

Jesus – Crucified and Risen

A Shocking Fact

The fourth century bishops who wrote the Nicene creed maintained that at the heart of what Christians believe, at the heart of what Christians proclaim, was this shocking fact

That the Lord Jesus, the eternal Son incarnate, born of the Virgin Mary.

was crucified under Pontius Pilate;

This is what Christians had proclaimed from the beginning

³ *For I, wrote the apostle Paul to the Corinthians, passed on to you as most important what I also received: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures,*

And the bishops kept the crucifixion of Jesus at the heart of the Creed first of all because it was true – it was something that had happened and could be dated to Pilate’s tenure as the Roman prefect in Judaea during the reign of the Roman emperor [Jesus and the rise of Early Christianity. Barnett pp. 143-8]

Now I probably don’t need to convince you that the crucifixion of Jesus was a real event in history.

But there is a surprising amount of scepticism and ignorance about the historical reality of Jesus in our community.

The Australian Community Survey carried out by the NCLS in 2021

[website <https://www.ncls.org.au/categories/surveys/australian-community-surveys/>]

Asked respondents whether they thought Jesus was a real person who actually lived.

Only 49% of respondents agreed [and only 40% of those in the 18-34 year age group]

29% said they didn’t know, and 22% said they thought Jesus was a mythical or fictional character

So that’s 51% of people either uncertain about or denying that Jesus was a real person in history

This despite the fact that the evidence that Jesus existed, and especially that he was crucified, is overwhelming

The letters of Paul – which are from within 20-30 years after Christ’s death bear witness that he preached Jesus crucified, despite the difficulties it created with his audience, both Greek and Jews.

1 Cor. 1: ²³ but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to the Jews and foolishness to the Gentiles.

Those letters are well within the lifetime of many witnesses of those events, when it would have been easy to deny a story of a fictional Jesus

Then there are the four gospels, separate, not uniform, accounts of Jesus’ life and death, from around thirty to fifty years after Jesus’ death, a record of what had already been taught by Christian preachers for decades. The gospels make clear that Jesus’ life and death were witnessed by many. Eyewitness accounts, not made up stories.

Then there is the unbroken witness of Christian communities for whom the message of the cross was at the heart of the Lord’s Supper, the meal they repeated from the beginning

As well there is testimony to the existence of Jesus, including testimony to the cross, in Non Christian sources

There are written sources, like Tacitus [c. 56-120 AD], talking about the execution of Christians by Nero after the Great Fire of Rome [July 64], who wrote “Christus, from whom the name had its origin, suffered the extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of one of our procurators, Pontius Pilatus.” [Tacitus, Annals, XV.44:2-8; New Eusebius 3., p. 2][cf. Josephus, Lucian [c. 125-180] in Everett Ferguson, p. 561]

And archaeological sources, like the famous graffiti of Alexamenos worshipping his God, mocking the worship of the crucified. The evidence for Jesus’ crucifixion is so great and sure that the Jewish NT scholar Geza Vermes, who is

quite sceptical of many details in the gospels, is quoted by Tom Holland, as saying “The death of Jesus of Nazareth on the cross is an established fact.”

You can hear that on the Rest is History Podcast 175. Crucifixion

This is a podcast in which Tom Holland and Dominic Sandbrook, two historians who would not call themselves Christians, look at the Roman practice of crucifixion

After detailing the reality of crucifixion, the role it played in asserting Roman power and order, and the way it was perceived in first century Greek and Roman society they say of the gospel testimony to Jesus’ crucifixion it is ‘Not the kind of thing anyone would have any interest in making up.’ [podcast minute 34:40]

You see, For ancient Romans and Greeks crucifixion was the punishment of rebels and slaves, seen as the very worst form of punishment that could be inflicted. It was designed to be not just slow and painful but humiliating, where the victim, stripped naked and having already been weakened by scourging and paraded through the town, was made a public spectacle, dying ‘the most wretched of deaths’.

For the Romans this ‘most cruel and disgusting penalty’ [Cicero, Hengel p.8] was designed to demonstrate Rome’s authority and power in its capacity to utterly humiliate those who opposed it. Jesus being crucified showed, though he was called ‘King of the Jews’, he was no more than a slave, a being without any status or honour.

