

Sunday 23rd March 2014 Christ Church 6.30 pm
The Big Issue – Why did Jesus die? John 12:20-41

In 3 weeks time it will be Palm Sunday, and at our 10.45 am service we will be doing something we've done a couple of times at 6.30 on Palm Sunday – building the whole service around the gospel account of the last week of Jesus' life, running from his triumphal entry into Jerusalem up to his death and burial.

When we've done it at 6.30, I've found it very moving. But what is interesting is that by and large, the gospel writers just tell the story – they don't explain directly why what was happening was so significant. So tonight, I'd like us to think about that. Why is Jesus' death so important? In what way does that death, almost 2000 years ago, impact my life today?

But where on earth do we start? Let's turn to something Jesus said just days before his death.

READING – John 12:20-41

Jesus replied, 'The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.'

Now, our natural expectation is that the next thing he will say will be about some great event, where the crowds will flock to him, and his name will be praised. That's what we think of as glory. Glory is what the winners of gold medals at the Olympics get. But, instead of that – look how Jesus goes on. *'The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Very truly I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds.'* And then, just in case we haven't quite got it, he goes on in v.27 *Now my soul is troubled, and what shall I say? Father, save me from this hour? No, it was for this very reason I came to this hour. Father, glorify your name.'* Why was Jesus heart troubled? Because he knew he was heading towards his death, which would be his glory. His glory wouldn't be to stand on the top of the winners' podium, it would be to hang on a cross. And Jesus was quiet clear – he knew that was why he had come.

And then John quotes those 2 passages from Isaiah, and says, in v. 41, *Isaiah said this because he saw Jesus' glory and spoke about him.* That is some claim, that when Isaiah wrote something like 700 years earlier, he was writing about Jesus.

That doesn't mean that Isaiah understood all that his prophecy was pointing to, but it does mean that his words were a prophecy about the Lord Jesus. The second quotation here is from Isaiah 6, the very start of Isaiah's ministry. But the first, which Isaiah clearly sees as being about Jesus and his glory, his cross, is from Isaiah 53.

Isaiah 53 is one of the best known and loved chapters in the OT. And John sees that it is pointing to the cross. And right at the heart of Isaiah 53:

v.5. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed. We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way, and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

The punishment that brought us peace was upon him. The Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all. John points us back to Isaiah, but Isaiah points us back to Leviticus. In Lev.16, the Lord gives Moses instructions for what was to become the great Day of Atonement – the day in the year when the Israelites came together to acknowledge their sin, and when through sacrifice, God wiped away that sin – the word atonement seems to have at its root the idea of taking a cloth and wiping something clean.

So – what happened? Aaron was to take 2 male goats; one was to be sacrificed as a sin offering. We pick up the story in Leviticus 16:20

READ Leviticus 16:20-22.

The goat will carry on itself all their sins to a solitary place.

So, the high priest takes 2 goats. The first one was sacrificed, and the blood was taken into the Most Holy Place – the very heart of the tabernacle which symbolised the presence of God with his people. This was the only day of the year when anyone could enter, and even then it was only the high priest (v.17). Inside the Most Holy Place was the ark – which contained the tablets of stone on which the law was written. The high priest comes into the Most Holy Place, and sprinkles the blood of the sacrificed goat on the cover which was over the ark. And the blood makes atonement – it wipes away the sin which has come between God and his people.

Now – the second goat is taken. Because atonement has been made, the sins of the people no longer came between them and God. And so they are symbolically transferred onto the second goat, and taken far away. So both the sacrificed lamb, and the scapegoat, point to what Jesus would do. It's what John the Baptist realised when Jesus came to him: *Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.*

So – why did Jesus die? To take away the sin of the world. But how could he do that? That takes us a bit further on in John's gospel. Jesus has finished teaching his disciples in the Upper Room, and gone out with them into the Garden of Gethsemane. And while they are there some soldiers came, there was Judas' betrayal, then Peter's fight-back. In John 18:10 – *Then Simon Peter, who had a sword, drew it and stuck the high priest's servant, cutting off his right ear. (The servant's name was Malchus). Jesus commanded Peter, 'Put your sword away! Shall I not drink the cup the Father has given me?'*

That cup was one of the main things Jesus had been praying about in Gethsemane – so Matthew records Jesus praying *My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will.* This cup was obviously something terrible to Jesus.

I guess that our first instinct is to think that the cup referred to the suffering, the physical agony of crucifixion, to the death that Jesus knew he was heading towards. That would be understandable – I don't think that many of us would be able to face such suffering without praying – Lord, help!

