broken corral gravel, sometimes. It winds its way across little creeks, through coconut plantations and beside sago palm swamps. I lived there about 40 years ago in a shack alongside that road. I never got to Alexishafen but a story told to me of an incident that took place previous to my arrival has stayed with me for 37 years.....

The podium was filled with all the dignitaries that could and were able to gather that day. The main event for some – the dedication of the first massive bamboo and thatch cathedral of the Catholic Church – was over. The senior Archbishop presided over the ceremonies. The highest official of the Government, the District Commissioner, was there with all the chiefs and heads of clans for miles around.

The master of ceremonies was about to bring the official part to a close. The Archbishop would thank everyone for coming, say the benediction and offer thanks for the massive feast waiting to be devoured.

Out of the crowd three men advanced towards the front of the podium. They walked cautiously but quickly. The hush of those who were “in the know” seemed to quieten the masses. There was a sense that something unscheduled was about to begin.

The man in the centre could be seen from a good distance to be quite nervous. The District Commissioner's sensibilities were alerted to prepare for a shock.

Suddenly, the man in the centre was laid on his back and held down by the man on his left. The man on his right produced a large knife previously concealed. Without hesitation he thrust the knife towards the reclining man's throat and opened a deep wound from ear to ear.

Almost robotically having had many an experience of seeing fatal wounds inflicted by tribal peoples on each other, the District Commissioner was out of his chair shouting to his driver and, within what seemed to be an instant in time, he was down that road, where I had lived, speeding towards the Madang District Hospital. The poor man was confirmed to be dead on arrival. According to the record after many days of enquiry, it was discovered that the victim was expected to rise from the dead in three days. He would then lead his people into the knowledge of how to obtain materialistic goods from the white man's world. Cargo cultism still gripped the minds of most of the tribes in the Madang province. Cargo cultists are preoccupied with materialism. They believe that everything comes from the spirit world: babies, goods called cargo, knowledge, life, everything, even the bad things from bad spirits that need to be appeased. Apparently, the white man had cracked the code on how to obtain the cargo that was destined for the Madang District villagers. They were sure that all these goods – houses, cars, trucks, etc – were rightfully theirs, but, through obtaining some secret power or knowledge, the whites were able to intercept them and take the cargo for themselves.

They were convinced that it was the white man's Jesus who had given them this power and that what was needed was a tribal Jesus. They chose a good man - one known throughout the clans as a model person, known for his kindness and goodness according to tribal standards.

This was his tribe's moment. There had never been a gathering like it before. It was not likely that such a moment would happen again for a long time. It was highly unlikely that it would be possible to get the extremely divided tribes' vote of confidence about one person again. This was their fullness of time.

It is this last comment in the telling of the story that had stuck with me. The Fullness of Time.

What constitutes this moment? What criteria were in place to say this about the coming of Jesus: "In the fullness of time, God brought forth His Son" (Gal 4:4)?

How did those very simple living people with their horrific presuppositions, yet for them beautifully clear logic, come to the conclusion that this was the gathered tribes' "fullness of time", their moment in history?

"This was a repeat of Jerusalem", the answer came from the storyteller. All the political, religious and social systems were fully represented. Similar ducks all in a row mixed with the mystery and magic of the spirit world.

For the Apostle Paul, the Jerusalem moment was not a mixture of mystery and magic. To the Apostle, this was a moment when mystery was taken away. This was an open show (Col 2:15).

I've often wondered, why was the first Century AD chosen to be the "Fullness of Time?". Why not before? Or later? Perhaps the 21st Century? In Texas where the death penalty is carried out with an injection - civilized, clean, no blood, no noise and in private?

Is there some dark side to God that requires the blood, noise and lots of pain? Do

centuries of blood flowing from bulls and goats form a clear enough shadow of what the Father was to expect of Jesus?

Was the Father waiting for the human race to evolve sufficiently to produce such a violent civilisation as that of Rome in order to satisfy His blood lust and huge anger towards sinners?

It could be debated that He may have gotten more satisfaction from the Chaldeans. One could argue that the Vikings would be excellent candidates as well.

Jesus prophesied to His disciples that He would be handed over into the hands of evil men and that they would do with Him as they pleased. The Chaldeans would have skinned him alive. The Vikings would have dragged him naked across ice and snow.

I've been talking to a friend for over 30 years about the Story of God. I'm afraid that the first few years of our dialogue were laced with heavy doses of punitive justice ideas from me. Recently, she blew up in my face. She's now 83. "I will never have anything to do with a God who is preoccupied with sin and blood".

"Whose sin are you worried about" I asked. "Yours?" Her silence indicated that my question had been given a response.

"Well". Said I, "He doesn't hold your sins against you". "What?" She had never heard anything like it before, least of all from me.

I read to her from 2 Cor 5:19: "God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not counting our sins against us". "Are you part of the human race" I asked. "Now don't take yourself out of the human race either as a special or hopeless case," I interjected, before she could answer. "Well, what about all the blood and guts of those terrible Jewish sacrifices, and that ghastly movie made by that extremely violent man....what's

his name?Gibson". "What's that all about?"

"Good questions" I enthused.

It has always been a point to be clarified for me. What is there in God that needs to be satisfied? Is this His pre-requisite before forgiveness can be made available? Didn't He originate the plan and commit to the processes relating to reconciliation before there was even a relationship breakdown? The Godhead decided on the forgiveness plan before humans were created and before they ever sinned. How can the Originator and Source of forgiveness suddenly have some huge reservations that can only be taken away by such hideous violence? That psychological profile could only be assessed as bipolar, extremely schizophrenic.