In fact the word ‘cross’ itself was said to be harsh to the ears [Varro, Hengel p. 9], talk of crucifixion a visceral turn off. To preach a crucified Jesus would lead many on first hearing to think of Jesus as an awful, debased criminal, a complete and shameful failure – not a Saviour

When we see how offensive crucifixion was to the people of the ancient Mediterranean world we see that it was deeply shocking to preach a crucified Lord, that for ancient hearers Jesus dying on the cross did not commend Jesus but was completely inconsistent with the claims Christians made for Jesus. There was no advantage at all in making it up. In fact keeping on talking about Jesus’ crucifixion was positively disadvantageous.

So why did the first believers, and then the writers of the Creed, keep crucifixion at the centre of their confession and their proclamation?

Yes, it happened, but why not try and cover it up, or at least make it less prominent? Not place it immediately following the confession of the Lord Jesus as the Son of God become man, a claim which for many the very fact of his crucifixion denied.

The answer to that question is contained in the creed itself, in three other statements in this section of the Creed.

They kept it central, firstly because Jesus’ crucifixion was

Purposeful – for us, *For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate;*

Secondly because The story of Jesus didn’t end at the crucifixion - *he suffered death and was buried. On the third day he rose again*

And thirdly because the crucifixion, along with the resurrection, was all part of God’s big plan - *in accordance with the Scriptures;*

Let’s look at each of these

Purposeful – for us, *For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate;*

The writers of the Creed speak of Jesus’ death being for our sakes, or for us [ὑπερ ἡμῶν], and there are many Scripture references to Christ’s death being for us.

These Scriptures tell us Christ’s death as a criminal, condemned by judicial authority, was intended, purposed by God to achieve great good for us.

A few examples -

Paul in 2 Corinthians

2 Corinthians 5: ²¹ He made the one who did not know sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

God has sent Jesus to take our place

To take our place under judgement, made him 'to be sin for us', to be there on the cross as the sinner we are even though he had no sin Himself, to endure in our place what our sins deserved

So that believing in Him we can be reckoned righteous, have the verdict on our lives that Jesus deserves, be people in whom God's law can find nothing to condemn and so people who can live forever with God.

And this verse is a reminder that when we say for us, it is not for us in the sense that Christ is someone we have chosen to represent us, our delegate undertaking a mission authorised by us on our behalf.

He is not for us in that sense. Jesus is 'for us' in the sense of our substitute, like when we are injured on the footy field and the coach sends in someone to take our position, to do in our place what we can't do.

This substitution of Christ on the cross 'for us' as those under the law of God's condemnation is even clearer in Galatians 3

*Galatians 3: ¹³ Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, because it is written, **Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree.***

Christ redeems us, sets us free from God's law's just condemnation, by enduring it himself on the cross. He pays our debt to the law. We were under the law's curse for our sin, our disobedience – that is we were condemned to exclusion from God's people, under sentence of death and having no place in the promised inheritance – the new heaven and earth; but on the cross Christ literally took that curse on Himself in our place

So that we could be included in God's people – forever, be reckoned those no longer under the law's condemnation, be reckoned fit to be in God's presence now in receiving the Spirit now, and forever as heirs of the promise

One final example that speaks of Christ's death for us, one familiar to believers Luke 22:20/ 1Cor. 11:24

Again, it is the Lord Himself speaking to us

*1 Corinthians 11: ²³ For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: On the night when he was betrayed, the Lord Jesus took bread, ²⁴ and when he had given thanks, broke it, and said, "This is my body, which is **for you**. Do this in remembrance of me."*

²⁵ In the same way also he took the cup, after supper, and said, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me."

Luke 22: ²⁰ In the same way he also took the cup after supper and said, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you.

Christians didn't make up after the fact that Christ's crucifixion was 'for us', 'for our sake'.

Jesus taught us that before He died.

Taught that He would give His body on the cross to be the one sacrifice that would take away the offence of our sin for ever. [Hebrews 9:24-27]

And in Luke we see that our Lord also taught that His blood was poured out 'for us', his dying for us on the cross, in our place, would bring into effect the new covenant where our sins would be forgiven forever [Hebrews 10:14-18]

In confessing *For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate;*

We are confessing that Jesus' shameful death on that horrid cross

Was in our place, taking upon Himself what our sin deserved [1 Peter 2:24]

Bringing us the good only the sinless Son of God could bring us – for only He, become true man, could die in our place.

The incomparable good of forgiveness forever

Of Freedom from the power and penalty of sin

Of being cleansed so we are fit to receive the Spirit

Of peace with God because in Christ we are reckoned righteous

Of being included in God's people who will live forever in His presence

And more

But who can say with assurance that it was for 'our sake' Christ was crucified under Pontius Pilate,

In the Creed it is clearly believers – those who are confessing that they believe in one God, Father, Son and Spirit

This is what the gospel says

Acts 10:⁴³ All the prophets testify about him that through his name everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins."

