



Creation and the Cross **The Mercy of God for a Planet**

in Peril

Elizabeth Johnson

In a recent book, *Creation and the Cross, The Mercy of God for a Planet in Peril*, theologian Elizabeth Johnson addresses a topic that is very pertinent as we enter into the Easter season. In the book, Johnson contrasts a theology of atonement with a theology of accompaniment. She traces the theology of atonement (which is still dominant in Christian thought and practice) back to St Anselm who lived in the eleventh century when feudal government was the norm. Anselm was motivated to make meaning of the crucifixion of Jesus as an expression of a merciful God, truly something we all need to do. In feudal times, an offence against a high ranking person had to be addressed by another high ranking person. It follows logically that an offences against God required atonement by Jesus who had come to be recognised as sent by God for that purpose. Anselm's theology was amplified during the centuries that followed into a glorification of suffering and a narrow focus on the significance of Jesus' death as necessary to atone for our sins.

Times change, and serious questions are now raised about the kind of God who requires the death of Jesus as satisfaction for the limitations and sinfulness of God's own creation. In response to some of these issues, Johnson finds in the Hebrew Scriptures a vibrant picture of a God who is concerned for the wellbeing of all creation. The Jews lived out of this strong sense of a God who was with them during periods of great social disturbance such as they

were experiencing under Roman rule. This God does not intervene in the events of history, but is present in the land and people, sustaining them through the good times and the bad.

In Jesus the early Christian community found someone with great concern for justice and compassion, and the wellbeing of all. They found someone who challenged the norms of the cruel Roman regime, and pointed to the possibility of a time when values of concern and compassion were dominant. Jesus' contemporaries were challenged to make sense of his cruel death at the hands of the Roman government. Somehow it spurred them to greater urgency to continue to spread his message. They felt enlivened and emboldened out of a sense that Jesus was now with them in a vital and vibrant form. In keeping with Jewish tradition they felt that he had conquered and transcended death. This we now call resurrection and look toward it as fullness of life and love into the future.

This is what we celebrate in a special way during the Easter season. God, whose compassion for all of creation has been experienced through the ages, shows us in Jesus that such concern is enduring and that suffering and death are not the end of the story. God accompanies us, is with us during times of limitations, trials and joy, and holds out a promise of fullness to those who engage with God's mission.

In the words of the Easter Exultet, let us "rejoice" in this good news!

Reviewed by Mary Tinney