

Article reprinted from *Cross+Way Issue Summer 2005 No. 97*

(C)opyright Church Society; material may be used for non-profit purposes provided that the source is acknowledged and the text is not altered.

## THE FINISHED WORK OF CHRIST - JEROME AND THE ROOTS OF CATHOLIC ERROR

By Dennis Peterson

It is made devastatingly clear in *The Heavenly Session of Our Lord*, by A.J.Tait (published by Robert Scott, 1912), that Catholic Tradition which has dominated modern Anglicanism, springs from serious mistranslations in Jerome's Vulgate. Tait very thoroughly examines Jerome's Latin translation of the Bible and shows that his erroneous renderings in Hebrews were: 'in no small measure responsible for the development of the mediaeval conception of a continual propitiatory offering, whether by Christ Himself in the heavenly sanctuary, or by Christ through His priests at the altars on earth.' (p. 109).

In brief, concerning references in Hebrews to Christ's offering for sin, Jerome translated the Greek aorist that expresses a single event, usually in the past, by the continuous present. Since the Vulgate was the only version of the New Testament available to the West *for over a thousand years*, its errors took deep root. Thus it was believed that Christ is in this age continuously offering His sacrifice in heaven. That erroneous belief was extolled by such influential writers as Bicknell on the Articles and Dix on the liturgy, and was expressed liturgically in the A.S.B and currently in the Communion services in *Common Worship*.

Having discovered the immense effect on Church doctrine of Jerome's mistranslations, I searched for some discussion of Jerome and the Vulgate in popular Church Histories. Almost all the books completely ignored Jerome. The one that gave him any attention only mentioned his influence on monasticism. Yet it can be shown that Catholic Tradition is the fruit of eleven hundred years of exclusive dependence on the errors of Jerome's Vulgate. The ignorance of this scenario is almost universal; one colleague of mine was of the opinion that Catholic Tradition was the 'the wisdom of the ages,' I am afraid that sadly this is not the case.

The eclipse of Greek by Latin as the *lingua franca* of the West had made the New Testament increasingly inaccessible. Pope Damasus asked his secretary Jerome to translate the whole Bible into Latin and it was published in AD382. It has been authoritatively described as 'perfunctory' and 'capricious' with many 'eccentricities' (*The Cambridge Greek New Testament for Schools and Colleges: Mark*).

In over twenty places he translated the word '*metanoia*' as 'do penance' instead of 'repent' but it was his errors in Hebrews that changed the Gospel message in the Holy Communion.

For example:

Hebrews 10: 12 *But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, "he sat down at the right hand of God,"* (NRSV)

Was translated by Jerome as

'*But this man offering (continuous present) one sacrifice for sins, for ever sitteth etc.*'

The Greek New Testament was soon lost to the West, so for eleven hundred years (a vast stretch of time roughly equal to the period from Alfred the Great to the present day), the only New Testament available was in the Vulgate.

Consequently, for over a millennium the Churches believed uncritically that in heaven, Christ is continually offering for our sins. It is easy to see how, as Tait shows, this deeply influenced thinking about Holy Communion, moving people to integrate it with Christ's alleged heavenly offering.

The problem Anglican Catholics face is the one that the Council of Trent found unsolvable: how to reconcile the original Scripture and the Vulgate-based Tradition. The Roman Catholics cut the knot by rejecting Scripture as a source of authority in favour of that Tradition. This problem for Anglican Catholics applies particularly to the Epistle to the Hebrews where Jerome's errors are the root of the Catholic Tradition of Eucharistic theology.

In spite of the fact that the death of Christ is referred to as a finished work some twenty-two times in the Epistle, (1: 3 & 13; 2: 9, 10 & 14; 3:11; 4: 1, 3 & 9; 5: 9; 7: 27; 8: 12, 14, 25 & 28; 10: 2, 10, 12, 14 & 18 and 12: 2), tortuous attempts are made to show that it was not.

Many references could be given from the rest of the New Testament teaching that the work of Christ was finished at Calvary, but high on the list must be Mark 10: 45. *For the Son of Man did not come to be ministered unto but to minister and to give his life a ransom for many.* A ransom, or redemption, was secured by the price being paid once when the subject in jeopardy was then permanently freed.

It has been suggested that since God is outside time, the offering of Christ at Calvary, though in the past to us, could be eternally in the present with God. On that basis it is legitimate for us to consider Christ as now offering His atonement to the Father, and we can shape our liturgy to express that belief.

In the first place, according to this suggestion, although God has expressly said that the offering of Christ was finished at Calvary, theology can explain God's directive away to accommodate the view that it wasn't finished at Calvary. That principle certainly has a Biblical precedent. It was called 'Corban.' God expressly said that a man was to honour his father and mother, but theology reasoned that since God is far greater than father or mother, then if a man dedicated his property on his death to God, he no longer had a responsibility to his parents. In both cases the Word of God is made of 'non effect' by tradition.

