

**‘JESUS: SUFFERED, DIED, DESCENDED’
(The Apostles’ Creed – Part 4)**

[St Mark’s Online Services – Sunday, August 30, 2020]

Drama

- the story of the man in the garden

I want you to imagine a man in a garden. It might be a pretty garden with green-leafed trees and colourful flowers but you wouldn’t know because the man in this garden is there at night. He’s been out for dinner with some friends. But the conversation at dinner turned in a distressing direction and now he’s agitated. He’s pacing and seems very distracted. He may not have asked his friends to come with him but they were a bit worried about him so they’ve tagged along. It’s late and they should be in bed but things are not OK. There’s an eerie sense that all is not well. And as his friends start to find their anxieties growing, the man they’ve followed out here turns to them and tells them to pray. But not for him. He says they should pray for themselves and the danger they face. Now they’re really worried. And then he leaves them. He walks away from the group about as far as you could throw a rock. All his friends can see is his silhouette. But they notice him fall to his knees. And he prays. Not like a little child prays as they climb into bed at night. And not like you or I pray when we gather together- with decorum and calmness. No. He prays with an uncommon kind of heart-torn anguish. He’s sweating profusely. And what could we say his sweat was like? It was like drops of blood falling to the ground. Now there’s a well-chosen simile. And these are his words- his strange, tortured, and yet somehow measured words: ‘Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done’.

Today/tonight I want to share three stories with you. This is the first. It’s a story you know. It’s the story we read again this morning/evening from Luke’s gospel. But it’s a story that once you’ve heard, once you’ve tried to imagine, it’s hard to forget. It’s a remarkable insight into an incredibly intimate moment in the life of Jesus. And it’s a moment that reveals some profound things about the nature of Jesus’ relationship with his father, and what it was that lay before him- now just a few hours away.

- the story that began with a man in a garden

But how did we get here? How is it possible that the Son of Almighty God finds himself in this place? Why is this man, in this garden, anguished and earnest, yet placing himself resolutely in the way of the cup- the cup of God’s wrath? Why?

Well, that’s where the second story comes in. And the second story I want to tell you today/tonight is much longer. But I’m going to summarise it for you very quickly. And it too is a story that began with a man in the garden. Actually there was a woman there as well. You know that story too. Their names were Adam and Eve. And they were the

first people to live. And the first people to sin. Their sin was to listen to someone other than God. They chose not to trust God's words. And so they disobeyed God's commands. And as a result they had to leave the garden. And they were destined to die. And all who read it are left wondering how on earth they or their descendants will ever get back to the garden, or to something like it? How will the judgement of death for sin ever be overcome? And so the story begins.

But then come the patriarchs- ancient men and their families who trusted God even when others did not. And to them God made grand promises. But even they were infected with the disease called sin. And they died before they saw all God's promises fulfilled.

And then came a whole nation of people who inherited God's promises. The people of Israel. God's chosen people. The objects of his love. A people to whom God was relentlessly faithful. Except, tragically, they were relentlessly faithless- disloyal, disobedient, and disappointing. But patiently and tenderly God kept on loving them and assuring them his promises wouldn't fail. He even invented a whole system whereby their sins could be atoned for- bulls and lambs were sacrificed to pay the penalty for their sins, their blood was sprinkled for cleansing, scapegoats were sent out into the wilderness to symbolise the taking away of their guilt¹, priests prayed for their forgiveness. It was all incredibly kind of God. But they kept on sinning. They kept on rejecting him. And as their sin grew, so did God's wrath, though all the while God insisted that his promises would still be realised.

And God sent messengers to these people to call them away from their sins, to warn them of God's wrath, but also to reaffirm his faithful promises. And these prophets even spoke of the day when God would finally make things right- when he would send his king to bring the promises to fruition, and to vanquish sin once and for all by absorbing the wrath of God. The prophets said that the coming king would suffer- like a lamb led to the slaughter, that he'd be despised and rejected, a man of sorrows, pierced for the transgressions of the guilty, crushed for their iniquities, all according to the will of God².

And that's how we find ourselves in the Gethsemane Garden watching the Lord Jesus sweat out his prayer- pleading for some other way, yet surrendering to what the prophets had said must take place- the suffering of the Son of God, under the wrath of God, by the will of God. This is why Jesus is here. This is why this man, on this night, is in this garden. Because this is how God had willed for the way back into the garden to be found, for the judgement of death for sin to be finally overcome³.

