

WHY DID JESUS HAVE TO DIE?

Or The Necessity of the Cross

Reading Isaiah 53 1-10

Today is Epiphany Sunday. In the Eastern tradition of the Christian church this traditionally marks the birth of our Lord Jesus, but in the West we traditionally celebrate the adoration of the Magi, popularly known as the wise men. Most people in the West speak of three magi or wise men, although in fact we are not certain how many actually came to worship Jesus, as this is not anywhere recorded. We do know, however, that they brought three gifts gold, frankincense and myrrh and perhaps this has led to the tradition of three magi.

Epiphany is usually regarded as the time at which Christ is revealed to the world. But why is he so special for Christians? The answer lies in His mission, and as we move out of the Christmas season I want to look forward to that mission today.

Jesus's mission was to die for the redemption of mankind, to die for all our sins mine and yours, and our reading today illustrates that this mission was foretold hundreds of years before he came to earth. It was also indicated by one of the three gifts of the magi I just mentioned – myrrh which is traditionally used for anointing the dead or embalming. But, why was Christ's mission necessary?

In order to address the question posed by the title of today's sermon we must start by considering a subject which is not at all popular in our society today – SIN. Most people today, even most Christians, simply do not realise the seriousness of sin. In order to illustrate this, how many of God's Laws, no let's make it simpler, how many of the ten commandments do you think you have to keep to be righteous. Most Christians will say you have to keep more than half, say six or seven out of ten, (incidentally that's exactly what Islam says about keeping God's laws, but that's a topic for another day). But, that's not what God says to us in the Bible he says you must keep them all. God's pass mark is not 60% or 70% or even 99% - its 100%. That's how seriously God regards sin. It's also why we could never achieve salvation by ourselves; we can't achieve 100%. God

hates sin, is angered by it and refuses ever to come to terms with it. As it says in the book of Exodus chapter 20 and verse 5 “.. for I am the Lord your God, punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation ..”.

As I said, the seriousness of sin, even sin itself, are not acceptable topics in contemporary society. Popular authors have remarked on it. Karl Menninger, an American psychiatrist has even written a book entitled *Whatever Became of Sin?* Does this mean, he says, that no sin is involved in our current troubles? No, indeed not. He concludes that the vast majority of the problems in our world today result from a failure to respect God’s laws. Actually, the fact that we downplay the importance of sin is well illustrated by the fact that we have only one word for it. In the Greek of the New Testament, there are no less than five words for sin, both passive and active.

One of the things that non-Christians – and even some Christians – frequently say to me is “we understand that we have been sinful and that we need to be forgiven, but God is merciful and wants to forgive our sins so why couldn’t he just forgive us. What was the need for Jesus to die a horrible death?” As the French cynic put it “the good God will forgive me, that’s his speciality”.

I must admit that at first sight the idea of Christ being sacrificed on the cross for our sins sounds like a primitive superstition which should have been discarded long ago. However, the more we look at Christ’s death on the cross the more it makes sense, the more it becomes absolutely central. As Bishop Stephen Neill says “in the Christian view of history the death of Christ is the central point of history; here all the roads of the past converge; and here all the roads of the future diverge”.

Those who express the view that God could simply forgive us are lacking a balanced view of the gravity of sin on the one hand and the majesty and nature of God on the other. God IS completely loving BUT he is also completely just and completely righteous and all these aspects of his nature are unchanging and unchangeable. Let me say

that again, God's nature is immutable – unchanging, unchangeable and absolute. Yes, he is absolutely loving and wants to forgive us, but he is also absolutely just and couldn't simply forget about our sin. God acts in accordance with ALL of his attributes ALL of the time. The problem of forgiveness was not in the world, it was within God.

Sin is a rebellion against God's laws and a law which has no sanction against breaking it is no law at all. It is inconceivable that God's moral laws could be of that kind. The sanction against breach of these moral laws, in other words the sanction against sin, is death. In the words of Romans 6:23 "the wages of sin is death". This does not mean that God's laws are mechanical, they are alive in God a part of his nature and that unchanging nature makes them unalterable.

If we try to bring God down to our level or try and raise ourselves to his level we see no need of a radical atonement to secure salvation. We need to hear again the words of Peter in 1 Peter 1:17 "since you call on a father who judges each man's work impartially, live your lives ... in reverent fear". When we tremble before God and acknowledge that we are hell deserving sinners the necessity for the cross becomes clear. Perhaps if we spoke less about God's love and more about his holiness, we might say more with more meaning when we did speak of his love.

Nothing reveals the gravity of our sin like the cross. For what ultimately sent Christ there was neither the greed of Judas, nor the envy of the Jewish priests, nor the vacillating cowardice of Pilate, but our own greed, envy, cowardice and all our other sins. I cannot face Christ's cross with integrity without feeling ashamed of myself. Indeed, in the words of Canon Peter Green "only the man who is prepared to own his share in the guilt of the cross may claim his share in its grace". In the words of our reading today "Christ was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed." In other words Christ died for my sins and yours to bring us forgiveness and healing.

