**I’ve got this. 12 Sept 2021.**

One of my great joys is when Sheila and I go out for a meal and I have left my wallet and cards at home. You ask for the bill, and when it comes, I smile at the waitress and say, “My wife will pay.”

Fortunately, over the years, Sheila has got used to this - although I don’t forget my wallet every time. It usually produces a slightly awkward smile from the waitress who is not quite sure how to take it, but Sheila is quick to defuse any embarrassment and shares in the joke.

Picking up the tab is what I said I was going to speak about this morning - so I will.

The importance of this subject cannot be underestimated, because the whole of the Christian doctrine of redemption hangs on the issue of Jesus taking the punishment due to us for our sins.

First of all, it is extremely uncomfortable to be even talking in theological terms about ‘sins’. What are sins, for heaven’s sake? In a [religious](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Religion) context, **sin** is a transgression against [divine law](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Divine_law). Each [culture](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Culture) has its own interpretation of what it means to commit a sin. While sins are generally considered actions, any thought, word, or act considered immoral, selfish, shameful, harmful, or alienating might be termed “sinful”.

The Greek for the word ‘sin’ as used in the New Testament is ‘hamartia’, From it we get the medical term, ‘hamartoma’, which literally means a ‘fault’ or ‘defect’, and is usually a benign tumour or swelling - growth, if you prefer. I say usually benign, because although they do not metastasize - produce secondary growths - they can, due to their size or position, be lethal.

Enough medicine for now. Sin is a word we instantly associate with guilt, and that makes us feel very uncomfortable or even angry, as we say to ourselves (or I say to myself) ‘Why should I feel guilty about going over the speed limit? There’s no-one around and it’s a clear, dry day, and what’s 90 or even 100 kph on an empty 80 kph road matter?’ I know I am not alone in this.

Dealing with guilt is one of the things that secular people say is pathognomonic of religion - ‘all religion does is fill people with guilt and ruin their lives.’ Well, that’s true - if you let it. But what the humanists, the agnostics, the atheists, the ‘don’t-give-a-damn’ folks have overlooked is that they, too, deal with guilt in their everyday lives, but probably without realizing it.

Let’s take a really small example; suppose that you borrow a book from a friend and then lose it - or you borrow their car and scrape it; you might reasonably feel bad about it - unless you are a sociopath, in which case you simply don’t give a damn. You might also reasonably apologize for trashing the car or losing the book and offer to make amends for it. This might take the simple form of replacing the book or paying for the repairs to the car. But the effect is the same in that it puts you and your friend back on the same page. That means being in agreement with, or ‘at one’ with - which, if we make that confluent - ‘atone’. It is a ‘making-right-again’ activity.

But what on earth has Jesus’ death got to do with me? That is the big question for so many of us. How can a man who lived 2,000 plus years ago have any bearing on my faults or screw-ups?

Before I go into that discussion, let me remind you that not only did Jesus **live** 2,000 plus years ago, but he also **died** 2,000 plus years ago.

Why he died is not so difficult to work out. He deliberately set out to contradict and antagonise the established Jewish religious hierarchy; in fact, he didn’t have a single good word to say about them, referring to them as hypocrites, vipers, snakes, whitewashed tombs, open graves, blind guides - whose teachings led people to death and not life. You don’t get invited to too many birthday parties with those sorts of opinions.

The Jewish nation was looking for a messiah - a military leader who would break the yoke of Roman oppression and occupation - but Jesus just didn’t fit the bill. He was a trouble-maker all right, but he had no interest in confronting the Romans. Nevertheless, the Jewish Sanhedrin - the highest court of justice in ancient Israel - was not about to be challenged by some weird itinerant preacher, whose following was getting difficult to ignore. But the Sanhedrin needed the Roman government to pass the death sentence on Jesus, as they were not allowed to - hence the false accusations - that Jesus was trying to cause an insurrection by suggesting he was setting himself up against Caesar by claiming that he was a king. Time and again Jesus explains patiently to Pilate that that is not his aim, and that his kingdom is ‘not of this world’. Pilate, of course, doesn’t have any idea what he is talking about.

