

Good Friday Talk, April 2 2021

Again we have gathered to hear an account of the final hours and death of someone who lived and died almost two thousand years ago.

Why?

There are so many deaths, even noble deaths, in the sad history of the world.

Why this death of this man?

Especially as our culture seeks to both relativise and relegate the importance of this death, to see Easter as just one religious holiday among many in our multifaith society, and its religious observance as something optional to be fitted in between camping and football.

Why is this an important day for the world, a day and a remembrance that deserves to have prominence and priority, in your heart as well as in the public calendar?

It is because the death of Jesus is no ordinary death, but the source of life and hope in a world full of death, and Jesus is no ordinary man, but the Son of God, the rightful ruler of all nations.

You may have already sensed as you listened to one of the eyewitness accounts of Jesus' betrayal, trial, and death some of its extraordinary nature.

This is a death Jesus knew full well was coming

He spoke of the woman who poured expensive ointment on His head as preparing Him for burial.

He interpreted its significance in the meal he shared with His followers – the bread and wine as His body and blood

He wrestled with its necessity in His prayer to His Father as He asked for the cup of suffering and death to be taken from Him, but humbled Himself to do the Father's will – 'not as I will, but as you will' He said.

He knew, better than any, that His death was approaching, and what kind of death He would suffer.

And He had multiple opportunities to challenge, to interrupt the flow of events, to avoid this death.

Knowing it was coming, He could have left Jerusalem

He could have confronted His betrayer

He could have armed and readied His followers to resist, rather than preventing them from fighting. "Put your sword back in its place" he commanded [26:52]

And according to Jesus, He could have called down effective divine assistance, twelve legions of angels.

He could have avoided this death, but instead insisted it must take place.

And even more extraordinary was the great claim being settled by His death – the claim that Jesus was the Christ, the Son of God, the King of the Jews.

That claim might not have much interest to us

But it should – Israel’s God is the world’s God, the Creator and Judge of all, our Creator and Judge Israel’s promised ruler, called the Son of God in Psalm 2, was the one this Almighty Creator said would judge the nations to establish God’s rule over all, and with justice would bring a time of peace, eternal peace [Psalm 2, Isaiah 9:27] to a renewed creation. To know that peace all need to be at peace with him.

This claim, stated on the charge board attached to Jesus’ cross – This is Jesus, King of the Jews [27:37]– mattered to the Jewish leaders

And for them Jesus’ shameful crucifixion was the decisive disproving of any claim by Jesus to be Son of God, the Christ, the promised King of Israel.

So they mocked him with it as he hung dying on the cross

Matthew 27:43

“He saved others; he cannot save Himself. Let him come down now from the cross, and we will believe in him. He trusts in God; let God deliver him now, if he desires him for he said ‘I am the Son of God.’”

A crucified man could not be the Christ, could not be loved by God

But Jesus did not share their view of the meaning of His cruel death.

On the cross, draining the cup the Father had given Him, He was showing Himself to be the true Son of the Father.

His last words, Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani, that is “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me.” Are the words of David from Psalm 22:1, the words of the humiliated and then rescued and vindicated King of Israel

With these words we know Jesus knew Himself, even in suffering, to be the King of Israel, God’s Son

And that staying on the cross, not saving Himself, was the demonstration, not the denial, of His being God’s Son

Diametrically opposed interpretations of what was happening in the crucifixion of Jesus

One the interpretation of the winners, the other of the dying man

Yet Jesus’ resurrection showed He was right. This was the demonstration by the almighty God who can alone give life to the dead that Jesus spoke the truth, that in His death He is God’s Son, the Christ, the King of Israel.

That is why this story, remembering this death on this day, matters.

It is the death of the Son of God, the one who will rule and judge all people

But it leaves us with the bigger question, a more unsettling question.

Why must the Son of God, the beloved of the Father, die? Why was it God’s will He hung on that cross?

Suffering is not how we conceive of greatness. Like the religious authorities, we usually think of dying at the hands of your enemies as failure

So why must the Son of God die? What does this death achieve?

