

Love's Highest

Romans 5¹⁻¹¹/ Luke 24¹⁻¹²

Christ is Risen! (He is Risen indeed!)

Today we celebrate and rightfully so for the great testimony of our faith is that God comes through – despite the very worst humanity can do – despite our worst betrayal, our worst behaviour, our worst denial of God, God is faithful! Today despite the very worst Satan could do, despite our complete capitulation to Satan's deceptions, despite all the damage that has done to ourselves, to Creation and, indeed to the person of God – something remarkable has happened. Jesus has Risen! Death could not hold him down. Evil doesn't get the last say! And the thing that sums up both the darkness of our sin and the light of God's mercy and grace today is... the Cross! The Cross holds within itself both the negative and positive of the human story.

Just think about all that the Cross as a symbol of dark Satanic power represents...

1. It represents the victory of sin in us and through us to all Creation.
2. It represents the symbol of earthly power – the Romans perfected the art of war, conquest and imperial domination.

They gave permission for this act and their power made it possible.

3. It represents the great failure of the law to produce the righteous fruits of God's Kingdom. The Law did not protect the innocent and, indeed, it was the guardians of the law who procured his death.
4. It represents the victory of Satan over the will of God. At His temptation in the desert after Jesus had seen Satan off we read these ominous words in the Gospel of Luke... ¹³'When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.' The Cross was that opportune time – the time of Satan's gloating over Jesus' death.
5. It represents the great humiliation of God for the Son is made nothing on the Cross and God does not prevent it.
6. Finally it represents the victory of worldly wisdom for it was argued that the death of one man was surely preferable to the demise of a nation. So worldly logic has defeated Divine logic on the Cross and with that the 'logos' of the world overtakes the 'logos' of God.

Yesterday we didn't know this. How dark is Easter Saturday. How empty. How desolate. We cannot under-estimate how heavy the defeat of the Cross on Easter Saturday is and it's important that we take this in for we all stand before that terrible instrument of torture which still casts a shadow over us. The Cross before Easter Sunday is a terrible thing and we must

still take account of it in our own lives, experiencing something of its power and pain by virtue of our own humanity. Yes, the Cross is partly us! Partly our doing, partly our responsibility and we only have to ask ourselves some simple questions to recognise its trace within us. Have I been unjustifiably angry recently? Have I turned my back recently on someone who needed help? Have I spoken harsh words to someone recently? Have I stolen something, made fun of someone, gossiped about someone, judged someone, lusted after someone or something recently? If we can answer yes to one of these questions then we can be sure we have a share in the Cross.

But today He is Risen. Jesus is alive! All that worldly power and threat has become nothing and friends, you and I are free. Whoever would have thought? Whoever could have predicted this completely unexpected turn of events. The grave is empty. Jesus is Risen... the Cross is defeated.

The resurrection is the great symbol of that victory and the revelation of the very nature of God as the One who is and remains both faithful and gracious in the very face of sin itself. God is revealed in this amazing act as the One who loves despite all; the one who is gracious in the face of the worst the enemy could throw at him. This is our God. But what does it all mean? What is the value of the Cross? Sure, it's a great symbol but what's that to you and I in this day and age faced with these

very real problems? What does the Cross mean for us today? Well let's be clear that when we speak of the Cross in this way we are actually meaning through the Cross. Jesus goes through the Cross and through death to defeat them both.

Let's list the most important things...

Through the Cross we have

1. Victory over our arch enemy death for though we will all die, yet we will rise again with Christ to a new life, an eternal life with Him.
2. The Cross has dealt with our sin in that it has become the judgement we would have faced and it is the means by which we may have victory over sin in this life as well.
3. The Cross is our new power. This is the power Christians may be truly proud of – the power of the Cross.
4. It is also our wisdom. Paul says the Cross is the wisdom of God and so it is also our wisdom.
5. The Cross is our defence against the world and its temptations since Paul says of the cross in Galatians...
¹⁴'May I never boast of anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.'
6. The Cross overcomes what was the tyranny of the Law and replaces it with the 'Law of love.'