But timing is everything in history - whether it be the wrong sort of climate conditions for an invasion, or a message not quite getting through to stop a cavalry charge, or a coincidental festival - as at Jesus’ mock trial coinciding with the Feast of the Passover - but Jesus knew that the custom was that a prisoner be released at Passover, and also that with the crowd infiltrated by paid stooges from the temple to incite the people, it wouldn’t go his way.

He knew he had to die - for no way else could he be the final, one, true, full, perfect and sufficient sacrifice and oblation (that’s a peace offering to God) for the sins or mistakes or misdeeds of the whole world.

You and I may not have done deeds worthy of the death penalty, but many in this world have, and as the old Jewish Law stated in Exodus, Leviticus and Deuteronomy; ‘life shall be taken for life.’ So Jesus - if he was to pay the ultimate penalty - had to die.

It might have been okay for Jesus to pick up the tab for you writing off your friend’s car, but that wouldn’t pay for the mass murderer or child rapist. The gospel talks about redemption, which means the action of regaining or gaining possession of something in exchange for payment, or clearing a debt.

It is like having an unknown benefactor who bails you out of prison, or clears your overdraft. That would be amazing enough, but to do a prison sentence for you - or even stand in your place on the scaffold or at the guillotine, is going way beyond anything we can imagine. That is why Jesus said, ‘Greater love has no man than this - that a man lay down his life for his friends’.

But he went even further - he laid down his life for his enemies, saying, ‘Forgive them, Father, for they know not what they do.’

So why should that have any impact on you and me, now, in 2021? Because the man who said it is still around us in Spirit. He did not stay dead. Oh yes, people will ‘poo-poo’ this and say that men do not rise from the dead - and I would have to say that in my experience that is true. Those that I have seen both dying and dead, once gone - stay gone - from their physical bodies at least.

But where the scoffers come unstuck is when you ask them to explain the behaviour of the disciples 3 days after Jesus had been pulled off the cross and laid into a tomb, sealed with a heavy stone and guarded by temple soldiers to prevent anyone making off with the body.

If you believe in the Resurrection - and you have no reason to call yourself a Christian unless you do - then the impact of that event continues to resonate around the world as fresh as if it were yesterday. That’s what is so exciting - ordinary people’s lives are being changed by the power of the Holy Spirit, which Jesus sent to us at Pentecost, every day. Today we welcome Christine who has been feeling the nudging of the universal energy, the power, the Spirit of God gently pushing her towards exploring baptism. What a fantastic thing to happen! Don’t say to me that God is not working in His or Her world today - the power and glory of the Holy Spirit continues to work every day and every night. When you cannot sleep and cannot think what is on your mind, be like Samuel; the Lord had to call him 3 times before Eli realized what was happening and why the boy couldn’t sleep. Say, like Samuel, ‘Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.’

What Jesus did by dying on the cross was to put right - to atone for - to gain absolution for our mess-ups, our whispering sins (as the metaphysical poet, John Donne, called them), and our major mistakes or even crimes. He took the fall and picked up the **whole tab for all of us** - the worst along with those who only nicked a stick of chewing gum.

His resurrection allows us access to his holy and life-giving Spirit, which, as he told us - is what God is; ‘God is Spirit’, he told us in John 4, ‘and you must worship him in Spirit and in truth.’

Now you understand a bit more about what Jesus did in those rather religious-sounding words of atonement and redemption, it does mean that you don’t have to go around with a face like a shovel and looking gloomy, as if you were carrying the weight of the world on your shoulders - Jesus’ sacrifice absolves you of your sins and faults, and means that you don’t have to lug around a guilty conscience - with one caveat, one condition; you have to accept Jesus’ sacrifice as your own - or you do not get to break the chains that bind you. Only accepting Jesus into your life can achieve that freedom - otherwise you are just fooling yourself and continuing in a paradise of self-deception. What accepting Jesus means is allowing the Holy Spirit to change you.

What that change will bring - I’ll tell you next time, because accessing universal energy is to come to a tiny little beginning of realization of what God might be. No-one has the answer - that is why God is mystery; if God was not mystery, He would be certainty - and then He would instantly explicable, containable, and be way too small.

God is in the same way the energy is and needs to be respected in the same way.

In the same way that the Spirit of God changes us, so different forms of energy change our lives…something to think about before next Sunday.