Jesus spoke of His death and its purpose in a number of places, but let's consider just one, what He said on the very night before his crucifixion.

Sharing a Passover meal with His disciples he had made bread a sign of His body given in death and the cup of wine they shared the sign of His blood, His life given in death, and had said Matthew 26:28 "this is my blood of the covenant that is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sin"

The goal of His death was forgiveness of sins, but what is this sin that needs to be forgiven?

Could sin be so dreadful and difficult that only this death could deal with it?

Could it be everyone's problem, so that Jesus' death is, as Christians say, important for everyone?

How does His death bring forgiveness?

It puzzles this focus on sin – because we don't think we are that bad, or sin – our falling short of God's standards, so serious a problem

We have many other problems

Gender equity

Violence against women

The warming of the planet

Protecting our infrastructure from malicious internet attacks

Staying well, finding a job

The list goes on

But sin?

Well there is sin all around us

Sin in our society

Sin in our lives

Sin in our hearts

And there is sin in this story read tonight

And to get a handle on its character and seriousness lets think about what we have heard

Think of the actions of the religious authorities.

Plotting Jesus' death, seeking false witness, inciting the mob to call for Barabbas

Because of envy – resenting Jesus' popularity and authority – that is sin

Their mocking cruelty, delighting in Jesus' suffering as a demonstration of their own rightness and power – that is sin

Then there is Pilate, willing to wash his hands of an injustice he could have prevented to be free of the bother and threat to his own position – that is sin

And the Soldiers – taking cruel pleasure and bolstering their sense of superiority from having Jesus in their power – that is sin

Judas – betraying a friend for money – that is sin

And Jesus' followers – like Peter – who boasted of loyalty and then abandoned a friend and broke his word because of fear – that is sin

Crowd – easily swayed to demand a murderer and rebel instead a righteous man of peace

There is sin in the story, yet the sins we see - Envy, lies,

hatred, cruelty and unkindness

Failure to do our duty to protect the innocent or following the mob to condemn the innocent

Greed, breaking our word, empty boasting

are not peculiar to the ancients – we see them all around us

Campaigns of misinformation, bullying, breaking of promises in marriage, the greed that withholds wages, violence

Let alone envy, lies, moral cowardice,

See those sins and more in our own lives. We are not different from those people we meet in the gospel

And where does all that come from?

Jesus says it comes from our hearts, the core of our being

From our love of self in our hearts, our determination to put ourselves first

Seen in our love of our own power, privilege, position, prosperity, pleasure and life, and our determination to protect them,

And to be directed in that by whatever seems right and best to us

Our sins show that big Sin, that love of self, is right at the core of our being, effecting every part of our lives – what we do and think and say, and every relationship

And what we see in their dealings with Jesus is that this heart sin which we all share is intolerant of God.

When the Son of God comes, the creator of the world to His own, His rule is to be resisted as threatening our own, and He must be ignored, abandoned, abused, and finally got rid of. Those who sin, who are committed to putting themselves first, saving their own lives, to following the direction of their own wills above God's word, are forever pitted in rebellion against God. The two cannot co-exist

So as well as being destructive and ugly, creating a world of grief and guilt, where power rules and power competes for control

Sin exposes us to God's holy anger – His determination that justice and righteousness are established in the earth, and that all sin is removed from His creation

His determination that all acknowledge Him as He is, the true and living God, their Creator and ruler and judge [know He is the LORD]

And sin Excludes us by its nature from God's lifegiving presence, from the light of His truth, and brings death

Sin is serious, and sin, this love of self, is everyone's problem

Shrouding the world in darkness and death and making every one of us liable to God's just wrath

How can it be dealt with? How can God's just anger at what we have done be turned aside?

Not by us

Not by ignoring God. There is no neutrality. That ignoring is itself sin as you use God's good world without thanks

Not just by changing our minds

Judas – shows us that just changing your mind about what is right cannot undo the wrong we have done – Jesus is still betrayed, still given up to death, the guilt remains

Not by any gift we could offer God

Sinners owe Him their lives already – there is nothing to give beyond what we already owe, and anything we do now could not make up for the wrong we have done.

