

28th March 2021 6 pm Palm Sunday: Shout for Jesus

Service led by Emma Latham, Talk by Revd. Robert Latham.

Readings and Intercessions by Emma Latham

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1st Reading: 2 Corinthians 5:16-21 [NIVUK 1984]

16 So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer. 17 Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come! 18 All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: 19 that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. 20 We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God. 21 God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

This is the Word of the Lord

Thanks be to God.

2nd Reading: Philippians 2:5-13 [NIVUK 1984]

5 Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus:

6 who, being in very nature God,
did not consider equality with God something to be grasped;

7 but made himself nothing,
taking the very nature of a servant,
being made in human likeness.

8 And being found in appearance as a man,
he humbled himself
and became obedient to death – even death on a cross!

9 Therefore God exalted him to the highest place
and gave him the name that is above every name,

10 that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,

11 and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.

12 Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed – not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence – continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, 13 for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose.

This is the Word of the Lord

Thanks be to God.

Talk Part 1: What did Jesus do on the Cross?

[Rob:] So Let us pray.

May I speak in the name of God who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

So Palm Sunday is the day that Jesus rides into Jerusalem on the donkey, with the destiny of a painful death on a cross to face at the end of the week. And it's that painful death that I wanted to reflect and contemplate. Jesus comes the innocent one, the almighty one, that there is no reason or why Jesus should go to the cross, there is no crime that He has committed. He's a perfect man. And yet He willingly takes our place upon a cross to die for us.

So what is it that we understand that Jesus is doing when He does this? The circumstances are clear. We human beings have fallen short of God's glory. We've fallen into sin. It's our fault. We choose to do it. We've been given freewill by our Father in Heaven, and we are responsible before Him for these things that are wrong in our lives and in the life of the world and all around. We cannot, however, deal with this issue. There is only one person that has the power to actually deal with our sin, and that is God Himself. But why should He? It's not His fault. He's leant over backwards to place us in the most wonderful possible place for us to live and share our lives in. He wants us to be one with Him. And we turned our back and rebelled. It's man's responsibility, but God has the power. And if God just does it: magic, if you like, then that would actually be dodging the issue.

The actual way in which God in His love reaches out for us to show His love for us, is actually sheer genius. Because what God does is He comes to us as a human being, to take upon Himself the mantle of our sin. As we heard Emma read in the first reading, Jesus comes and became sin, though He knew no sin, in order that we might become the righteousness of God. And this is what we are seeking to understand when we talk about the atonement. The atonement itself is a word that actually says what it means. To understand the word atonement, you only have to break it up. It means at-one-ment, it's an Anglo Saxon theological word. It means about making amends or giving compensation and making up, reconciling of oneself to another. But when we talk about the atonement, we're talking about this great gulf of sin that is bridged by our Father in Heaven, in order to bring us back to Himself. So this is not just any old making amends, it actually is the awesome glory of God being revealed in its magnificence. Ultimately, what's here is a mystery. And we will never bottom it at all. We just have in the end to accept it.

But there are four things which are often said about the atonement, that maybe gives us a handle, an idea about what it is. I've already used the expression that God shows His love, but that's the **first** thought, that is about showing the mighty love of God. Yes, it is, He's dealing with man's sin, woman's sin, with humanity's sin. But God is reaching down to us to demonstrate the great love that He has for us. We remember perhaps the most famous verse in the Bible¹, God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have eternal life. But this is God's demonstration of ultimate love, a love that has no comparison whatsoever.

It's a bit similar to the prodigal son's father, who every day from his journey away from him scans the horizon to see whether he's come to his senses, and he's on his way back. But once he is visible on that journey of penitence back from those mistakes he's made, his father rushes out to him, and endues him with a love, falling on his neck kissing him, putting fresh clothes on him, the ring of honour, and proclaims a feast and kills the fatted calf. It's an example for us to follow, and to be aware how much God loves us.

1 John 3:16

Secondly, it's that God is our substitute. God takes our place. We've got two pictures of this to kind-of think on.

- The first is a law court. We are in the dock. We are condemned to death, because we are rightly being prosecuted for the wrongs we've done. And we know that the wages of sin are death. But instead of condemnation, God pronounces us free and not guilty while taking the punishment upon Himself. Jesus died in our place upon the Cross.
- The second picture says pretty much the same thing really. In the old days of slave markets... We have slavery still today, but it's a little bit more hidden than we might have imagined, say, in the time of Jesus, where slaves would be advertised, you know, for sale, the stronger ones setting the higher mark, and the younger and the weaker ones, having to fetch the lower mark. But along comes God into the situation, He pays the price for our release, we are released from the slavery to sin, and God takes our place and He becomes, instead, the redeemer, the person who sets us free.

