

**On the Cross: what's God up to ... in the 89th minute
SPH. Monday in Holy Week.**

I'm not much of a football fan, but one thing that has struck me when watching news reports of matches is how often I seem to hear something about a late substitution being made which results – wonder of wonders – in the winning goal being scored by the sub. And a bit of me – the bit that grew up when football was a game played by teams of 11 people, not 15 or however many it is now – thinks this feels like cheating. The team's not up to it. They're tired out. So we bring on someone fresh to make a difference.

And could God be laughing up his sleeve? Or even hers? Because here I get an echo of what it's like when you're playing a serious game with someone who suddenly awards bonus points you didn't know were on offer.

So, you see, it's like this. There we are: the whole human race, struggling to get on with life, struggling to live up to the demands of God, and failing. And along comes God and laughingly kicks our struggles into touch – to mix the games.

That's a very different way of looking at it from what we hear some Christians saying. Lots of Christians take the view that our failure to live up to the demands of God is so serious that it demands nothing less than the death penalty. And Jesus pays the penalty in our place. His death on the cross substitutes for the death that is the rightful end of every human being. We are freed from the death penalty and can live with God for ever, they say, only so long as we put our faith in Jesus' substitutionary sacrifice. Crudely put, God punishes Jesus instead of us.

But is it really like that? All language about God is metaphorical. Beyond the assertion that God is (and that's a faith statement, anyway) it's not factual. When Paul says that 'For our sake God made him to be sin who knew no sin', or when he talks about the idea of ransom, the crucial point he's trying to make is that Christ liberates us from the power of sin, and this liberation – this victory, to continue the football analogy – is costly: we were bought at a price (just like footballers!) (1 Cor 6:20). And even when we admit, as we have to, that there's lots about the anger of God against sin, it's always allied with or offset by God's compassion, God's loving-kindness, God's steadfast, passionate love, for his creation and his human creatures (unlike footballers, who just get the chop).

Let us therefore adore the God who loves us so much that he's prepared to pay the cost of liberation.

So what's God up to? Well: let's briefly anticipate the end of this week. Never forget that the cross is only half the story. We wouldn't be here today if Christ dying instead of us were the end of the story – as it often seems to be told. It's only because of what God gets up to afterwards – the resurrection, God's triumphant vindication of whatever it was God was doing in Jesus – that any of these descriptions have any meaning.

Of course, we can't deny the language of substitution. And it does point to God bearing the cost of human sin. But as well shall see as this week continues, it's not the only language in the New Testament.

So thinking about the idea of the substitute, I think we should play with the idea of God coming to the rescue, rather like the 89th minute substitute (and I don't want to press this

analogy too far, because that would get us into questions about why did God wait so long in the first place – ideas which Paul wrestles with in Ephesians). What the language of the substitute is trying to say is something like ‘because of our sinful nature we owe God a debt we cannot pay’ (forgive us our debts, as the Lord’s prayer probably says). Instead Jesus jumps up from the bench and says ‘Hey let me do that’. Just when I thought I could never get it right with God, on comes this divine sub and wins the match – with no help from me, but to my eternal salvation.

Adore the God who grabs the victory for us.

At some points in my life, I’ve tended to think of the cross not in footballing terms but as a dustbin, a dustbin into which I can pour everything that’s rank and foul and rubbish in my life. Then the sub becomes the dustman who carries it all away.

And something of what that implies, and something of the surprise that the 89th minute sub entails, is caught in a wonderful passage in one of the amazing soliloquies in Zorba the Greek

I think of God as being exactly like me. Only bigger, stronger, crazier. And immortal, into the bargain. He’s sitting on a pile of soft sheep-skins and his hut’s the sky. In his right hand he holding not a knife or a pair of scales – those damned instruments are meant for butchers and grocers – no, he’s holding a large sponge full of water, like a rain cloud. On his right is Paradise, on his left is Hell. Here comes a soul; the poor little thing’s quite naked, because it’s lost its cloak – its body, I mean – and it’s shivering. God looks at it, laughing up his sleeve, but he plays the bogey man: “Come here” he roars, “come here, you miserable wretch.”

And he begins his questioning. The naked soul throws itself at God’s feet. “Mercy!” it cries. “I have sinned,” And away it goes, reciting its sins. It recites a whole rigmarole and there’s no end to it. God thinks this is too much of a good thing. He yawns. “For heaven’s sake stop!” he shouts. “I’ve heard enough of all that!”. Flap! Slap! A wipe if the sponge, and he washes out all the sins. “Away with you, clear out, run off the Paradise!” he says to the soul. “Peterkin, let this poor little creature in, too.”

Because God, you know, is a great lord, and that’s what being a Lord means: to forgive.

The substitution isn’t about punishment and penalty. It’s about forgiveness – it’s a way that God has of showing that God is always ready to forgive because God loves, whatever the cost, whatever the time.

Adore the God who forgives and loves.

On Calvary

where love and sin are made at one:
there Christ is made all sin for us
and sinless bears the cost of sin,
that he, in meek obedience to the law of death,
might break for ever

the chain of necessary effects,
renewed by sin through sin,
till self itself accepts the task of selflessness
and love is all.