

Easter & the Cross: the pain, the purpose, the power.

Introduction: We are two weeks away from Easter. Now when I was a kid, & even as a young adult (because I wasn't converted till I got to University), I used to be so confused, and wonder- "How can Good Friday be 'good' when its the story of innocent man, a good man, the best who ever lived, being tortured to death & executed, in one of the most horrible, sadistic fashions possible?"

Today we are going to wrestle a bit with this question, reflecting on the first half of the Easter event, the death of Jesus, the Cross - & its pain, its purpose, & its power.

How many people here have seen Mel Gibson's 2004 film, *The Passion*? How many people enjoyed watching it? No. me neither. It's an extremely violent, graphic portrayal of the trial, torture and crucifixion of Jesus. And it's not an easy watch - in fact its horrible. But the truth is - it's realistic, & Gibson actually does capture the real horror of what took place that dark day. But 2000 years later we cloistered, genteel folk have turned the cross from an instrument of torture - which is what it was - into an item of fashion jewellery - pretty little necklaces & earrings & so on. Even the crosses we hang in our churches are so often made from beautiful, varnished & polished wood-like this one here; whereas the cross Jesus died on - & the crosses all the other criminals died on that same day - would have been made from harsh, rough-sawn beams, jagged & sharp & by the time of Jesus' death clotted with blood & skin. The Roman cross was designed to be nothing else but a brutal execution device - just as the guillotine & the electric chair were in later ages.

And as we know from the gospel accounts, even before Jesus got to the cross, he had been severely scourged, whipped by the Romans. For the scourging, Jesus would have been stripped of his clothing, and his hands tied to an upright post and the whip would have consisted of several braided leather thongs in which small iron balls and sharp pieces of sheep bones were tied. If a prisoner survived the flogging, the were then taken to their cross.

We need to understand that Crucifixion was used by the Romans to punish what they considered the worst crimes & those people they considered the most dangerous criminals - those whose actions would disturb the social order - such as being a runaway slave, or those fermenting political insurrection against Rome. It was a deliberately vicious form of State execution, performed in order to terrorize those looking on & to persuade them to never attempt any similar kind of rebellion against the State or against the law. Victims were left hanging for days, even after they'd died, as warnings to others. Crucifixion was intended to provide a death that was particularly slow, painful, humiliating, and public. The English word "excruciating", comes from the latin phrase "out of crucifying". Crucifixion was both an execution, & a humiliation, by making the condemned victim as vulnerable as possible. Although artists have traditionally depicted the figure on a cross with a loin cloth or a covering of the genitals, the person being crucified was usually stripped naked. When the the book of Hebrews talks about Jesus enduring the shame of the cross - well it really was one of the most shameful & humiliating deaths possible.

The actual cause of death for person being crucified was often a combination of blood loss & circulatory shock following the scourging, and suffocation as their lungs filled up with fluid, & they found it harder and harder to raise their body up to catch a breath. The account in John's gospel of the soldier piercing Jesus' chest with his spear, and seeing blood & water flow out, is really a confirmation that Jesus was really dead, not just unconscious. The flow of water or serum may have come from Jesus' lungs, or even from the pericardium around his heart, which would have been under tremendous stress hanging in that position for so many hours. Some have argued, in fact, that Jesus may have literally died of a broken or ruptured heart on that cross.

In addition to the physical pain of Jesus' crucifixion, there was of course the mental and emotional pain. Jesus in his incarnation was fully human, & Jesus in his humanity prior to the crucifixion, in that garden of Gesemene, begs God to take this cup away from him. Knowing full well what is about to happen to him, Mark's gospel says that Jesus started to become deeply distressed & troubled, & confides to three of his disciples that "my soul is overwhelmed with sorrow, even to the

point of death". In Luke's gospel, it says that Jesus was so distressed his sweat was mixed with blood, which medically is known as hemato-hidrosis. Hemato-hidrosis is a condition in which capillary blood vessels that feed the sweat glands rupture, causing them to exude blood, something that can occur under conditions of extreme physical or emotional stress. There is the sheer human fear of knowing what was about to unfold for him over the next 48 hours. There was also the pain of deep, deep betrayal. The crowd that had cheered him into Jerusalem, under the influence of the temple leaders would shortly be baying for his blood, & shouting 'Crucify him, crucify him'. Have you ever wondered at how quickly so many turned on Jesus, or rather were turned against Jesus? Actually, We know from the gospel accounts that it was really just a few key, powerful leaders that managed to turn that crowd. And are we that much different from these people that betrayed, or at least turned their backs on Jesus? Probably not, because history teaches over & over how shockingly easily we are deceived. You know that the great majority of Germans supported Hitler as he rose to power & promised to make Germany great again, and they were blinded to the danger he represented & the evil that lay behind his words of fervent patriotism. And what is really shocking is that 90% of the Christians, & 90 % of the German church at that time supported all that Hitler did, & turned a blind eye to what was being done to the Jews & to the other minority groups that Hitler first of all blamed, & then attacked. When ever a leader starts scapegoating & blaming other ethnic or religious groups, we should be very, very wary.

At an even more personal level, Jesus was about to be personally betrayed, & turned over to his executors by someone he had regarded as a friend & poured 3 years of his life into, Judas, who just a few hours before Jesus had knelt & tenderly washed the feet of, & shared the bread & the wine with at passover. Within a few hours Jesus would also be abandoned by another of his closest friends & disciples, Peter - Peter who had vowed '*even if everyone else deserts you, I will never desert you, even if they try to kill me*' - & a few hours later Peter's courage had failed him, & he was denying that he even knew who Jesus was. But I wonder, under those circumstances & those pressures, would we be any better, would we be any more courageous?

For any who have known betrayal in a relationship, or betrayal from someone they had poured their life & love & trust into - you will know something of how deep the pain of betrayal is, that Jesus was wrestling with that first Easter.

And then there was the spiritual pain that Jesus experienced - he who was completely innocent, he who as it says in Acts 10:38 "went around doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil"; he whose every motive was pure, he who was sinless, according to 2 Corinthians 5:21 he became sin on our behalf. According to 1 Peter 2:24 he carried our sins in his body onto the cross. In other words, the sinless-one absorbed & took upon himself the worst of our sin, our shame, & the penalty we should bare for those things - in order that we who are guilty might be made innocent & that we might go free.

So it cost Jesus everything to set us free from the power & consequences of our own sinfulness, of our own dumb decisions, from the wickedness & weakness & fickleness of our human nature. The pain for Jesus on the cross was physical, emotional, mental, relational & spiritual pain. And this is the thing we need to get our heads & our hearts around. That God put on flesh & blood, humbled himself and came to us, showing us the way of love & justice, and on behalf of all of humanity suffered one of the most humiliating and shameful deaths that mankind could devise.

But for what reason? Let's look a bit more deeply at **the purpose** of the cross & the easter event. We'll I've already mentioned this concept in Scripture that he who knew no sin, became sin on our behalf, and in doing this Jesus absorbs, wears, takes upon himself the penalty & consequence of all human sin.

The Scriptures teach that though God desperately desires to be in relationship with us, and sometimes, we even desire a relationship with God - but something has come between us. There's a barrier, and theres a gap and there's a problem . This thing called sin. Now what is sin? Sometimes Scripture refers to sin, as the breaking of God's laws. Now both Jesus & Paul tell us that all of God's laws can be summarised into just two: love the Lord your God with all your heart;

and love your neighbour as you love your self. And actually we see this two fold nature of God's law even we look at the 10 Commandments - the first four commandments are all about how we can love God, the last 6 commandments are all about how we can love each other. So what is sin? At its heart Sin is a failure to love. A failure to love God. A failure to love each other. A failure even, to love ourselves.