John 20:³¹ But these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

Those who believe the gospel can say Jesus' death was for our sake.

But Scripture has various ways of speaking of those for whom Christ died, each reminding us of something important.

Consider

John 10:¹¹ "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.

Those who can say 'for our sake' are Jesus' sheep – those who listen to His voice, who hear His call and follow Him, and there is no assurance of being included in Jesus' death outside of that listening and following – all our lives.

And listen to Romans 5

Romans 5:⁶ For while we were still helpless, at the right time, Christ died for the ungodly. ⁷ For rarely will someone die for a just person—though for a good person perhaps someone might even dare to die. ⁸ But God proves his own love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

Here those for whom Christ died are the ungodly, sinners.

That is a reminder that when we say 'for our sake He was crucified under Pontius Pilate' it was not because we were good or deserving

To confess that He was crucified for our sake is to confess that we were sinners, and these words can only be on our lips by grace.

It is to confess that we were once alienated from God by our choices, willingly enslaved to sin, deservedly facing God's wrath

And Christ's death is the source of all the good we know as believers – the source of our reconciliation to God, our freedom, peace and forgiveness

Again, Paul in 1 Timothy

2 Timothy 2: ⁵For there is one God and one mediator between God and mankind, the man Christ Jesus, ⁶who gave himself as a ransom for all, a testimony at the proper time.

Here Christ is said to have given himself for all, whatever their race, their education, their gender, their culture or language

And I am drawing your attention to this

Because Terms like 'all' and 'sinner' are deliberately inclusive.

They are invitations to all without exception to find ourselves included by faith in Jesus amongst those who can say 'for our sake' He was crucified

So if you can know yourself a sinner – you know you can be included in the benefits of Christ's death if you will trust Him

If you know that other person is a sinner – that husband or wife, that child, that friend – or enemy

You can know that they can be included in the 'us' if they will turn and believe

Believers confess 'for our sake He was crucified under Pontius Pilate'

And we can say that with confidence because

The story of Jesus didn't end there, in the crucifixion - he suffered death and was buried.

On the third day he rose again

The podcast I referred you to is very weak on the resurrection – not surprising from those who are not yet believers

The resurrection of Jesus is unique.

In the body in which He died and was buried, He rose and appeared to His followers

Where death's power is most seen and felt – in the cold corpse of the person who was once living

There the defeat of death is demonstrated as Jesus' followers touched Him and spoke with Him

And it is something only God can do. Resurrection life is not in the power of humanity, not in the power of lifeless matter

God raised Jesus from the dead

The resurrection is a God only vindication of all Jesus taught and did

And it is an event, not just a thought, a nice concept, a comforting projection

You heard the witnesses to Christ's resurrection in the reading from 1 Corinthians

1 Corinthians 15: ⁴that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, ⁵and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the Twelve. ⁶Then he appeared to over five hundred brothers and sisters at one time;

most of them are still alive, but some have fallen asleep. ⁷ *Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles.* ⁸ *Last of all, as to one born at the wrong time, he also appeared to me.*

Different people, at different times, in different places and contexts

And a lot of them – most of whom, wrote Paul to the Corinthians, were still alive at the time of writing – that is, people who could be consulted about the truthfulness of what Paul is writing.

And when you read the gospel accounts you see that those to whom Jesus appeared weren't expecting the resurrection. Jesus had to convince them He was alive

By talking with them, saying their names, offering Himself to be touched by them, showing them His wounds, eating with them

In speaking of the resurrection they witnessed to what they had seen, touched and heard [1 John 1:1-5]

Now Over time all sorts of alternate explanations for their testimony have arisen, offered by those who don't want to accept that they were telling the truth

I mention these alternative explanations now, not to deal with them in detail, but to invite you to come and talk if you think they might be true

Some suggest, for example, that the disciples were deliberately lying when they talked about Jesus' resurrection

This was what the religious authorities tried to claim when they put out the rumour that the apostles had stolen the body

But It strains credibility to think they are intentionally lying.

The gospel accounts, especially of the resurrection, are sufficiently different in detail to make it clear they didn't get together to make up a story

And what would be the benefit for them in making up a story? A life on the move, accumulating no wealth, like Paul – beaten, whipped, stoned, imprisoned, killed – as he said, if there is no resurrection 'we should be pitied more than anyone' [1 Cor. 15:19]

And if the body was stolen, why not search for it and produce it.