In the second place, one can see no motive for this devious justification of the error of continual offering except to preserve the corrupt form of the Eucharist now in such vogue; that is a God-ward movement and offering, in defiance of the fact that the Bible says its direction is downward to us and is a proclamation not an offering!

In Dix's *The Shape of the Liturgy*, the Work of Christ on Calvary's Cross is relegated to being the mere preliminary to the provision of the Eucharist. Thus Dix said: concerning '...the atonement and reconciliation achieved by the sacrifice of Christ. It is important to observe that they are all here predicated not of the passion as an event in the past but of the *present* offering of the eucharist.' (*The Shape of the Liturgy*, p.243).

The extremely serious issue that arises with Jerome based Tradition, is that it strikes at the very heart of the New Covenant, the experience of being saved and at the core of the Eucharist. Applying the prophecy of Jer. 31: 31 - 34 concerning the New Covenant, the writer says:

*The Holy Spirit also testifies to us about this. First he says: "This is the covenant I will make with them after that time, says the Lord. I will put my laws in their hearts and I will write them on their minds. Then he adds: "Their sins and lawless acts I will remember no more." **And when these have been forgiven, there is no longer any offering (prosphora) for sin.** Heb. 10: 15- 18.*

In the earliest account of the Last Supper, 1 Cor. 11: 25, the Lord said, '*This cup is the new covenant in my blood.*' Without possibility of question, Christ was applying Jeremiah 31: 31 - 34 to the Last Supper and its proclamation of His death. The like passages in the Synoptics, although the word 'new' is not in the best MMS, can only refer to the prophecy of Jeremiah. What other covenant could possibly be in mind?

Clinging to the Vulgate based Tradition, Dix and Bicknell denigrate the Lord's greatest work by teaching that sins are perpetually being remembered, that Calvary is not complete and we can only be sure of forgiveness up to the last time we received Communion.

Continual offering, by definition not complete, was the character and failing of the Old Testament offerings, for they '...can never, by the same sacrifices repeated endlessly ...make perfect those who draw near to worship.' Heb. 10: 1.

The fruit of Christ's sacrifice as a finished work, is that as Christ sat down at the right hand of God, so also the forgiven sinner is saved and enters the Rest of Hebrews ch.4, fulfilling Christ's invitation, 'Come unto me all you who are weary and burdened and I will give you rest'. Is the experience of being saved through complete and eternal forgiveness, which is clearly and graciously proclaimed in the New Testament message of Christ's death, a common experience of those under Catholic Tradition? I have been told more than once that it is presumptuous to say one is saved.

Article XIX places as a mark of the visible Church of Christ the preaching of the '*pure Word of God,*' thus excluding the adulteration of Scripture by mixing it with Tradition. The Church of England Prayer Book of 1552 expressed the New Testament teaching on the Communion, closely returning to the example and commands of the Lord and His apostles. Thus the words of Christ concerning the bread and wine in the 1552 Book are rehearsed simply as a prayer before communion.

Following Archbishop Laud, the 1662 revision misleadingly entitled this prayer, *The Prayer of Consecration*, ignoring Hooker's demonstration of the fact that the Lord who commanded 'Do this,' gave the disciples unconsecrated bread and wine! (*Ecclesiastical Polity, Bk.V. ch. lxvii.6*)

The only explanations of the Communion in the New Testament are that it proclaims the Lord's death to us (1 Cor. 11: 26, there using the downward prefix *kata*) and that it expresses the unity of the congregation, (1 Cor. 10: 16).

I was brought up in the tradition where confirmation candidates are told wonderful things about the Eucharist, but when they at last receive the Wafer—nothing happens! Many are disillusioned thinking either that they are not good enough for it to 'take', or else there is 'nothing in it.'

There are many lay people, perhaps the majority, who sincerely look to the consecrated Wafer as the ground of their standing with God and the means of receiving spiritual help. To them the death of Christ is inevitably relegated to the background as it is in many of the much-revered books on the subject. In the New Testament the death of Christ is the only source from which forgiveness and life

are to be appropriated: 'We preach Christ crucified...the power of God and the wisdom of God.' (1 Cor. 1:23 - 24.)

If Church historians had looked objectively at Jerome and the Vulgate, Catholic Tradition would surely have been completely rejected and Eucharistic liturgy would point away from the elements to the death of Christ under Pontius Pilate as the only source of grace.

The massive momentum of this error has particular seriousness since the Christian ministry is preparing people for eternity, thus we ought to take seriously the Scripture, '*We who teach will be judged more strictly.*' (Jas. 3.1)

Dennis Peterson lives in retirement in Essex and was most recently incumbent of St. Jude East Brixton.