7. The Cross brings reconciliation between God and ourselves, within our own community and between ourselves and what Paul calls the Commonwealth of Israel. (Eph 2¹¹⁻²².)
8. The Cross creates a new household, the household of God into which we are grafted along with Israel.
9. The Cross brings all of Creation into a reconciled relationship with God so peace begins to flow into all that there is. (Col 1²⁰)
10. The Cross brings healing for as Peter says 'by His wounds we have been healed.'

All of this is won through the Cross. All that we now possess in terms of blessing and hope comes through this great symbol of sin and death. God has taken the worst of us and transformed it by His love into a pathway back to Him. This very thing that most symbolised the depth of our sinfulness has come to represent the miracle of God's redemption. The Cross is now no longer our shame but our hope. It brings to us everyone of the blessings we've listed here but, the key issue however is still not before us.

What is the central message of the Cross? What is the supreme gift of the Cross? Oswald Chambers wrote a series of devotions which have become world best sellers since his death and his wife called it 'My Utmost of God's Highest.' It's a wonderful book and one which I have gone through many times and the

premise comes from a reflection on the Gospel in which Chambers understands the Cross as God going to the very end of Himself for our sake. This is what it cost God to see the Son Jesus on the Cross – everything and for what? For we who put Jesus there...

And what was this about? What lies at the heart of this incredible act? Romans 5 sums it up, I believe, perfectly;

⁶You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. ⁷Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. ⁸But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

The Cross is God's love writ large for the whole of Creation to see. More than anything else what we see today is the victory of love; the rising of love over all the darkness and bitterness of our sin and the triumph of God's nature over all that would deny and reject it. And this is the great message of the Cross today and always... 'I love you! I love you when you're nice and when you're naughty. I love you when you're good and when you're bad. I love you when you're right and when you're wrong. I love you because I have decided to love you.

But Richard, doesn't that mean we can go out and live like there's no tomorrow and really do anything we like. No, no, no!! There's still right and wrong, good and bad and they each come with consequences. Right comes with certain consequences –

consequences which bless people. Wrong also comes with consequences – consequences which are curses. We don't get away with anything really in this life – even when we think we've gotten away with something we haven't. Either internally or externally we pay for sin. But God still loves us!

The question is what are we going to do with this love? This is the great question of Easter. God has said to us through the Cross – 'I love you.' Now it's our move. What are we going to do with God's love this Easter?

The answer is – we will let it transform us. The great story of the Cross is one of transformation. Jesus transformed the darkness and evil of that terrible instrument of torture into a message of hope and love. Our task now is to be transformed... to allow it to transform us. As story to finish with...

In his book *The Prodigal God*, Tim Keller uses the following story to illustrate how experiencing God's grace can transform our life: The acclaimed foreign film *Three Seasons* is a series of vignettes about life in postwar Vietnam. One of the stories is about Hai, a cyclo driver (a bicycle rickshaw), and Lan, a beautiful prostitute. Both have deep, unfulfilled desires. Hai is in love with Lan Lan lives in grinding poverty and longs to live in the beautiful world where she works, but in which she never spends the night. She hopes that the money she makes by

prostitution will be her means of escape, but instead the work brutalizes and enslaves her.

Then Hai enters a cyclo race and wins the top prize. With the money he brings Lan to the hotel. He pays for the night and pays her fee. Then, to everyone's shock, he tells her he just wants to watch her fall asleep. Instead of using his power and wealth to have sex with her, he spends it to purchase a place for her for one night in a normal world, to fulfil her desire to belong. Lan finds such grace deeply troubling at first, thinking that Han has done this to control her. When it becomes apparent that he is using his power to serve rather than use her, it begins to transform her, making it impossible to return to a life of prostitution. Keller notes that in a similar way Christians are transformed as we accept how Christ served and died for us while we were unworthy of his love. Keller asks: "Why wouldn't you want to offer yourself to someone like this? Selfless love destroys mistrust in our hearts toward God."

God hold's hands out to you this Easter through the Cross of Christ and says to each one of us 'I love you.' This is a transforming love – a love that helps us recover the person we were meant to be; a love that delivers us from the evil within and without. Will you not take hold of such love today?