You might die for a lie you believe is true – like those who piloted the planes into the twin towers, but you don't die for a lie you know is a lie, and the apostles maintained their witness to Jesus rising from the dead even when they were killed for it, died rather than say it was a lie

There is a more sophisticated version of the lying scenario.

They were nobly lying. That is the disciples had a spiritual conviction of the greatness of Jesus, of his life somehow going on, and they crafted the gospel stories to convey what they had experienced of Jesus so that we could share their experience of Jesus as we learnt what He meant to them. But it wasn't lying because we were never meant to take what they wrote literally.

But they were lying if Jesus was not risen bodily.

And this suggestion makes nonsense of the gospel stories, of Luke's insistence that he is conveying eyewitness testimony in his gospel, of the empty tomb, of the details of the resurrection – for example the conviction of sceptical Thomas by the appearing of Jesus to be touched in his hands and side – of the testimony of Paul, and of the pre-existing Jewish understanding that resurrection was always bodily. This theory is the lie of those who want to deny the bodily resurrection yet stay in positions of influence in the Christian church

It strains credibility to think they are intentionally lying

So maybe the apostles and the other witnesses were deceived.

There are various versions of this

They went to the wrong tomb [you might get confused and go to the wrong space in the car park when you go to get your car, but you work it out in the end – and you don't go home with someone else's car, and this is more significant] – but it wasn't the empty tomb that convinced them Jesus was alive, it was the risen Jesus himself. And why didn't the authorities just produce the body?

They were deceived about him being really dead; he had just 'swooned', fainted from blood loss and then revived in the tomb – and yes, then rolled the stone away, and convinced His followers that He was the glorious risen Lord, and vanished. This is unreal about the process and purpose of crucifixion and inconsistent with the eyewitness accounts.

Hallucination – either grief or drug induced [magic mushrooms] – but multiple appearances to different people in different contexts is entirely the opposite of what you expect of hallucinations, and it is doubtful there are such things as 'mass' hallucinations

All these alternatives are far less plausible than the almighty God raising Jesus from the dead, and the apostles witnessing to what they had seen and heard and touched as Jesus appeared to them to convince them He was alive.

But if thinking these are possible is keeping you from taking the gospel seriously, come and talk

The apostles kept preaching and we keep confessing the crucifixion because Jesus' death on the cross was purposeful

And because God vindicated Jesus, showed the truth of all He taught, in raising Him from the dead

But that is not all

We confess that Jesus' death and rising

were part of God's big plan - in accordance with the Scriptures;

Here the creed echoes St Paul ³ *For I passed on to you as most important what I also received: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures,* ⁴ *that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures,*

And Paul himself is just summarising what Jesus taught, that HE had come to fulfill the Scriptures. [Matt. 8:17, 12:17, Mark 14:49, Luke 4:21, 24:25-27, 44-48]

Jesus' death and rising weren't an accident, and they weren't an abandonment of God's past dealings with Israel

The fulfilment of the Scriptures in Jesus' death and resurrection tells us the crucifixion and resurrection had been purposed by God from long before, a purpose and plan He had revealed over centuries to His people in the Scriptures, and that the salvation He brings is the salvation promised by God to His old testament people

In those Scriptures – from Genesis 3:15 on – we see that God had a plan to undo the effects of the sin of Adam and renew the whole creation through having a people for His own

This plan was revealed in the promises to Abraham, that in him all the nations would be blessed [Gen. 12:3], promises repeated and developed through Israel's history – through the covenant at Sinai, through the anointing of David as King and the promises made to Him that one of His offspring would have an eternal reign [2 Sam 7], through the promises in the prophets of a new heaven and earth, and of a servant who would be a light to the nations [Is. 42:6, 49:6], a servant who would save God's people through His sacrifice of Himself [Is. 53], and of a new covenant [Jer. 31, Ezk. 36].

Many, many promises – and one of the most exciting things you can do is read your Old Testament and see those promises given hundreds of years before Jesus was born

See how they become richer and more detailed

And then see how they are fulfilled in Jesus – both in the details of the crucifixion and resurrection, and in the big picture of His coming, and how believers in Jesus become heirs of those promises as the people the Lord Jesus has redeemed for His Father, the people who will dwell in the new heaven and earth.

