

CROSS MEANINGS

A Good Friday Sermon

So what's it all about then, this death of Jesus?

There are Christians all around the world who will tell us something like this.

Jesus has died in place of us.

He is our substitute.

He has taken all of God's wrath upon himself.

We humans all deserve eternal punishment in Hell,

but if we believe in Jesus,

God will accept and welcome us.

Over the years, as I have grown, my faith has grown.

I have learned more and thought more and I'm a different person.

In terms of my faith,

there are some things I believe that I always believed,

there are some things that I believe even more strongly now,

there are some things that I just puzzle over,

and there some things that I used to believe that I just don't any more.

But if you were to ask me to choose one thing to eliminate from Christian thought I think I would probably choose this – the idea that Jesus died as our substitute.

You have probably heard me talk about this before.

Why keep mentioning it?

Firstly, because the idea is everywhere – and some would say that this idea is the very heart - the very centre of our faith, and you see references to it especially in hymns and worship songs. So it's a common notion in Christian circles.

And secondly, because I believe that this notion is not just erroneous; it's dangerous.

If we take this to heart we are doing a great disservice to God.

If the theory is true, then God's love turns out to be very limited love,

God's attitude towards us is that we deserve eternal punishment,

and God is so blood-thirsty that God will only forgive us if someone somewhere suffers punishment – even if that person is innocent.

It leaves us with a negative image of God which is far from the truth.

God tells **us** to be forgiving, but God doesn't actually do that.

The truth about God is not just a bit different.

The truth is the complete opposite.

The truth is what Jesus has told us –

God is like a parent to us,

God wills our very best,
 God loves us beyond our deserving.
 Now when I've spoken about this 'substitution' theory before this is why I have spoken against it – because of the distorted image it presents to us of the nature of God.
 For me that's plenty bad enough....but there's even another problem.

This theory stops us from recognising the truth about Jesus' death and the real significance of Jesus' life.

The substitution theory suggests that the whole thing that matters about Jesus is his death and a transaction paid to God that allows us the chance to be forgiven and go to heaven.

Jesus might as well not have lived his life up to then,
 and his teaching and ministry don't matter that much.
 All of it was just marking time till he could do the *real* thing – die on a cross.

It's like the Apostles Creed that is sometimes said in churches and said in some branches of the church every week.
 It's a famous historical document, and the very reciting of it places us in tune with countless believers through the ages,
 But, (forgive me for being blunt),
 what a terrible description it is of our Christian faith.

For example, there's not a word anywhere about love.
 And as for Jesus, here is what the Apostles Creed says about Jesus,

*“Born of the Virgin Mary,
 suffered under Pontius Pilate,
 was crucified, died, and was buried....”*

That's it!
 That's it – Jesus is born then straight to Pilate's judgement hall.
 This is the entire description of Jesus' life.
 Nothing about who Jesus was,
 or what he said and did and taught –
 nothing about what his life was like - and why it matters.

And as for the Jewish leaders condemning Jesus to death, and the Romans carrying out the execution of Jesus – you almost feel you should be thanking them for that.
 In a way it was like they were carrying out the will of God.
 Thanks to their part in the story, Jesus gets a chance to die for our sins - which is apparently the only reason for him being born at all!

So here are some things to notice tonight about Jesus' death.

JESUS WAS KILLED

I realise that might seem a bit basic. But it's worth pointing out.
 Jesus didn't just die.
 He didn't die of old age. He didn't die from disease.
 He was executed – not by a deranged criminal - but upfront and officially,
 by the authorities in the country where he lived.

To some of those in power he was seen as a threat, and they could see he was
 attracting a growing group of followers, so they decided to be rid of him.

I dare say Jesus could have escaped this fate,
 by staying away from Jerusalem,
 keeping quiet about the cheating and shenanigans in the Temple,
 toning down his message,
 and sticking to what people wanted to hear.

But Jesus would not give up his programme of working for a better world –
 of standing up for the poorest and weakest
 and challenging the rich and powerful to use their wealth and position to help
 others.

Jesus had a mission in showing the world a better way to live,
 a better way to draw close to God,
 and a better way by which to treat the neighbours around us.

That cost him his life.
 But if we are going to be his followers, then we need to get with that programme.

