

## Lift High the Cross over Canterbury

"Greater Love has no-one than this that he lay down his life for his friends." (John 15:13)

Isaiah 53:1-7

John 19:16-30

***This Good Friday I want to pose the question: What does the Cross mean to you and me?***

***The Cross means that the Price has been Paid:*** The Cross and all its implications have always shaped and directed the thrust of my preaching but one particular aspect of the death of Jesus has affected me personally more than some of the others. As the hymn says: "In my place Condemned He stood." - I just can't get away from the fact that He took all my rebellion, failure and guilt upon Himself when He was totally perfect. In return I was given forgiveness, and all the benefits of Salvation. He got what I deserved, and I got what He is! When I was a boy we had no shower and even a bath was a special occasion, particularly in cold weather. After I'd washed with a liberal lather of Wright's Coal Tar Soap, I loved to lie soaking with as much of my body under the warm water as possible. Soon there was a thick great scum floating all over, particularly after football. I'd stay under until the temperature demanded that I got out. Then I'd pull the plug and wait with eager anticipation for the moment when the tug of gravity would cause that whirlpool effect, and all the scum and dirt would be sucked down the pipe with a glorious gurgle and gulp.

Years later, when meditating on Romans 5:12-18, I was reminded of my bath time experience.

As a result of Adam's single act of disobedience a channel was opened up into the world, through which flowed all the filth and muck which floats around our ears right up to today. But through Jesus' one act of obedience in going to the Cross-, the process was reversed. Jesus pulled the plug on sin and by

descending into Hell drew after him every last bit of our evil and foulness.

We will sometimes endure shame, but mostly we avoid it. Jesus did not simply endure the shame - and surely this is one of most wonderful verses in the whole Bible (Hebrews 12:2) - He 'despised/scorned it'. He treated it with contempt although it was the ultimate shame that anyone could endure.

The curse of God was upon Him, but the shame paled into insignificance compared with the joy that was ahead of Him. His gaze penetrated beyond the grave to a captivating vision. He saw you and me and millions of others being set free and brought home to Father God.

If there had been no one else in the whole wide world He would still have died just for me - or you -that's the measure of grace. That's the price He gladly paid to bring us back to Father.

And if the Price is Paid, why act as if we are still in debt? To walk in anything but the freedom and life Jesus purchased for you and me is not simply foolishness, it is ultimate folly.

So child of God stand tall in this glorious reality and take every opportunity to speak of the one who has gifted you this eternal hope. Live like the Price is Paid (not a deposit, not a dodgy cheque, not a never, never) but in FULL!

***The Cross means that relationships are restored:*** Whatever concepts we use to describe the meaning of Golgotha, we must never lose sight of the fact that it is an event that takes place within the context of a relationship, such as the divine Father and His Son, or the Heavenly Husband and His Wife.

Let's look at a human relationship, which has gone wrong. We'll say a husband is unfaithful and leaves the wife he swore to love to the end.

Now she has had to fend for herself, bring up the children, work twice as hard to fulfil the role of both Father and Mother, suffer lonely nights and unshared days, experiencing

premature aging and low self worth while she hurts for herself, but also pines over what her husband is doing to himself, for she really does love him. Then he returns and stands in the doorstep: 'will you forgive me?'

Will she have him back? Can the relationship be renewed? Will she reject him? What does she do? I don't think she says; "have a cup of tea. Fish and Chips were your favourite meal, weren't they? Eastenders or Corrie is on the Box if you want to look". If you think that's what she could say, I don't think you've ever really loved.

Relationships aren't cheap, and neither are human beings. No! She hesitates. She as a person is totally opposite to what he is and what he has done. She is faithful, committed, selfless, clean, sacrificing; he is faithless, selfish, shallow, and dirty. The tension rises in her heart, then something in her snaps. She metaphorically steps out of her heart into his shoes as he stands there, feels what's going on inside him - the fear, smallness, humiliation, self-judgement, God's judgement, rejection, emptiness. Then she steps forward and embraces him with a reconciling kiss: 'Of course I forgive you, come in.' She forgives because she knows what it is she is forgiving. She has experienced it. This is, in part, what happens at Calvary: 'Bearing shame and scoffing rude, in my place condemned He stood, sealed my palm with His Blood, hallelujah! What a Saviour!'