It is both awesome and encouraging to look at the horrid event of the crucifixion – in all its ugliness of cruelty, callousness, and hatred – and say with the apostles that those involved in killing the Lord Jesus ‘did whatever your hand and your will had predestined to take place.’ Acts 4:28

Awesome – because God did exactly what He intended and revealed hundreds of year before – through the sinful free choices people made

Awesome because what God did was so good when what people were doing was so wicked

And encouraging – to see God never fails to do what HE says, His word never fails, even if all seems lost

When you see Jesus’ death as for us, as not the end of the story, as part of God’s big plan for the whole creation

You can see why those fourth century bishops kept the shocking fact of Jesus’ crucifixion at the heart of what we confess

Our continuing Confession and Message

And Crucified under Pontius Pilate, raised on the third day – remains our confession, for it is true and it is a wonderful confession

It Says of our God, Father, Son and Spirit

That He is the Living God – not an idol, not a creation of the human imagination

Who reveals His purposes and plans and then brings them to pass – in the world, in real life

The God who can do what no creature can do – save by the eternal Son becoming man to do for us on the cross what we could not do for ourselves, save by raising Him from the dead

The living God whose foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, whose weakness stronger than human strength [1 Cor. 1:25]

The living God who is good, doing all this for us, sinners – those who have trashed His world and His reputation, because He loves with a great love and is rich in mercy

The living God who deserves our praise and trust

And this confession says of us, who believe in the Lord Jesus by believing the gospel that He has died for our sins and risen again

That we are Loved, those who can say with Paul

Galatians 2:20 I have been crucified with Christ, and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.

That we are included by God’s grace through faith in the people of God, the people who will inherit the new heaven and earth, who will rise with Christ on that day when every tear is wiped from our eye

And it says now that we have a Living Saviour – always able to help – and more of that next week, when we think of what the Creed says of the Lord Jesus’ present and future

To understand this confession, which has been found on the lips of so many ordinary sinners like us over the years, makes your head spin

That we could have such a God as our God, such a Saviour, know such love

And

For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate;

he suffered death and was buried.

On the third day he rose again

in accordance with the Scriptures;

Remains at the centre of our proclamation

The creed reminds us that sharing the gospel is not sharing ideas to be debated

Passing on The advice of a life coach which people can take or leave depending on their circumstances

It is news, news of events

It is the proclamation of what God has done in Christ

Good news – for it says the good God, the living and true God, In giving us a Saviour, the Lord Jesus, who was crucified for us, for our sin, and raised to life to never die again

is offering us forgiveness for the wrong we have done, life for our death, truth for our lies, light for our darkness, a way home in our lostness

That is good news, news that saves, that is itself the power of God to bring that life and light to all who believe – Romans 1:16-17

*Romans 1: ¹⁶For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, first to the Jew, and also to the Greek. ¹⁷For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith, just as it is written: **The righteous will live by faith.***

But as News it must be responded to

When the bloke in the car came into the car park of the church camp on Sat Feb 7th 2009 at Marysville and brought the news of the approaching fire

Adam and Andrew and the others there had a choice

Believe it, pack and go – and save their lives

Or ignore it, and perish

How they felt about it, whether they were disappointed to be leaving early, rushed, unsettled - didn't change the choice

Didn't change the urgency

When you hear the news that *that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, ⁴ that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures,*

You have a choice

To respond as this news requires – with repentance – that is changing your mind about who is in charge of your life – the Lord Jesus, not you; and faith, believing that Christ has died for your sins and now lives and reigns – and live

Or to ignore or reject it – and face condemnation in God’s just judgement

How you feel about being faced with this choice – whether you feel its an imposition, a bother, poorly timed, even rude

Doesn’t change the choice

If you think you don’t know enough – unsure about the resurrection, or even the idea of sin – then investigate, come and talk

But better still – choose to live, confess the truth of the gospel and ask the Lord Jesus to forgive you and give you His Spirit, which He will to all who call on Him in truth, and talk to someone

And if you agree the news of Jesus’ death and resurrection must be responded to, then you know it is also News that needs to be heard

That Australian Community Survey by NCLS I spoke of at the beginning that revealed many were sceptical or ignorant of Jesus’ existence

Had both encouragement and challenge

3/10 said they were likely to go to a carols service if invited by friends and family – openness

But only 44% of those in the survey had a close friend or family member who attends regularly

Means 56% don’t

And that Means if those 56% are to hear – it has to be from others – workmates, fellow members of the sports team or club, someone who is in class with them, a neighbour

From people like you and I

*For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate;
he suffered death and was buried.*

*On the third day he rose again
in accordance with the Scriptures;*

Offensive and awful as that crucifixion was, That’s the gospel

Do you believe it?

Are you growing in understanding and conviction of its truth?

Is it a joy to confess that is what you believe?

And are you sharing this good news so that others will be able to say – for my sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate