

Sermon preached at King's College Cambridge

Sunday May 5th 2019 - Second Sunday after Easter

He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed. *1 Peter 2.24*

What do you think the crucifixion of Jesus is really about? And what do you think his resurrection is really about? If you think of yourself as a Christian, how do you explain them to a non-Christian? It's one thing to recount the story; although of course Jesus' all-too-earthly death is a lot easier to describe than his miraculous rising from death. And even if your conversation partner lets you get past the miracle, how do you deal with *why* the death and resurrection happened, and how it matters – to us? Matters so much, in fact, that it's a matter of life and death?

The temptation is to reach for easy, familiar phrases. 'Christ died for our sins' is probably the one we most often hear and say. St Paul has several variants on this, in four of his letters. If we spend any time studying Paul's words, let alone the more generic use of the phrase, we soon discover that those questions – why did it happen, and how does it matter – depend very heavily on the smallest word in the sentence, that one tiny little preposition, 'for'. . 'Christ died *for* our sins'.

Anyone who studies languages, modern or ancient, will tell you how slippery prepositions can be when you need to translate them. Paul uses two different ones, as it happens, but they can mean much the same thing: 'by reason of' or 'for the sake of' or 'because of'. This is what we have to have in mind when we listen to him. So, to quote from one of our best modern English versions of the letters - *Jesus was handed over to death for our trespasses* (Romans 4.25), or *Christ died for the ungodly* (Romans 5.6), or *Christ died for us* (Romans 5.8), or *Christ died for our sins* (1 Cor 15.3) or *having given himself on behalf of our sins* (Gal 1.4).

I mention that last one last because the translation goes further than the others, even though it has one of the same prepositions. It's actually going out on rather a theologically-loaded limb; and in a way which is extremely unhelpful.

The problem is that a phrase like 'on behalf of our sins' says quite a lot more than 'because of our sins' or even 'for the sake of our sins'. 'On behalf of our sins' plays into the idea that Jesus took a punishment due to us. This is part of a really common misconception. You hear it a lot, from certain brands of Christian. It's been around quite a long time, admittedly, for reasons which will become clear.

Those questions about why Christ died (and rose), and what that means, often prompt this standard answer: 'humanity is mired in sin, totally unable to win salvation by our own merits. This means we were consigned to hell, having earned the wrath of God. But Jesus took the punishment due to us himself, and if we accept him as our Lord and Saviour, then we will be saved. Heaven awaits us, not hell.'

You may be very familiar with this. This is not surprising, as many people buy it; and they use those very phrases, like a mantra. The problem is that it is mostly wrong. Pretty comprehensively mostly wrong.

Entire books are written on the pros and cons of all this, so I can only offer a few very brief counter-arguments here. I'm also aware that there might be people here who passionately believe what I'm criticising: so I offer this in all due humility. So here goes.

First: 'humanity is mired in sin': the language is deliberately hard-hitting and emotive. And we don't have to look very far to see what we can call human sin: be it bombings in Sri Lanka, the racism of nationalist politics, our destruction of the environment or simply day-to-day selfishness towards others, and worse. But that's not the whole story: for every example of the bad there is an example of the good; indeed, more than one. And at the theological level, the notion that we are all 'mired in sin' simply ignores a fundamental – that we are all made in the image of God. In each and every one of us is an icon of the divine, although it might be more deeply buried in some. Answer this: if we are so vile, why would God bother to come to us in the person of Jesus? Why would he become human if being human had no worth? To tell someone they are mired in sin is an act of spiritual abuse.

'Unable to win salvation by our own merits': this is true, of course. The line 'be good, and you'll get to heaven' is only for young children as a kind of holding operation in the early years of their upbringing; like believing in Santa Claus. Otherwise we slide into a primitive sort of religion, where we have to win over a usually-terrifying God. But this mentality infects much of what I am criticising, ironically. And, also ironically, some of the most enthusiastic proponents of it are the same people who hound us with their catalogues of moral failure and codes of purity: they are obsessed with merit-checking. In fact, the belief that we can't do it on our own is part of what the good news really is, about the death and resurrection of Jesus: that the initiative has been taken by God, in Jesus. He reaches out to us. We don't have to do anything to prompt that reach.