You see the reason they decided to kill Jesus was because they wanted to kill
 what Jesus stood for. After all, Jesus was the leader.
 Their thinking was straightforward: kill the leader and the movement will die.

But this mission of Jesus was given him by God.
 This kingdom Jesus spoke about is God's kingdom.
 Jesus may have been the first to outline the way, but God is calling others like
 you and I to follow.

The whole point of Easter is that this work did not die after all but continues
 even to this day.
 If we think of Jesus' death only as a transaction to appease God we miss all of
 this.

Jesus had a mission. We must have too.
 Jesus was radical and upset the status quo. He was looking at the world with
 different eyes.
 If we are going to follow him we need to follow him in that.

The next thing follows from this.

JESUS' DEATH WAS A SACRIFICE

People often describe Jesus' death as a sacrifice, and I agree with that. But his death was not a sacrifice to God, to placate an angry God, or to soften up a vengeful deity, to try and change God's mind and let us off the hook. Christ's death was a sacrifice for us.

He died because he loved us, he loved the world **and** he dreamed of a better one and all the evil and opposition on earth would not make him give up.

Sacrifice and love often go together. People who sacrifice their lives often do so because of a greater love.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a German Lutheran pastor, who was imprisoned and later executed for his involvement in a plot to kill Hitler and stop the war. He died because of his love for the German people, and those other people who were being victimised.

There was Martin Luther King Jr, whose dedication to justice and the civil rights movement meant he was killed. He sacrificed his life for others.

Or think of Oscar Romero the Archbishop of El Salvador, who spoke out bravely on behalf of the poor and the injustices taking place in his native country. He was gunned down by a death squad in 1980 when leading worship.

These people sacrificed their lives because of their faith in God and their love for others.

But these deaths weren't substitutions. It would be crazy to suggest that God demanded that Bonhoeffer, King, or Romero **must** be killed.

These people were killed *because* of their love for God and fellow human beings and their passion for a different and better world.

So, too, Jesus. He sacrificed his life. He offered it up as a gift to God, not because God demanded it, but because he was filled with God's passion for the kingdom of God - a different kind of world.

JESUS' DEATH IS A METAPHOR FOR OUR OWN LIVES

Dying and rising is like a description not just of Jesus' life but of the spiritual life of all people everywhere.

We were thinking about this the other week. We have to die to let new life emerge. The whole world operates on this system of death and new life. New life comes once the seed dies in the earth. Winter must die for spring to be born.

Some things must stop to allow others to start.
 We need to say **no** to some things to be able to say **yes** to others.
 Paul talked about dying with Christ and being born into a new kind of life.

*'I have been crucified with Christ;
 and it is no longer I who live,
 but it is Christ who lives in me.'*

(Galatians 2:19-20)

The old Paul was no more – but now a new Paul had been born.

To be a follower of Jesus is to embark on a new way of living,
 to change, to grow,
 to become renewed, to take on new ideas,
 to allow God's values to become our own.

We die to an old way of life and we are born into a new way of living.

And one last meaning...

JESUS' DEATH SHOWS US GOD'S LOVE

All Christians everywhere will agree that despite the sadness and suffering and apparent defeat of Jesus, his death has brought something clearly into the world that is wonderful.

Thus looking back on the outcome of what happened that Friday, we can even dare to call this day 'Good' Friday.

Some will say the cross is wonderful because it provides us with away to avoid the wrath of God. The cross is wonderful for it shows us how we can be accepted by God - because Jesus has died as our substitute.

Others, (like myself), would argue the opposite.

The cross is wonderful because it shows us the depth of God's love. It lets us see how much we are loved.

That love is wonderful because we know full well it's a love we don't deserve.

We can't earn it or pay it back, and we have no right to expect it – yet it is here – God's unending love for us.

Far from being a transaction to soften up God into loving and accepting us, Jesus' death is the exact opposite, showing that there is no point where this love stops or fails.

No matter how much we reject God, God keeps on loving us.

Even though we try to destroy that love by nailing Christ to a cross, the love is still there and can never be broken.

The message of the cross is that not even death can take away God's love for us.

Loved like that by God, how can we bear not to love in return?

Luke 23:44-56

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