

ATONEMENT (AT-ONE-MENT)

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Hello, this is Jose Parappully, Salesian priest and clinical psychologist at Sumedha Centre for Psychospiritual Wellbeing at Jeolikote, Uttarakhand with another edition of Psyche & Soul.

In this edition, I present another midlife challenge: atonement.

Integrity that we explored and reflected upon in the previous podcast calls for atonement, understood as *at-one-ment*, becoming one, becoming whole.

An essential challenge here is to work through and heal from the painful feelings and experiences we have carried with us into midlife.

At-one-ment involves reconciliation - making peace with self, with others and may be also God, something that most of us find a real challenge.

Reconciliation

To experience atonement, we must come to terms first of all with guilt over our own wrong doings. We need to forgive ourselves for our foolish choices and decisions, for messing up our lives, and turning a deaf ear to the deepest longings of our soul.

We need to let go our grievances against others for the real or imagined damage they have done to us. We need to forgive and reconcile with people who we feel put us on the wrong track or stood in the way of fulfilment of our dreams.

In the pursuit of our ambitions and misplaced priorities we might have been unfaithful to our promises to others, to husbands and wives or to God as religious men and women. We are challenged to right these wrongs, forgive ourselves and others, as well as ask forgiveness. We are called to reconcile, to reach out to others and end our alienation.

Reconciliation is a challenge for most of us. Some of us are able to achieve it, some of us do not. Some of us do not want to reconcile, preferring to carry our hurt, anger and resentment, seeing our stubbornness and pride as badges of strength.

Antony and Rajan were very close friends who set up a business together. The business thrived for a few years. Then profits declined, the ledger was showing big losses. After a careful internal auditing it was discovered that Rajan had been siphoning off money on various spurious accounts. Antony was very angry and upset. He angrily confronted Rajan and resigned from the company and decided not to have anything to do with Rajan or his family. This situation went on for a quite a few years. During a spiritual retreat Antony had a conversion experience. The words of the preacher on forgiveness touched him deeply. Though painful, Antony decided to forgive Rajan and reconcile with him.

Sr. Prabha had been the principal of a higher secondary school for several years. She had worked hard to bring the school to a standard of excellence and everyone was very happy with her. Ten years after she had taken over, her Provincial wanted to give her a transfer. Her considerable talents were needed elsewhere. Prabha talked the Provincial out of it. Another three years passed. There was now a new Provincial who also decided to transfer Prabha, who tried to talk her too out of it. She shared with the new Provincial all the plans she had to take the school to still greater heights, and that there were a number of works she had initiated that needed her attention. However, the Provincial stuck to her decision. Prabha obeyed and took up her new assignment, angry and resentful. She also stopped talking to her Provincial, and continues to avoid her even now when that Provincial has finished her term of office.

Antony realized the futility of holding on to his anger and was able to let go and make peace. Prabha was unable. She is still holding on to her hurt and resentment which keeps her fragmented, splintered within herself, alienated from others. No reconciliation, no atonement, no integrity.

Acceptance

Atonement is manifest also in the greater acceptance of the paradoxes of life, between good and evil, failure and success; in the giving up of our rigid and unbending opinions, and greater openness to contrary views; in becoming more sober and less impulsive in our judgments and our behaviour; in the willingness to acknowledge and accept more easily that we have been wrong on many matters and in many situations.

Atonement is manifest in the capacity to accept and tolerate ambivalence, conflict and failure. We no longer have the compulsion to be always perfect. We become more accepting of our limitations as well as appreciating our strengths and our accomplishments.

Inclusiveness

Atonement also calls for becoming more 'catholic' - more universal, more inclusive, making space for everything and everyone in our heart, learning to cross narrow boundaries. We exclude nothing and no one, rather we embrace and include all, breaking down walls, broadening our perspectives and expanding our horizons.

This acceptance and inclusion apply also to parts of our own selves and our personal history that we have despised or rejected.

Mourning

Atonement calls for mourning. Mourning is grief over unrealized dreams and lost opportunities, foolish decisions and roads not taken. It is coming to terms with our mistakes, failures and disappointments, letting go and moving on.

In authentic mourning, we process the past and discover who we are as a result of our experiences. We realise we cannot undo past events or the foolish choices and decisions we made, or the wrongs that others have done to us. We accept them and their consequences for us, who we have become as a result, and move on with life.

We have to mourn those aspects of our personality we were unable to develop because of past choices or circumstances. We have to deal with the disparity between who we are and who we had dreamed of becoming— that is, mourn the person we have not, and now may never become.

Shanti was brilliant in school. She had dreamed of becoming a doctor. But when she completed her school finals, she felt a call to become a religious. She felt she could fulfil both her dreams – be a religious nun, as well as a doctor. She became a nun; but her dream of becoming a doctor was never realized. After taking her religious vows, her superiors wanted her to be in education. She was deeply disappointed. But she obeyed, though with some initial resentment. She qualified in the educational field, obtaining a PhD, the only one in her congregation to do so. She has accomplished much as a well-recognized and appreciated educator. She still feels a tinge of sadness when she recalls her unfulfilled dream, but she is also grateful when she recalls how many lives she has touched as an educator.

Mourning is not regret. In regret we remain tied to a non-existent past, revelling in the “If only...” wishing things were different. Historical events cannot be wished away. All our wishing to the contrary will not make an iota of difference to the fact that something happened, however unfortunate it was. But we can change our attitudes toward what happened. We can accept what has happened as part of our history, as something about which we today can do nothing and move on with our lives focusing on the present and the future. This is mourning. This is what Shanti did.

The Challenge of Atonement

As psychologist Daniel Levinson observes, failure to undertake this challenge of atonement can move us into late adulthood, bitter and resentful about perceived or real injuries, as “angry Martyrs,” our energy sapped by rage and self-righteous indignation. On the other, when we experience atonement we move toward the sunset of our lives enjoying peace and serenity.

I conclude with William Kraft’s description of the challenge of atonement: “...middle agers are challenged to reflect on life and to bring integrity into their relationships with themselves, others, and the world. Out of guilt, they come to forgive themselves and others. Out of depression, they come to a deeper fulfilment. Out of limits, they come to experience the unlimited. Out of resentment, they affirm their dignity and learn to be compassionate and forgiving. Out of anger, they become gentle and touching. This is the age of atonement, the time to become one with self and others. (*Spiritual Growth in Adolescence and Adulthood*, 1983, p. 21).

Reflection Exercise

- *What aspects of Atonement described here have you engaged in? Which do you still need to engage in? Which of them do you find difficult to engage in? Why?*

Prayer

The story of Joseph and his brothers in the Old Testament (Genesis Chapter 42-45) is classic case of atonement – forgiveness and reconciliation and moving on.

The young Joseph is sold into slavery by his jealous brothers. Later Joseph becomes the premier of Egypt and when a famine ravages their land his brothers are forced to go to Egypt and beg for grains from Joseph who recognised them. He is able to let go of the cruel injustice they had inflicted on him and treat them with love and affection and given them the grain needed. Not only, he invited them and their father to stay with him in Egypt.

What does this story evoke in us? We could spend a few moments with our God, talking to God about our challenges related to atonement and seek his help to do the needful, so that we can move into the second half of life less burdened by resentments and anger, and in serenity and peace.

Have a blessed and safe weekend.

Thank you for listening/reading

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