But, however understandable it would be, I don't think that quite makes sense of Jesus' words. *Shall I not drink the cup my Father has given me?* Quite what that means might not be so clear to us, but to the people around at the time, and to John's first readers, I think it would have both made sense, but also been so shocking. And again it takes us back into the OT.

Let's turn back again to Isaiah – Is.51:17-22

The cup here is the cup of God's wrath. It comes twice in this passage, you find it as well in Psalm 75, in Jeremiah 25, in Ezekiel 23, in Habakkuk 2 – in fact as far as I can see, every time in the OT that God's cup or some similar term is used, it refers to the cup of God's wrath.

So – for Jews who knew their OT, hearing Jesus talk about the cup his Father had given him would straightaway have made them think of God’s wrath. But here is where it would have been so surprising – so shocking. Jesus seems to be saying that the cross would be the place where God would pour out his wrath on Jesus – which I’m sure is why he prayed so desperately for the cup to be taken from him. I don’t think it was because Jesus was afraid of the physical agony, or of death. It was the terrifying prospect of facing God’s wrath.

It would have been shocking for people then – and I think it is shocking for us today, though for a different reason. Then the problem would have been – how can God’s wrath have been poured out on his Son? Today the problem is – we know that God is love – so how can all this talk of his wrath make any sense?

That word wrath is not one we use often, sometimes the word anger is used, but I prefer to stick with wrath. If I talk about God being angry – I all too easily start to think that his anger is like mine. So I could start to think of God loosing his temper – which is neither edifying, nor true. God does not fly off the handle. God’s wrath isn’t something that happens now and again when he has had a bad day. God’s wrath is, I think, a function of his holiness.

God’s holiness means that he is utterly opposed to evil. God’s wrath is his settled, controlled, personal hostility to all that is wrong. And God’s wrath isn’t just in something abstract. God is opposed to evil – and he must punish it.

Now lets’ go back to Gethsemane. *My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me.* Why was Jesus so horrified at the prospect he was facing? Because he was to take the cup of God’s wrath, he was to take God’s punishment for sin, he was to die physically, and spiritually – he would be cut off from his Father – that cry of dereliction on the cross – *My God, my God, why have you forsaken me.* But – he knew that was why he had come - *Shall I not drink the cup my Father has given me?*

Why did Jesus die? To deal with sin. On the cross Jesus took the full force of sin on himself, and he experienced the guilt and the punishment that sin brings. And although I’m not going to try to unpack the trinity tonight, that means that on the cross God himself acted in Jesus to defeat sin.

In 2 Cor.5 Paul writes that *God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them.* 2 Cor. 5:19. The cross was the place where sin's hold on the world was decisively broken.

I guess that it isn't anything new for most of us here – though I do think it is good to be reminded of why Jesus came and of why he died. But I think in a sense what we've just looked at lays the foundation for another way of looking at that question – 'why did Jesus die' – one which asks – so what difference does it make to me now?

1. Jesus' death means that death is no longer terminal

In John 11 Jesus says some very famous words – words which have become part of the funeral service liturgy. John 11:25 – *Jesus said to her, 'I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die.'* Wonderful words, but, it does sometimes seem incongruous to be saying them at the start of a funeral service, even when the deceased has been a believer. Whoever lives and believes in me will never die?

But so often in John's gospel, when he talks of death, he means more than the biological end of life. John 3:16 tell us that those who believe in Jesus will not perish, but will have eternal life. Perishing means more than just physical death – it is the opposite of eternal life.

In Genesis 3, the punishment for sin was death – which included permanent separation from God. But on the cross Jesus took that punishment, he endured that separation from God, so that now, for those who believe in him, biological death will never mean separation from God. At some stage my body will give out, but I will not be separated from God – because I know him now I will be his for eternity.

It is only the death of Jesus that can give the believer that assurance. I can't say I look forward to the process of dying, but I do know that for me it will only be a physical thing – and the other side of that unpleasant experience I will be alive with the Lord. For the Christian, death will never be terminal, because death is a punishment that Jesus has taken for me.