Sin must be forgiven, must be forgiven by God, forgiven by God without compromise to His just judgement

Without accepting or tolerating sin, without suggesting that rebellion can be overlooked or ignored.

God will not abandon His righteousness to forgive

Only as the sinless Son dies in the place of sinners, enduring the God's just judgment on sin

Only as the eternal Son of God pays the cost in Himself of forgiveness, the debt of death each of us owes

Can sinners find forgiveness from the holy God

Only this death that we remember today can bring forgiveness while vindicating God's just judgement and demonstrating His righteousness

Why the Son of God must die?

TO do what only He can do – to die the death sinners deserve in their place, the righteous for the unrighteous

TO die the death that will turn aside God's just anger at our rebellion

To bring what only HE can bring – the forgiveness of God to all who will repent and believe the gospel, for there can be no forgiveness for those who persist in rebellion, who persist in their hostility to God, but there is forgiveness for all who will call upon the Lord Jesus for mercy

And with that forgiveness HE by His death brings us peace with God, and hope of eternal life as we no longer need to die for our sin

Wonderful – reason enough to remember Him as long as life on this earth endures, to celebrate this day as the day when we were ransomed from judgment and death

But we have more reason to remember with thanks. We have only answered the question “Why must the Son of God die” in terms of the purpose of His death. But we can also answer it in terms of motive.

For what reason does the Father give the Son to die for sinners

What takes the Son to the cross?

Why is it the Father’s will, as it is so clearly?

And there is only one answer, given repeatedly in Scripture

Love

John 3:¹⁶ “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.

Romans 5:⁶ For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. ⁷ For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die—⁸ but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

Ephesian 3:⁴ But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, ⁵ even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—

1 John 4:⁹ In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. ¹⁰ In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins.

The Father sends the Son to die out of love

Love, not because we are lovely, in any way deserving

But because just as He is holy, just and righteous so He is love, rich in love, grace and mercy

Much we don’t understand about the world – why this or that happens

But we can know why Jesus went to the cross

In a World where there is still so much cruelty, unkindness, envy and hatred

Here we know love

The love of the God who cannot be defeated, whose will is done, whose good purpose is achieved not just despite but through our rebellion against His good will

Marking this day, this death, says God is, and HE is good, and there is hope in Him – Hope for love and life, for truth and justice, hope for you and hope for all creation, a real hope, just as there was a real death on a real cross on the day that follows this night/ this day so many years ago

Lord's Supper

On this night before He died Jesus made it clear that He wanted His followers, believers in Him through believing His gospel, to remember Him in His death by commanding them to repeat His breaking of bread that symbolised His body given in death and sharing the cup that spoke of His blood poured out.

And we are going to do that now in sharing together in the Lord's Supper

This meal is only for believers in Jesus, for in eating and drinking you are confessing your faith in the gospel, the gospel we have heard read, the gospel of the death of the Son of God

summarised by Paul as "Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures"

So in eating and drinking you are Confessing the truth of the gospel's verdict on your life – that you are a sinner – deserving of the judgment of death, facing God's just wrath, and unable to save yourself

And in eating and drinking you are Confessing the necessity of Jesus' death. That only the death of the Son of God could save you, that His death alone is the sacrifice that can turn God's just anger away from you, and the effectiveness of His death, that in truth His death has brought you forgiveness for all your sins – past, present and future

IN eating and drinking you are Confessing you have a Saviour by grace – you have done nothing to deserve a seat at this table, that a share in Christ's body and blood and the forgiveness and fellowship with God it brings are a gift from His generous love

And you are confessing the truth of the revelation of God given in the Father sending the Son into the world to save

that the only God is One, Father, Son and Spirit, three persons; holy, righteous, just, loving, merciful and faithful, almighty and eternal

IF that is your confession then come and eat and drink together as you hear Jesus words of promise, and receive from His hand a share in His death for sin.