In other places, Scripture refers to sin as 'falling short' of God's glory - that is, falling short of all that God created us to be as those who bare his image & his likeness. And we all know that we fall short; and we all know that we fail to love as we should; and we all know that there's got to be more to life than the way we are living now.

But more than anything else, 'sin' refers to broken relationship. We were created to be in right relationship with God, with each other, with ourselves, with all of creation in fact - but Sin is that which breaks relationship and that which makes community impossible. Sin is alienation, estrangement. Sin is when Adam turned on Eve & said "it's her fault". Sin is when Cain turned on his own brother Abel, & killed him. Sin is our failure to be the people God created us to be, and our failure to love as God loves

And this is a problem that humanity, from our side of the deal, simply cannot solve. As it says in Psalm 49:7-8

'No one can ever redeem the life of another or give to God a ransom for them—because the ransom for a life is costly, and no payment is ever enough'

And so what Scripture tells us is that God, who is love, who longs that we be in relationship with him, put on flesh & blood & came across that gap, across that barrier, across that alienation - as the perfect human being called Jesus, who lived among us & taught us how to live in relationship with God, and how to live a life of love that fulfilled God's two great commandments.

And this Jesus, because he was God, and because he was man, was able to pay that price that redeems the life of another - my life, and your life, and every life. In both 1st Timothy and the book of Hebrews, Jesus is referred to as the mediator between humanity & God, between heaven & earth. What is a mediator? A mediator is a go-between, a negotiator, an intermediary, an interceder, a broker, a peacemaker, an honest judge, a reconciler, a person who brings those who have fallen into conflict back together and helps them make peace! And this is exactly what Jesus has done in coming, in living, in teaching, in dying, in rising, & in pouring out his Spirit upon us. But this is a mediator who gives his life in order to bring the two parties back together. It's as if Jesus uses his physical body to form a bridge between God & humanity, between heaven & earth.

The great purpose of the Cross is reconciliation. Reconciliation - not just this way (Vertically) between God & humanity; but also reconciliation this way (horizontally) between humanity & humanity, between neighbour & neighbour, between community & community. For our reconciliation with God, we have the image of the the great curtain that hung in the Jerusalem temple being ripped in half, at that very same moment as Jesus' body is being torn apart on the cross - that we might be reconciled with God - because that curtain represented the thing blocking humanity from entering the Holiest place where God's presence dwelt. As we read earlier in Colossians 1:19-20 *God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in Jesus, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.*

We also have the image in Scripture of Jesus, through his death, breaking down the wall of enmity that separates racial and ethnic groups: initially between Jew & gentile, but ultimately between every ethnic group. Here's what it says in *Ephesians 2:14-16: For he himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by setting aside in his own flesh the law with its commands and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace, and in his one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility.*

Yet another gift we see shining through Scripture, won for us through what Jesus did on the cross, is that of healing. 1 Peter 2:24, quoting Isaiah 53:4-6 says that by his wounds we have been healed. God's very nature is love, is healing, is reconciliation. God so desires to see healing of our lives, of our relationships, of our communities - this is the length he went to on the cross. By his stripes we are healed. He was torn apart so that we might be put back together. He was broken that we might be made whole. A cosmic transference takes place at the cross that we will never fully understand, but we can receive it.

There is also a tremendous paradox taking place at the cross event. Paul in 1 Corinthians 1:18 refers to the message of the cross being 'the power of God'; and yet, the crucifixion is simultaneously the moment in history when the God made himself the most weak, the most vulnerable, and at which he allowed himself to be engulfed by the darkness of humanity and by the powers of darkness themselves.

For the past few weeks I've been putting together a series of reflections on the atonement, or how Christians down through the ages have understood how Jesus' death on the cross restores us to God. It's been fascinating as I've reflected on the 7 or 8 or 10 main explanations that Christians have believed historically, & I hope to have this reflection available to share with you by Easter. But historically, one of the oldest explanations that the early church & the early church writers focused on, was one called Christus Victor, or Jesus the Victor. And it really latches on to those words Paul read to us earlier from Colossians 2:13-15 - *When you were dead in your sinsGod made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, having cancelled the written code with its list of charges against us which condemned us; he has taken it away by nailing it to the cross. And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.*

Christ the Victor focuses on the idea that at the cross - what looked like a defeat for Jesus, a defeat for God, was actually a victory, a triumph over the powers of darkness and death. The very thing that the devil uses to accuse & condemn humanity with - that is the law - Jesus took & nailed to the cross when he died.