2. Jesus' death means that I don't have to fear judgment.

Within my first few months of being a curate, I had to visit an old lady who was dying. She had been a church member all her life – and she was in her 80's. And she was afraid. She'd always done her best to live well, but what if it wasn't enough? She believed the Creed, she believed that 'he will come again to judge the living and the dead.' And I had the great joy, over her last few weeks, of taking her to various passages in the Bible, and especially Romans 8. *Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.* The therefore there refers back to what Paul had been writing about in the earlier part of Romans – especially about the death of Jesus. Romans 4:25-5:1 – *He was delivered over to death for our sins and raised to life for our justification. Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.*

Because Jesus died to take the punishment for my sins – for me there is nothing left for God to punish. A couple of years ago I had a VISA bill, which told me I had been charged a £30 penalty for failing to pay last month's bill. But I knew that wasn't right – and fortunately I still had the counterfoil which had been stamped at the bank when I paid. So I phoned up my VISA, and with some pleasure told them that the bill had been settled. They were very apologetic!

You see – it would be totally out of order to expect me to pay a bill I had already paid. Once a bill is paid, it's paid. That's it. And in the same way – if Jesus has paid for my sin, taken my punishment – God can't possibly have anything to punish me for. And this doesn't just affect future judgment. In one sense how the death of Jesus 2000 years ago could take on himself my sin is a mystery. But what I can say is that because of what Jesus did then, I can be forgiven now. And because of that I can come into God's presence now, I can know God as my Father now, I can be assured of eternity with him now. Without that forgiveness I would have been eternally cut off from God, because of it I am eternally united with him.

When I stand before him, I might be aware of all sorts of thing in my life I'm not too proud of, but all he will see is – nothing. Therefore there is now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus.

3. Jesus' death shows me how valuable I am.

So many people today suffer from low self-image. I think it is a particular problem in modern Western society, because we are constantly bombarded by media images showing us perfect men and women, with successful careers, living in beautiful homes with lovely children driving top of the range cars. It's enough to make any normal person feel inadequate. But we are also a society which puts so much store on success – whether it is exams, career, or even sex. And if you don't measure up – you will be made to realise it.

We live in a society which is almost bound to make you feel inadequate. And it can feed into your Christian life. I read books about someone else's ministry, and they just make me feel inadequate.

But listen to what Jesus says in John 10:14 – *I am the Good Shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me – just as the Father knows me and I know the Father – and I lay down my life for the sheep.* Maybe in the world's eyes you are insignificant – but to God you are worth the death of his Son. As Archbishop William Temple put it, 'My worth is what I am worth to God; and that is a marvellous great deal, for Christ died for me.' If nothing else tonight, you can go home knowing that, no matter what you have done in the past, no matter how much bad or how little good you think you have done, no matter how much you think you've achieved or not achieved in your life, your value, and therefore your significance, is infinite. And you can only know that because of the cross.

4. Jesus' death means that for the Christian suffering is never the last word.

One of the great questions of life is the question of suffering. Why does God allow it? Suffering seems to be an inescapable part of human experience. But on the cross Christ entered into human suffering – suffering of the very worst kind imaginable. And he conquered it. Isaiah 53:4 – *Surely he took up our pain and bore our suffering.* On the cross Jesus dealt with sin and all its results. Without the cross, we would have no hope of anything except this suffering world. But because of the cross, we can look forward to a new heaven and a new earth where, as Rev 21 puts it, *there will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain.*

5. Jesus' death gives us power to live.

1 Peter 2:21-25 *He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree.* That is the wonderful truth which the whole Bible points towards. When Jesus died, all my sin was laid on him. He took the punishment that sin deserved. But that should never just be an abstract theological truth. It has a real here and now impact. *He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness.* When we turn to the Lord Jesus, accepting his forgiveness, acknowledging him as our Lord, then our sin is dealt with – Jesus bore it so it is no longer ours. And we are given a new life, a life in which we are able to live to please God – to live for righteousness.

You see, Jesus death 2000 years ago is meant to make a difference to how I live now. Someone does something to hurt me, something which I find it impossible to forgive. I am in danger of becoming a bitter person, consumed by what was done to me. But then I realise that through the cross I have been forgiven. And that what was done to me has no hold on me. And so I am enabled us to forgive.

In the same way, in the cross we can know love, which enables us to love others. We can know what God has done for us, which enables us to serve others. I suspect that one of the reasons Christians still sometimes struggle with forgiveness, with love, with service, is that we spend too much time thinking about those issues, and not enough meditating on the death of Jesus.

You see, the death of Jesus changes everything. It changed everything on the cosmic scale, as Jesus took the sin of the world on himself, and so defeated it, and made a new world possible. And it changes everything for me. As long as I will let it. There is a lot that will try to tear your mind away from the cross. But if you do loose sight of the cross, you loose so much.