Some would offer even a worse explanation...like God planned that humans would fail so that the only way to relationship with Him was through His redemptive process that required the satisfaction of His wrath against sinners.

Jesus was to become the Father's punching bag.

God did actually give us the power to reject Him, but not the permission or approval. For us to participate in His reality, to enjoy relationship with Him and live relationally as He does, we had to be designed with the capacity to voluntarily give our responses of love out of liberty and the depth of our distinctiveness. The downside of this empowerment is the risk of rebellion and all its darkness. Without the risk, no freedom, no volunteerism, no love, from us. The best is that we would be magnificently designed, yet totally pre-programmed robots. Offering conformity, but not worship with genuine love and affection.

The bad news is that the downside happened. The amazing news is that the initiators of this wonderful story have given themselves as real participants in the solution to reconcile us and restore us to fellowship free from condemnation or accusation.

I said to my friend, “ The Scripture says that those who say that they have no sin are liars”. “By what standards? She pouted. “By what standards would you prefer?” I appealed. “Sharia law?where you could be stoned if your husband accuses you of adultery?” “Hindu law? ... where you could be drenched in gasoline and set alight, simply because your husband’s family have judged you unacceptable and rejection-able?” “Perhaps tribal law is better?....What tribe? And in what era? The Maya, the Inca, the Sawi? Or maybe by some ancient tribe that has captured you during a battle?”

“What if we put all the standards together and then bring a judgement against your behaviour?” “Oh my, aren’t we thrilled that we live in the enlightened and liberal era of the 21st Century?”

It is not Yahweh who is hungry for blood but the demonically inspired masses and individuals throughout the centuries who have tried to satisfy their lust for revenge without fulfillment. The rage continues today. ‘Where are your accusers?’ Jesus asked the woman caught in adultery. “Neither do I condemn you”. This, spoken in the face of the law of Moses that clearly identified stoning as the required punishment according to the accusers.

What about the systems that would investigate and accuse us as well as individual accusers. What shall we call the record of these accusations? Col 2:15 (NASV) calls them ‘Certificates’ or the written code with its regulations. The Romans had them, the Jews had them, and Herod had his, particularly when it was convenient to condemn somebody. The traffic cops in Australia have them.

What standards came to bear down on Jesus? He was innocent and yet he was condemned by all their systems. To God, these systems and the civilisation that existed,

are representative of the total of what human penal justice would demand. I say 'representative', not an exact measure, as it is the one who was condemned that makes this whole act representative.

It is His life, applied as a substitute for us all and a substitute for all that can be certificated against us that makes this to be the moment that it is.

That is just what it is - a moment in space and time when all converges in to this life - the One who spoke the worlds into existence and He through whom all things came into being. This was the time in the mind of the Father, Son and Spirit, that the gathered assembly of accusers, through the life of His Son, could become sufficiently representative of what all of humanity could offer as a standard into which the innocent Son of God be placed to carry the weight of the total volume of the certificates that could be written against us (Col 2:14). He bears also the effect of the regulations attached to the certificates.

I asked my friend, "Who could write certificates against you?" God is not writing any. He is taking the certificates against you upon Himself.... nailing them to the Cross. They were torn up in His body and are therefore cancelled out. "He has taken all my certificates?" she asked in amazement. "Yes," I said, "that is what it says - all of them".

It does not matter in which era you live, by what standards you are accused or even how severe the consequences or the punishment. They have been torn up.

When the systems could not get better or worse

When they could not be more united over a single issue

When the Fullness of Time had come and the issue of the written codes in the hands of

our accusers had been settled in the Cross, God raised Jesus from the dead. So now He can declare us forgiven without the possibility of some accuser nullifying God's work of reconciliation.

Oh yes, we still have to face the court of today with their regulations and take the consequences if accused correctly, but heaven declares us to be forgiven in Christ.

“What about all the blood?” she asked. The desire for blood is in the heart of the accusers. God made it quite clear to Abraham His friend that he was not like the blood-thirsty gods of the nations.

Some required infant or child sacrifice. Yahweh was not demanding sacrifice. It is a revengeful spirit that demands sacrifice. It is an accusing spirit that convinces us that a sacrifice is needed. Yahweh is the only one who sacrifices Himself in order that the accuser has no more power through accusation. He made an open show of Him triumphing over him through the Cross (Col 2:15).

God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not holding our sins against us and bearing the worst consequences that the most severe combination of systems in human history could subject us to.

We were dead in our sins. Dead men walking.....losing our sense of being. Becoming non-beings. If we are to be subjected to all the punitive demands of all of history's penal codes, then we are undone. But God made us alive together with Christ and He forgave us all our sins (Col 2:13).

Forgiveness was always in the Father's heart. Now He can declare it openly without the possibility of contradiction by any accuser. In the fullness of time He made an open show of all our accusers and the powers supporting them and He triumphed over them

on our behalf. He tore up the certificates... all of them.

I am convinced that the scene in Alexishafen could have been a whole lot different had the clans understood that they had already been included and that Jesus was truly their Christ.

This is the real challenge. How many of us accept that we have been included in the generosity of His beloved Son? Or are we like the clansmen? Do we still think that there is another sacrifice to be made?