The **third** one emanates from the Old Testament, the system of sacrifice that is established in the Old Testament, beginning with the exodus story, where the sacrificial lamb of the Passover is offered in token of the firstborn son. And a whole system of sacrifices then become part of the religion of Israel, throughout the Old Testament. These sacrifices are offered as our representative. It means that the people of Israel do not have to die, that God's punishment will be set aside in place of the sacrifice in order that the people might continue to live. But of course, we're told that bulls and lambs and sheep are never going to be sufficient to offer an ultimate sacrifice.² Instead, Jesus comes into this world, and becomes the ultimate sacrifice for us in exactly the same way. The difference is that Jesus Himself is the priest, who offers Himself and dies upon the cross as the ultimate sacrifice. We read much more about it in the letter to the Hebrews, in which Jesus' blood prevails far more than all those animal sacrifices in the past. And because Jesus then becomes our representative, this is a sacrifice once for all, by which we're able then, with His help, to enter in to the eternal regime of Heaven.

And **finally**, the one that I'm probably rather partial to, is that the Cross is a battle with the evil that fills His world. We know that there is so much evil, the origin of which lies, perhaps, in the temptations of Satan, but also in that sense that we are culpable and we fall to sin, as we say. But on the Cross, Jesus does the battle for all time, with all evil, with Satan, and with everything that is contrary to the will of God. He takes battle and He wins the victory. The final cry of Jesus upon the Cross was a victory cry, "It is finished!"³ And Jesus defeats sin, death, and Satan, and reveals the resurrection to eternal life, so that we might be free. We therefore live out a victory. In our Christian life, we are called not to kind-of fight for a victory in each and every circumstance, because the victory is won. We just simply need to apply the power of the Cross, fight from the victory that is won for us, and we will be victorious ourselves.

Of course, it's impossible, as I've said already, to completely explain such a mysterious experience as the Cross of Jesus Christ. And all of these theories have their truths. And all of them maybe have things that maybe just thinks, "Well, how can this possibly be?" For instance, when we just talk about God's love, it rather leads us as human beings to make an appropriate and proper response. And some people feel it doesn't necessarily always take human sin seriously enough. Because, you know, how do we measure our loving response? If God is our substitute, we sometimes worry that actually sets Jesus against His Father, that Jesus is the victim, and the Father's taking it out on Him, I suppose. But you can't divide the Trinity, and Jesus and the Father are one in this, and it is their work. And there are other things that maybe just makes us wonder about these things. But essentially, we have had to recognise that here

2 Hebrews 10:1

3 John 19:30

is God's action and work in the Cross of Christ, that Jesus there for us, wins for us a love, a freedom, a sense of belonging to God, that can be given in no other way. As Mrs. Alexander would say⁴,

There was no other good enough
To pay the price of sin;
He only could unlock the gate
Of heaven, and let us in.

We're going to just have a brief reflection now, as we listen or share and sing the hymn, 'It is a thing most wonderful'.

Talk Part 2: The centrality of the Cross and our response

So, the mystery of the atonement. But the Cross clearly shines bright throughout the pages of the whole Bible. I sometimes ask myself, at what point did the Cross become an inevitability? There is a sense that from beginning to end of the Bible, it's the story of the Cross. But were there other ways in which we might have possibly found a way so that Jesus didn't need to die upon the Cross? But when we look at Scripture, and just read very briefly through some of the pages, then clearly, the Cross is always having an impact, right from the very Fall itself, where Satan is told that human beings will crush his head, there is a prediction that this fall into sin of humankind will not be the final end of the story.

We also reflect on the story of Abraham and Isaac, because Abraham is bidden by God to offer a sacrifice of his only son, Isaac, the son of promise⁵. And when on that journey, to the mountain of Moriah to make that sacrifice, Isaac timidly asks his father, where is the offering, Dad? Abraham can only say, "the Lord will provide an offering." And at the very moment when the knife is poised above Isaac to kill him, and to complete the sacrifice, the voice of the Lord cries to stop and Isaac is released, and a ram is caught in the thicket, the sacrifice is provided.