And this is not only why we find ourselves in the Gethsemane Garden, but it's also why we find these lines in the creed: 'suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried; he descended to the dead.'

¹ Leviticus 16

² Isaiah 53.

³ For the necessity of this way, see also Luke 24:26, Acts 17:3 etc.

Suffered is a jarring word there isn't it? Up till this point the creed has spoken of wondrous things- a God who is an almighty Father, the universe he made in majesty, his Son brought miraculously to earth. And then all of a sudden- suffering. Why is the grand and happy vision of the creed suddenly interrupted with this? Why is this the next part of the story? And why is this not only the centre of the creed but at the heart of the Bible itself? Well, it's our doctrine of Christ's suffering and death that will answer that question for us. So we turn now from drama to doctrine. And to help us with this, we're turning this morning/evening to Paul's masterful paragraph in the middle of Romans 3.

Doctrine

Now, of course, masterful though it may be there's no way a single paragraph from a single epistle can do justice to the depth and breadth of this doctrine. And if that's true, how much less likely is it that a sermon from me will do it justice?! There are literally hundreds of Biblical texts that contribute to our understanding of Christ's suffering and death. There are more dimensions to this doctrine than there are people in our church. There perhaps isn't a more significant matter in all of Christian theology. So trying to capture the importance of these lines of the creed in a single Sunday sermon feels like trying to pour the ocean into a syringe. So please consider this an introduction to the theology of the cross at best. But having said that, it's still true that this paragraph from the apostle Paul does a stunning job of at least getting us started in our quest to understand. So, let me point out three things he tells us in this paragraph about Christ's death.

- revelation

Firstly, the death of Christ is a revelation. Paul uses the language of revelation here twice. In verse 21 Paul talks about something being 'made known'. And then down in verses 25-26 he twice uses the word 'demonstrate'. In the death of Christ God was showing us something, he was making something known, he was revealing. But what was it?

Well, in Romans 3:21 Paul says that through the work of Christ God was revealing a righteousness 'apart from the law', a righteousness to which the law and the prophets testified. He's saying that in Jesus we see a way to be right with God that wasn't previously available, a way to be right with God that doesn't depend on the law. It comes to all those who put their faith in Jesus- whether Jew or Gentile.

And down in verses 25-26, Paul also says that in the death of Christ God is revealing his own righteousness. He shows that he's made a way to justify sinners whilst himself remaining just. We'll come back to that in a moment. But for now I just want you to notice that Paul speaks of the cross revealing God's own righteousness, as well as a way for us to be righteous through him.

{But of course, elsewhere the Bible speaks of the cross as revelation in different ways too. John's gospel argues that the cross is the revelation of God's glory in Christ⁴. At the start of 1 Corinthians, Paul says that the cross reveals the wisdom and strength of God, and shows how foolish the so-called wisdom of the world is, and how weak the world's so-called strength is⁵. A little bit further along in Romans, chapter 5, Paul writes that in the death of Christ God demonstrates his love for sinners⁶. And we mustn't forget what Paul teaches in Colossians 2 as well, that the cross of Christ spectacularly demonstrates God's victory over every evil power⁷. These are the sorts of things you ought to see when you look at Jesus' death.}

One of the books I was reading this week about the Apostles Creed is written by an American Christian leader called Al Mohler. And he tells the story of when he was invited to watch a preview of Mel Gibson's *Passion of the Christ* film back in 2004. And he said the thing that struck him most about that experience was the way that most of the audience watched the movie while 'nonchalantly shovelling popcorn into their mouths'⁸. You see, most people who watched that film probably just saw an historical drama focussed on the hero's violent death- just another movie. But that's not what the wisest people see. The Scriptures invite us to look to the death of Christ and see God's victory over evil, God's love for sinners, God's power and wisdom, God's glory in Jesus, God's righteousness and the righteousness he makes possible for all who believe. These are not the sort of things you watch unfold while eating popcorn. These are the sort of things you watch unfold with intent awe, and maybe even with humble tears.

- atonement

But of course, the reason why the death of Christ reveals a way for sinners to be righteous before God, is because it didn't just reveal something, but it also accomplished something. And the word Paul uses in Romans 3 is 'atonement'. From verse 23.

[Read Romans 3:23-25a]

As I mentioned earlier, God had established atonement sacrifices in Old Testament times. They were adequate for their purpose. They made ongoing relationship between God and his sinful people possible. The problem was that those Old Testament sacrifices were not able to take sin and guilt away. They covered over sin, but they didn't remove it⁹. And Israel's guilt was not removed by their sacrifices because God's proper punishment for their sin was not meted out. So something different was needed. Something more powerful. Somehow, the punishment for sin needed to be served- punishment for the historical sins of God's Old Testament people, but also the future sins of God's people, including yours and mine. And this is what happened when Jesus died. It was utterly unique. There was no sacrifice of atonement like it before or since.

⁴ See especially John 17:1-5.

⁵ 1 Corinthians 1:18-25.

⁶ Romans 5:8.

⁷ Colossians 2:13-15.

⁸ 'The Apostles' Creed: Discovering Authentic Christianity in an Age of Counterfeits', by R. Albert Mohler Jr.- p.56.

⁹ See Hebrews 10:1-4.

Though he was innocent of all sin, Jesus became sin for us¹⁰. And in taking our sin upon himself, he then bore the wrath of God against that sin. All of it. This was the ‘cup’ he spoke of in the Garden of Gethsemane. The cup of God’s wrath¹¹. Jesus bore the penalty our sins deserve, by taking the guilt of our sins upon his own shoulders. As the apostle Peter says: ‘Christ . . . suffered for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous’¹². He was our substitute. Our atoning sacrifice¹³. The word older translators used was ‘propitiation’. It’s a word which refers to the turning away of God’s wrath from us. And it’s what Jesus accomplished by enduring that wrath himself.

This is why the darkness of the Garden of Gethsemane on Thursday night, gave way to the darkness of Friday afternoon as well. The gospel writers tell us that at noon on the day Jesus died, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. And after three hours of darkness, Jesus’ own voice pierced the sky: ‘Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani’, which means ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me’¹⁴. What Jesus was so grief-stricken about the night before had come to pass. Though he had always been with the Father, in the closest relationship with the Father, he was forsaken by the Father. He felt the Father’s anger. For us.

And then, with a loud cry, Jesus breathed his last. And at that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom¹⁵. And this was to signify exactly what had been accomplished. Free access back to the holy God for all who would come. The way back to the garden. Righteousness before God for natural sinners. As Paul says here in Romans 3:24- justification- just as if we’d never sinned, and redemption- we are bought back by God, rescued from being a slave to sin, and purchased to serve a new Lord- the Lord we were created to live for.

Of course, this doesn’t really make any sense. We might understand why it works, but how can we understand why God would do this? How can we understand why Jesus would undergo this, for us? Paul captures the absurdity of it here when he says ‘all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and all are justified freely by his grace’. That sentence should end differently. All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God so all are punished by God and excluded from his kingdom. That would make more sense. But it’s not the sentence Paul writes- because Jesus suffered and died. All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God and all are justified freely by his grace. There’s that word. The word that explains this absurd proposition. Grace.

When I was on Long Service Leave last year our family visited the town of Bayeux in Normandy, France. And there is a war museum there which honours the military achievement of the Normandy Landings towards the end of the Second World War. And while we were there I took {a/}this photo [Show 1st photo] of a monument that the British erected near their cemetery. {The words over the top of it are in Latin}. You won’t be

¹⁰ 2 Corinthians 5:21

¹¹ Eg. Jeremiah 5:15.

¹² 1 Peter 3:18.

¹³ See also 1 John 2:2, 4:10.

¹⁴ See Mark 15:33-34.

¹⁵ Mark 15:38.

able to read the words over the top of the monument so I'll read them to you. They're in Latin: 'Nos a Gulielmo victi victoris patriam liberavimus'. The translation? 'We who were conquered by William have now liberated his country.' It's a very interesting inscription. The English in World War II had still not forgotten the 11th century invasion of Britain by William the Conqueror from France. Nevertheless, the British had come to the aid of the French to defend them against Hitler's Germany. And by this inscription they remind the French of their grace. Though you were formerly our enemy, we came to your rescue. And across the road from this monument you see {gravestones as far as the eye can look} this. [Show 2nd photo]. Gravestones as far as the eye can look. The British grace towards the French cost them dearly.

And so it was with the death of Christ. Though we were formerly God's enemies, he came to our rescue. And it cost him dearly. This is his grace.

- justice

But it was not grace without justice. Grace is certainly hard to make sense of. But it's not unrighteous. And this is the third thing to point out from Romans 3. God delivers grace with perfect justice.

It's interesting isn't it that the creed refers specifically to Pontius Pilate. There are not many people from history mentioned in the creed- just Jesus, Mary, and Pilate. And Pilate is a shady character to say the least. He's really only known these days for the part he played in the death of Christ. He's known for his weakness. He's known for the great injustice he allowed- the execution of a man he knew to be innocent¹⁶. But the reference to Pilate in the creed locates the death of Jesus in history. And it draws our attention to the injustice that occurred.

But in Romans 3, Paul is keen to point out that, though at a human level there was great injustice, from God's perspective there was perfect justice here. Of course, this isn't to say God thought nothing of the sins of those who put Jesus on the cross- Pilate included. He will hold those people to account for their sins. But it is to say that the death of Jesus on the cross was an act of divine justice. In verse 25 of Romans 3, Paul points out what we've already noticed this morning/evening- that the sins of all Old Testament people had been left unpunished. But for there to be justice for those sins, there needed to be punishment. And by willingly taking that punishment, Christ enables God to forgive those sins justly. And not only those sins but also ours. By virtue of Christ's death, God could be, as verse 26 says, just and the one who justifies sinners. Ultimately there is no justice without God's wrath. And there is no ultimate forgiveness without justice.

And this is why the creed speaks of Jesus descending to the dead. Some versions have the word hell there instead, but the word 'dead' better captures what the original writers

¹⁶ I enjoyed the way J I Packer speaks of Pilate washing his hands as 'the goofiest gesture, perhaps, of all time'. From 'Affirming the Apostles' Creed' - p.80.

of the creed had in mind¹⁷. The point is that Christ descended to the realm of the dead. He really died. This was no fiction. He really did bear what sinners ever since Adam and Eve have deserved. Of course, God did not abandon Jesus there¹⁸- more on that next week. But nevertheless that is where he went¹⁹. He went where all dead people go. And the point, of course, is that if Christ has been there for us, he can certainly lead us through that place when our day comes- to the other side. As the Puritan Richard Baxter once wrote in a hymn: 'Christ leads me through no darker rooms, Than He went through before'.

This is God's justice. Christ bears what we deserve to bear for sin. And he bears no less. Descending to death for us. Feeling the Father's forsakenness for us. Bearing and absorbing God's wrath in place of us. In this, God's justice is fulfilled. But he is also able to justify those who come to him in faith to claim the benefits he offers. It's astounding.

Discipleship

Well if trying to briefly summarise the doctrine of the cross is like trying to pour the ocean into a syringe, I would say that trying to summarise the implications of Christ's death is like trying to pour the ocean into a small glass. Really much the same. To talk thoroughly about discipleship in the light of the cross in just a few minutes is close to impossible. But a few minutes is all I have. So let me again give you the briefest introduction to a few lines of thought you might like to pursue further. And I hope these five short suggestions will be enough to demonstrate that understanding the death of Jesus really does shape a person's life very profoundly.

So, five quick thoughts.

- accepting his grace (Romans 3:27-28)

Firstly, accepting his grace. This is where the life of Christian discipleship begins. Straight after this paragraph we've been reading in Romans 3 Paul goes on to say again that the way to receive the benefits of Christ's death is by faith in Jesus. By entrusting your life to his Lordship. And when you do that, you acknowledge that you have absolutely nothing to boast about before God. Faith excludes boasting. Because faith in Jesus is faith in the gracious act of God to atone for our sins. We contribute nothing to our own rescue. So, if you're a Christian here this morning/evening, then this is where your new life began and I hope it continues in the same vein- remembering every day that you are lost without his grace, you'd be enslaved to sin and facing death if it weren't for the death of Jesus on your behalf. And if you're not yet a Christian then this is what Jesus calls you to today/tonight- to see what Jesus has done for you, and to entrust your life to him. This is faith. It's the acceptance of his grace.

¹⁷ The placement of this line in the creed after the reference to his burial rules out the possibility that the creed is referring to the 'hell' Christ suffered on the cross (though there is a sense in which we could certainly say he did).

¹⁸ Psalm 16:10, quoted in Acts 2:29-31.

¹⁹ See Mathew 12:40, 1 Peter 3:19.

- living for him who bought us (2 Corinthians 5:15)

But, of course, the death of Jesus has many other implications for the life we live as well. The Christian life is cruciform from beginning to end- that is, it's in the shape of the cross. And I'll briefly mention four ways in which this is true, although there are many more.

In the first place it means living for him who bought us. If Paul says that Christ has redeemed us by his death it means we've been bought by Jesus to belong to him. And if we belong to him, we live for him. We take up our cross daily and follow him, as Jesus himself said²⁰. Which means we don't just live in freedom from sin's guilt and sin's penalty, but we also live in freedom from sin's power. It no longer rules over us. As Paul says in 2 Corinthians 5:15.

[Read 2 Corinthians 5:15]

- suffering with him and like him (1 Peter 4:12-13, 1 Peter 2:21-25)

Secondly, the cruciform life involves suffering. As he suffered, so we who follow him will suffer. As the world rejected him, so it will often reject us. And like his was, our suffering too is under the hand of the sovereign God²¹. So we don't need to fear it, though it may be painful. And we look to not only suffer with him, but to suffer like him. That is, we seek to imitate the patient and quiet way he persevered in suffering, entrusting himself to God no matter what people did to him. I encourage you to read the letter of 1 Peter to reflect on this further, and especially the passages I've listed on your outline.

- trusting his enduring love (Romans 8:32)

But thirdly, I want to remind you that the cross of Jesus also causes us to trust in his enduring love. Listen to what Paul says over in Romans 8:32.

[Read Romans 8:32]

Paul's logic is this. If God gave up Jesus for you, there's nothing he won't do. If he did the most loving thing imaginable, surely he'll keep doing lesser loving things for us. If he's proved himself gracious in the death of Christ, we can count on that grace to continue forever. And this verse appears in a chapter which is written to assure Christians of God's unending love. Because of the death of Jesus there's no place for a Christian to doubt that God loves them. There's no place for us to question whether God is being good to us- because Jesus died.

- having confidence in the salvation to come (Romans 5:9-11)

²⁰ Eg. Luke 9:23

²¹ See Acts 2:22-23.

And fifthly and finally, the cruciform life means having confidence in the salvation to come. This is what Paul argues for in Romans 5:9-11 and you can read that paragraph later as well. But if Christ has descended to the dead for us already, then we have nothing to fear when death comes to us. I spoke with a lady this week whose Dad recently died as a result of COVID-19. He got sick and passed away very quickly, and it was extremely sad for her and her family. But he had faith in Jesus. And she told me how fearlessly he faced death. Her Dad said to her: 'If I get better that will be great. But if COVID kills me I will get to go and be with Jesus and that will be great too. It's a win/win.' And I would say that that attitude is perfectly in keeping with what the Bible says about living in the light of Christ's death²².

I told you before that there were three stories I wanted to tell you today. Well, this is the third. It's the story of my life, and I hope yours. It's the story of a life not just full of the benefits of Jesus' death, but a life actually shaped by the cross. Because the suffering, death, and descent of Jesus is not just a doctrine. It's not even just a map that shows disciples the way. It's life- life radically altered by what happened in that moment of human history when Pontius Pilate lived, and Jesus suffered, died, was buried, and descended to the dead. This is my life now- a cruciform life. And I'm not so much talking here about an urgent imperative as an inescapable reality. This is the story of my life. I've humbly accepted his grace. So I live now for him who bought me, not for myself. And sometimes I suffer the world's scorn or rejection as he did. But I have no reason to doubt his love for me- every day. And I face the future with every confidence that he will be with me, through death, and beyond.

Doxology

- on earth as it is in heaven (Revelation 5)

And when I do pass through death, I will come to the place where Jesus sits enthroned. And I will join the choir of voices who praise him there. Their doxology will be on my lips, and my voice will be in harmony with theirs. And we will praise him for who he is and for what he's done, and especially for his suffering and death which changed everything. And it occurs to me that if I will praise him like that then, I ought also praise him like that now. There's every reason why doxology on earth should be just as it is in heaven.

So I finish today/tonight with these words from Revelation 5.

[Read Revelation 5:5-6a, 9-12]

²² See also the story about John Preston (told by Packer- p.86). He said about his death: 'I shall change my place, but I shall not change my company'.