Then: 'we were consigned to hell, having earned the wrath of God'. Here is more hard-edged language. 'Wrath' is a strong word, and there is something psychologically suggestive about the eagerness of some to use it, rather than, say, 'anger', even though it is a rather archaic word. All too often you hear it said with what sounds like relish, which again smacks of spiritual abuse. It's a kind of spiritual Project Fear. Jesus uses the word (wrath) just twice, but he does use it, so we have to get our heads round it. However, he uses the word 'love' sixty times. If we want to talk about God's wrath, it must be consistent with what we say about God's love. And that 60:2 ratio is pretty compelling.

Next: 'but Jesus took the punishment due to us himself'. So we arrive at the heart of it. The language is legalistic, despite the repeated diatribes against legalism by both Jesus and Paul. But, more substantially, it assumes that God is bound by some system of cosmic justice, that he is compelled to punish human wrongdoing; and to punish in a way which portrays him as a retributive, vengeful God who must be appeased. Where is the God of forgiveness, infinite mercy and unique humility, about whom we learn, and whom indeed we simply see, in Jesus?

This is where that primitive kind of religion which I mentioned before has shouldered aside the way of Jesus. I think we can see a tension between the two throughout the Old Testament. Just as we see a tension there between obsessive religious observance and a holy love of the poor, the widow and the orphan, so there is a tension between fear of an angry God and wonder at the God of mercy. I believe that fear is part of a religiosity which arises from within the less ethical bits of being human, where images of the dominant father and the aggressively powerful ruler get projected onto God. God's response to this is in a sequence of hints and rumours which thread through the Hebrew scriptures, especially the prophets and psalms: hints of a God who is quicker to forgive than to condemn.

This is one of the golden threads in those writings which are gathered up in Jesus and woven into a great tapestry of joyfully good news. They are the threads which, we should guess, Jesus was weaving for the disconsolate disciples on the road to Emmaus; and indeed for all his friends in those days after his resurrection. No more hints and rumours, filtered through the fragile imaginations of prophet and poet. God has now intervened directly: being human, and speaking humanly, in the person of Jesus.

The more compelling – and more biblical – understandings of Christ's death and resurrection speak of *sacrifice* and of *reconciliation*.

Now of course sacrifice immediately sounds like more of the same, discredited primitive religion. But Jesus' sacrifice is not like the human sacrifices of the Aztecs, viciousness demanded by the capricious god Huitzilopochtli. Jesus' sacrifice has its origins in the old Jewish idea of sacrifice, *properly understood*. At the heart of that are the great sacrificial rituals of Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. Those complex and blood-soaked ceremonies were actually the vehicle for God to reach out to his people and restore them to relationship with him. They were not winning him back: they were enacting his welcoming them back. This is one of the richest of those golden threads in Jesus' Jewish inheritance.

What was new in Jesus' sacrifice was that the whole system of sacrifice was being brought to an end. In Jesus, God was cutting across the relentless cycle of sin and restoration. This is why we call it the full, final sacrifice. The restoration is made, once and for all, for all people, and for all time: atonement, at-one-ment, being made at one with God, is achieved. This is extensively and richly explored in the Letter to the Hebrews. Now we have to respond. Do we reach out to grasp the hand already reaching towards us?

That hand is the hand of reconciliation. Here is the beating, beautiful heart of what the cross and resurrection are about. Thus Paul can write:

In Jesus Christ all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross. *Colossians 1.19-20*

This has been a long sermon, by our standards here; and so much more could be said, given how fundamental the death and resurrection of Jesus are to the gospel. But for now, let us pause and take stock. When someone asks what the death and resurrection are about, we *can* say, 'he died for our sins'; but we need to be able to say what we think we mean by that, and very carefully.

Or we could say this. God loves us so much that he became one of us. What he had to show us about loving him and loving each other was so blazingly new and challenging that the gatekeepers of religion had him judicially murdered. That was like the apotheosis of human sin. The perfect man allowed himself to be nailed to a crude cross. But nailed there with him was every moment of human sin before and since. He took it with him in his death. And in his emergence from the tomb he was saying 'all that sin, every single moment of separation from God and from each other, is not the end of the story. It will dog your footsteps through life, but I will be with you on that journey. Every time you fall, I will help you up. I love you more than you can possibly know. That's why I died. But death is no match for me. Stick with me, and it will be no match for you either.'