To sum up where we have got to so far then we see that God couldn't simply forgive our sins. His just and righteous nature precluded that. So, it was necessary either that we should all die as our sins deserved, or that God should somehow arrange for the punishment we deserved to fall on someone else. In his mercy he took the latter course and the punishment we deserved was suffered by Jesus on the cross.

God's love must have been wonderful. He could, quite justly have abandoned us to the fate our sins deserve – to perish in our sin. But he did not. Because he loved us, he pursued us in Christ – as the good shepherd pursues his lost sheep.

Of course Jesus well knew that this was his mission on which his Father had sent him, he predicted it many times to the disciples, for example on the way to Jerusalem before the crucifixion where Mark in chapter 10 and verse 33 tells us that Jesus told them he would be handed over to the gentiles who would flog him and kill him. Indeed if Jesus had not been a willing substitute for us all I do not believe his sacrifice would have been effective. But why did Jesus have to come down to earth and suffer this terrible fate.

Really there is only one simple reason for this – that was the only way the mission could be fulfilled. God's just and righteous punishment could not have been visited on any ordinary man. Our sins already justified our punishment by death – each and every one of us, so we could not act as a sacrifice for anyone else by suffering a punishment we already deserved. On the other hand God could not suffer a punishment as God, because the guilty sinning party was mankind. Only someone who was both wholly God and wholly man – and that was uniquely Jesus – would do.

Just as the cross has two arms, so it has two aspects. Firstly what we did to Christ – convicting him through our sin – and secondly what he did for us – securing our forgiveness and salvation. So far we have focussed on the first aspect – what we did to Christ through our sin. However, we do need to see the cross as something done by us, to

lead us to repentance, before we can see it as something done for us, which leads us to faith and worship.

We need a balance between awareness of sin and awareness of forgiveness in our Christian lives. If we concentrate on the former we shall be sorrowful and guilt ridden (one author called Christianity the “guilt edged religion”), but if we focus too much on the latter we are likely to carry on sinning as if it didn’t matter.

Let’s now look at what Christ did for us. Christ took upon himself all the sins of the world past present and future. As he said on the cross “it has been and will for ever remain finished”. Because he has paid the price for our sins we are able to stand before God clothed in Christ’s righteousness, to escape any condemnation for our sins and enter into salvation or eternal life.

Lets pause again for another summing up of what we’ve covered so far. We have seen that God couldn’t simply forgive our sins, but in his great love and mercy he sent his son Jesus to bear the punishment that was rightly ours and Jesus’s death on the cross has dealt with the past present and future sins of each and every one of us.

This forgiveness is a free gift from God. Although it was purchased at great price by Christ’s life blood all we have to do is to receive it. We cannot earn it or even contribute the smallest element to it. In the words of Saint Paul in Ephesians Chapter 2 and verses 8 and 9 “For it is by grace you have been saved not by works so that no one can boast.”

Also, it’s only true, we can only receive salvation, because Jesus willingly died and shed his blood on the cross to pay for my sins and yours. Yes it was by God’s will. In the words of our reading “.. it was the Lord’s will to crush him and cause him to suffer, and the Lord makes of his life a guilt offering ...” But it was with the consent of Jesus who subordinated his will to the Father in the olive grove.

However, we do have to receive this grace, this forgiveness. The world was not automatically put right because Christ died for us, nor have we automatically been forgiven. We need to appropriate his death to ourselves in order for it to be effective.

The last time I preached in this Church I spoke about what we needed to do to be saved and how simple it was – that we just need to turn to Jesus, truly believe in his death and resurrection in our hearts and confess him as our Lord with our mouths. And that's perfectly true, it is exactly that easy and precisely that straightforward. If you have any doubts look at the words of Saint Paul in Romans Chapter 10 verses 9 and 10 after the service. But, you do need to do that and if there is anyone here today who has never done these things I urge you to do them right here right now today. Don't wait. Your salvation, your eternal life, is too important to put off to another day.

As we close then let's have a final summing up of what we've covered this morning. We see that God couldn't simply forget about our sin. Sin is too serious in God's eyes and His nature would not have permitted that. But – "It is finished" - because he loved us so much he sent Jesus Christ to die for us on the cross, which secured the forgiveness of sin; he was the innocent lamb slaughtered to pay for all our sins past present and future – and we should be eternally grateful for what he has done for us. May that gratefulness be reflected in the lives of each and every Christian. In the words of the well known hymn:

Were the whole realm of nature mine
That were an offering far too small
Love so amazing, so divine
Demands my soul, my life, my all

Lets bow our heads for a word of prayer: Heavenly Father, thank you that in your amazing love you pursued us in Christ and that he willingly died for us and that his sacrifice has secured the forgiveness of ALL our sins for ALL time. Help us to turn to you in faith at the beginning of this New Year to accept that sacrifice and make it effective in our lives. AMEN