One of the best explanations of this is actually *The Lion, The Witch & The Wardrobe* by CS Lewis. Do you remember how it works in that story? Edmund, who represents all of us, has been captured by the Witch, who represents Satan & the powers of darkness. She claims Edmund is rightfully hers because he has broken the laws of the land & of the Universe, & has made foolish & selfish decisions that mean he has come under her ownership. Because he has broken the ancient laws of Narnia, he should die, & because she is so full of hate, she will have great pleasure in putting him to death. Aslan, who of course represents Jesus, goes to the Witch, and does a trade, offering himself in Edmund's place. The Witch is of course delighted, because now she doesn't just get to kill a puny human being, she gets to kill the only one that stands between her & complete control of the world: Aslan. And Edmund is allowed to go free, but Aslan must now suffer a horrible & humiliating death at the hand of the Witch & her demonic horde. As they kill Aslan, the Witch & her demons break into a frenzy of celebration, believing they have won, and have finally eliminated the power of goodness from the Universe, & now they control everything. BUT its a double cross. Aslan understood the deeper magic or law of the Universe in a way the Witch couldn't. Aslan later tells us that if the Witch "*could have looked a little further back, into the stillness and the darkness before Time dawned, she would have read there a different incantation. She would have known that when a willing victim who had committed no treachery was killed in a traitor's stead, the Table would crack and Death itself would start working backwards.*"

And this is how the early church understood the cross event. That at the cross the powers of darkness had done their worst, their absolute worst, to Jesus - and they actually thought

they'd won. But actually it was a double cross, a trap. At the cross Jesus lures them in, they do their worst, & Jesus absorbs their hate, their enmity, their accusations, their condemnation, their power - into his own body, & then destroys it, by nailing it to the cross & then three days later rises from the dead. The New Testament tell us that the final enemy to be defeated is death itself, but on the cross Jesus absorbs death, & then overcomes death, by rising from the dead. As it says in Hebrews 2: 14-15 "*Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might break the power of him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil— and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death.*"

BREAK & DISCUSS WORDS & IMAGES USED. Mediator, redeemer, reconciler, shame-bearer, sin-bearer, go-between, negotiator, intermediary, interceder, broker, peacemaker, healer, Victor, the perfect human being, the lamb of God, the bridge, defeater of death, disarms the darkness

Timing from here?? Duty elder calls kids back??

But there's something a bit confusing in all this isn't there. if Jesus won the victory on the cross, & defeated the powers of darkness - why do we still see so much darkness & suffering in the world?

If Jesus won the victory 2000 years ago, why is there still so much evil in the world? We still have wars and terrorism. We still have murders and rapes. We still have tsunamis and earthquakes. we still have AIDS & Alzheimers & cancer. We still have children who are abused & brutalised, & loved ones who die far to soon. How do we explain this?

Well there's an analogy that I have found super-helpful in this regard, from the end of WWII. In June 1944 the allied invasion of Europe was launched with a massive assault on the beaches of France. The fighting for the first 48 hours was savage, and thousands of lives were lost on both sides. But historians & military strategists agree that once those beach heads were secured at Nomanby, the Nazi regime was doomed to defeat, & the war could only end one way, in a total allied victory.

But of course for the soldiers on the ground, it would not have felt that way. The war ground on for another 11 months of savagery before the Nazi regime finally, finally collapsed. And it is estimated that in that period of 11 months, when victory was assured, another 2 1/2 million Allied & Russian lives were lost, & whole towns & villages & communities were destroyed. Hitler, knowing his time was nearly up, became even more crazed & vicious over those last 11 months, ordering all kinds of suicidal & vicious, & self-destructive counter-attacks. Which I have to say, reminds me of that verse in Revelation (12:12) which says "*woe to the earth and the sea, because the devil has gone down to you! He is filled with fury, because he knows that his time is short*"

And this is the situation we are in: living in the time between Jesus' first coming & his second coming. The beach head has been established thorough Jesus' first coming. Our job is to push ahead and in cooperation with God's Spirit free the captives, all those who have been taken prisoner by the forces of darkness & oppression, but even though they have been struck a mortal blow, & will be defeated, they will fight back - & there will be pain & loss on our side too, until that day we Jesus returns & fully establishes his Kingdom here on earth.

But from our perspective, living between Jesus' 1st coming & the final coming of his Kingdom, we are like the soldiers in those trenches, & the war is still brutal. Sin, suffering, injustice, sickness, death, disappointment, failure. And in these trenches, if we are not careful, we can lose perspective. But we must never lose sight of the fact that we struggle in hope and in certainty of final victory.

The Redemption of the world has been accomplished. It may not yet have been fully realised. BUT D-Day is behind us. AND THE FINAL VICTORY OF CHRIST is ahead.

Each time we gather to observe Communion we “proclaim Christ’s death — until he comes.” These are the two reference points of the Christian life, and this ordinance is given us to keep perspective — Christ has come, and he is coming again. Redemption has been secured, and it will one day fully come.

A day is coming when we & this world will experience full redemption. No more evil. No more sin. No more alienation. No more loneliness. no more broken relationships, No more suffering. No more curse. When ever we celebrate communion, we look back to that last last supper, to that special passover meal and to the passover lamb that was slain for us, in our place, to set us free. And we also look forward to the beautiful feast to come, the marriage supper of the lamb, when the victory of the lamb is complete - the day when our reconciliation will be complete; when our healing will be complete; when our victory will be complete, & there will be no more death or dying or tears or mourning.

In a few minutes we will indeed be moving on to celebrate communion, and to celebrating all that Jesus has won for us, even though it was the most shameful & humiliating of deaths, even though it cost him everything, his very blood, his very life.

As we get ready to come to the table of the Lord & take communion, we are also going to invite you to bring with you the stone you have been given, & to lay it down in this basket at then foot of the cross. There’s an old gospel song that says “lay your burden down, at the foot of the cross” - & that’s what we are going to do today.

The prophet Ezekiel talked about a day that would come when the Lord would cleanse his people, when the Lord would remove our heart of stone, and replace it with a tender heart of flesh, a heart of love. Some of us may be able to identify with that & we know we have a stony heart, one that finds it hard to love God or to love other’s in the way we should. But I know this: all of us are carrying stones IN OUR HEARTS. Many of us are carrying burdens that we need to let go of & lay at the feet of Jesus. For some of us, our stone will represent pain, or brokenness, or fear, or shame, or sin, or loss. Your stone may represent a burden you are carrying for someone else - a son, a daughter, a husband, a wife, a friend - but someone you are carrying a burden for that you need to lay at the foot of the cross. Or perhaps today this stone will represent you, your life, & this morning you want to lay your life afresh at the feet of Jesus.

So I’d invite you to take your stone in your hand now, & think about what it might represent for you this morning & what it is you want to lay at the feet of Jesus. (pause for half a minute to consider/reflect)

But as we take communion this morning, hear the words of this beautiful song: I AM INVITED TO THE TABLE OF THE LORD; I WILL FEAST AT THE TABLE OF THE LORD; HE SAYS JUST COME AS YOU ARE - TO THE TABLE.

This morning we invite you to come & lay your burden down, to empty your hands & heart, & to instead take up Jesus’ offer of grace & love & forgiveness in its place. And Jesus does say come just as you are - you don’t have to be religious or righteous, it doesn’t matter where you’ve been or how much you feel you’ve messed up or have been messed up; Jesus just says COME.