Let's imagine that, three months later, the husband questions his forgiveness, saying to himself, 'If she really knew what I'm like and what I have been, she would throw me out this very minute! He can reassure himself with the words He knows she would speak to him. "I know what I have forgiven, I've been there and experienced it, and I've carried it right away into the unfathomable depths of my love. You need never be afraid again." That something of what Calvary means - relationships restored with God and with one another!

And if the Lord, by grace, goes to such lengths to restore His relationship with us, so the Cross demands that we go to the same lengths of grace and forgiveness to restore relationships with each other. And so we need to live like they are!

***The Cross demands discipleship:*** A complete sacrifice demands complete commitment, for what Christ paid was not a deposit but the full price for our redemption. Salvation is free, but it is not cheap. A Christian lifestyle, which revels in resurrection and sidesteps the cost of discipleship, is at best only half a commitment.

Such a Christian witness falls perilously close to a consumerist Christianity that is difficult to identify in scripture.

Jesus has every right to demand that we take up our cross to follow Him (Luke 14:27). At its worst, our cross can be only a pale reflection of His own.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer put it very well: 'When Christ calls a man He bids him come and die.' Paul put it even better: 'If we endure we will also reign with Him' (2 Timothy 2:12).

I once met a young woman who was homeless in London. I talked to her about the value that God and we, His people, placed on her life. Her initial response was one of disbelief and disgust.

When I met her three weeks later I discovered that she had spent Christmas off the streets in the home of a young family within our congregation. During that time she had surrendered her life to Jesus Christ.

As we talked about her initial conversion, she stated that when I told her of God's love she thought I was just another Jesus Jerk - all spiritual mouth and no action.

Through the ministry of the family that took her in and other Christians who cared for her, she said that she had come to understand that actually there was a God of Love who cared a great deal and there was truth in what we said. So often a cynical world in which we live has looked in at the Christian

Church, which has often tried to keep the reality of the cross and resurrection within the narrow boundaries of personal salvation and piety.

As I understand the New Testament, the key to life, the Death & Resurrection of Jesus is summed up in John 1:14 - 'The Word became flesh and dwelt among us'. If our experience of, and thankfulness for, the death and resurrection of Jesus does not flesh out in living our lives as Jesus would have us live (1 John 2:6), and demonstrating Christ's compassion in a very practical way to the world, then no matter how spiritual we may like to think we are, the label of "Jesus jerk" will inevitably stick.

Discipleship is no soft option; in fact it's not optional at all: it's what we signed up for the day we said yes to Jesus as Saviour and Lord.

***Finally the Cross and the Resurrection are two sides of the same coin:*** They cannot and must not be detached.

It was not until around 250AD that the Cross of Christ became the symbol of the Christian Faith. It is at the Cross we see the passionate heart of God for humanity. The evangelist's favourite text: 'For God so loved the World that He gave His only Son', sums it up wonderfully.

Nevertheless, I want to suggest that we have made a terrible mistake in nailing, gluing, hanging and standing crosses in every conceivable orifice in every religious place. Slogan Posters about the Cross are another mistake, Even Gold-leaved texts printed onto Chapel walls send out so many wrong signals.

Why? Because the central point of Christianity is not the Cross on its own. This preoccupation with crosses, death, and blood are dire slogans, to a culture which is largely unaware of the content and nature of the gospel, and simply reinforces the idea that Christians are a grim, deadly lot!

However the resounding note of throughout the New Testament is one of Triumph! Jesus is alive! Nobody was ever

martyred for saying Jesus had died for him or her. Hundreds of people, perhaps thousands died on crosses throughout Jesus' lifetime. But nobody absolutely nobody, raised themselves from the dead!

Therefore we should not be surprised that recently written songs emphasize the central theme of the New Testament, that Christ who died is alive; Christ who paid the ransom, reconciled us to God, and became our substitute, is at work by His Spirit, getting His will done throughout the Nations of the Earth.

We must not attach sentimentality to the Cross and speak of it in mock religious tones. That has nothing to do with reverence. To revere somebody is to do what he or she wants you to do in the way they want you to do it. We have been given the same Spirit that raised Jesus from the Dead to do just that. Thank God for the Cross, without which there would be no salvation, but thank Him also for the powerful Resurrection, for without this greatest ever jailbreak, Calvary would be insignificant.

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