We also can reflect on other passages of Scripture that clearly speak most profoundly of the experiences of Jesus upon the Cross. Most clearly included in these would be Psalm 22, which seems to tie in very directly with what happened to Jesus on the Cross. And Isaiah 52 and 53, when we see again, a foreknowledge of some of the events that happened, both to Jesus at the time of the cross, and in preparation for it. And even stretching that the rest of the way, obviously, as we move into the Gospels and the story of Jesus, it's hard to know exactly when the Cross becomes inevitable. Maybe it always was. Simeon makes prophecies and predictions about this for Jesus at the time of His birth. Jesus, it seems, has himself an idea that His mission is to the lost house of Israel⁶. Is there something here about perhaps reviving in Him that ancient story of Israel that will bring the people of Israel as a whole to be the redemptive people? Was this God's original plan in choosing Israel itself?

But even as we get beyond the Cross and the preaching of the Cross, it's obviously the Cross that gives power to the testimony. In Revelations we're told we overcome by the blood of the Lamb, and by our testimony⁷. And even the signs of the Cross remain in Jesus, as He stands victorious in Heaven, because the Lamb that is slain is standing there⁸, alive and bearing the marks that crown

4 Hymn: "There Is A Green Hill Far Away" by Cecil Frances Alexander 1818-1895 (published 1844)

5 Exodus 22

6 Matthew 15:24

7 Revelation 12:11

8 Revelation 5:6

Him with many crowns⁹ tells us "those wounds yet visible above" are "in beauty glorified"¹⁰.

But you know, one of the most telling thoughts that I ever heard around this was simply that when God made the world, He had already made the choice, either out of necessity, or provisionally, that if the world rebelled against him, that He would give himself and His life to redeem us human beings, that even before the world was made, God chose to die, and be willing to set himself as the cost of our sin and wrongdoing, so that in His love, He can bring us back.

But in reality, this is even still only half the story. Because as we praise and honour God for His love to us, for taking our place, for being the sacrifice, for battling for us and wielding the victory over all that is evil and wrong in this world; actually, there is a much-neglected part in this story, and that is our response. Because, you see, we have to decide ourselves with such great love that is demonstrated to us, how are we going to respond? To reject Him is to throw it all in His face. To try and remain neutral is not much better. The only way we have is responding to God, and applying the Cross into our own hearts and lives. One of my great heroes I heard about when I was in South Africa, is a guy called Bob Mumford. I may already have spoken about him to you. And if not, well, you're about to find out.

Bob Mumford has a teaching around the Cross of Jesus Christ, and He divides it into two sections.

- He talks about the **work** of the Cross, which is the atonement, that's the part of Jesus in giving Himself to die upon the Cross. It's what brings us and enables us to come into Heaven. It's God's work to bring us out of sin into His marvellous light. And He therefore is enabled to get us ready for Heaven in that process.
- The second part is the **way** of the Cross. Now Emma read from Philipians, the great hymn of Christ's glory, central to which of course, is the Cross of Jesus Christ and His victory that enables him to become the name above all names at which every knee will bow. But as Emma continued, she read about how Paul exhorts each one of us to work out our salvation in fear and trembling. And the way of the Cross is the road in which we walk as the people who respond to the Cross of Jesus. Jesus told us clearly, if anybody wants to be my disciple, he must deny himself, take up his cross and follow me¹¹. Well, in Luke's gospel, He says, "Take up your cross daily, and follow Me."¹² And to take up our cross and daily follow Jesus is actually to walk in the way of the Cross. It's to allow the processes of God within us to fill us with power from on high to enable us to walk in the way of Jesus.

The work of the Cross is the atonement. It gets us ready for Heaven. The way of the Cross is working out our salvation in fear and trembling, it's living the life of Jesus here and now, empowered by His Spirit. The work of the Cross is what God does **for** us. The way of the Cross is what God does **in** us, and what God does **through** us, because He wants to make us the people who reflect His glory and the truth and the life. If you imagine the way of the Cross is a long journey between the point in which we believe and trust in the Father, and in the work of the Cross, to the point where He draws us fully into His kingdom, then that journey is marked by one particular end, that is given to us in Romans chapter eight and verse 29, "that those who He calls are called to be conformed to the image of the Son." Our salvation is only fully formed in us when we reflect fully and completely a picture of Jesus. Not that we become a clone, but that our desires, our life, and the whole shape of our being, reflects clearly the work of Jesus in us.

9 Revelation 19:12

10 Crown Him With Many Crowns – 12-verse hymn by Matthew Bridges 1800-1894 and Godfrey Thring 1823-1903 (first published in 1851)

11 Matthew 16:24

12 Luke 9:23

In South Africa, I was also introduced to another gentlemen, an American evangelist called Francis Frangipane. And he picked up with that notion of us having to follow in the way of the Cross, taking up our cross daily. I remember even today, Francis saying, on video as it happened, that the Cross is an instrument of torture. It's designed to kill you. You see God and Satan both want us dead, but for different reasons. Satan wants us dead to destroy the work of God. God wants us dead, in order for us to reflect in the new life that He gives us, much more fully the person that we were meant to be. We have to literally take up our cross, so we die to ourselves and live to God. Paul writes in Galatians¹³, "It is not I who live, but Christ who lives in me, because I've been crucified with Christ."

So, we are called to walk, because of the Cross, as our response to God's love and His work, to walk in the way of the Cross, and to carry our own cross enabled by the power of God's Holy Spirit. It is then that we can truly live out the blessing of Christ in our life.

Did you know that the simple sign of the cross is meant to tell us something very, very important in this life? If I make the sign of the cross, it's simply one [hand moves vertically] and two [hand moves horizontally]. And we can say this, it is 'I' crossed out. If we are prepared to die daily to sin, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit, we might be reborn to the life of Jesus, then we will truly walk in the way of the Cross and follow our Saviour, who has died for us and given His life upon the Cross of Golgotha.

Amen.

Prayers

So Emma now will lead us into prayer.

[Emma:] So let's just be quiet for a moment and reflect on Rob's teaching, and just recognise who we are in Christ.

Palm Sunday

Lord, we praise You for Your glory, which we have seen in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, our Lord. We join in the praises of those who greeted him as He rode into Jerusalem. We praise You for His coming on the back of a donkey - the sign that He comes as the Prince of Peace.

We praise You that in His coming, You have demonstrated Your commitment to us by Your total rejection of all that is evil; for the utter determination of Your love to touch our hearts, to change our lives and to gently but firmly call us to follow Your Son.

We praise You that even when the world and our neighbour have, like the crowds of Palm Sunday, stopped praising Him, He is still Lord; that even when those around us, like the mob who cried 'Crucify!', turn their backs on You and reject Your Son and Your purpose of grace for a lost world, still You cannot be defeated.

We praise You that whether, like the crowds who waved their palm branches, we are passing through times of peace and rejoicing, or whether it feels as if we are standing at the foot of a cross, You give us the assurance that Your grace is sufficient, no matter the cost.

We praise You for the victory of Your love that triumphed over sin and death.

13 Galatians 2:20

We praise You that now and always He is our living Lord. We come to praise You now in and for Him, as we will praise You for all eternity.

Amen

God's riches for the people of faith

Almighty God, our Heavenly Father, we thank You that though You are a high and a holy God, You are not remote, unmoved or unfeeling, but You live in the hearts of Your people. We praise You that through the life, death and resurrection of Christ You have made it possible for us not only to know You, but also to hear Your call to commitment and service.

Father, we worship You for the riches with which You shower our lives and the riches of Your grace with which You wish to fill our hearts. We thank You that in the empty cross and the empty tomb and the 'emptying out' of the Holy Spirit, You have given us the assurance of Your love for us and our place in Your Kingdom; that by Your grace You call us and by Your Spirit You empower us to live for Christ and to declare His name.

We thank You that down the centuries You have called those whom everyone else would have rejected and appointed those who felt least worthy to the most important tasks of all.

Father, we thank You for every person who makes Your love and presence real for us and for every person who shares Your riches with others. May the name of Christ always be lifted up and draw all people to him.

Amen.

Holy God, Your love is amazing, steady and unchanging. Your love is relentless, passionate, and astounding.

We thank You for the sacrifice of Jesus which has redeemed us and restored us to a right relationship with You.

We confess that we take this gift for granted; we fail to grasp the significance of the sacrifice; we continue to live as unredeemed people.

Forgive us for our sinfulness. Cleanse us. Restore us. And ignite our hearts with a passion to live for You. We humbly ask, in Jesus' name.

Amen

Lord, we come with our hurts

Lord, we come with our hurts and our disappointments;
we come with our emptiness and our concerns;
we come with our loneliness and our aloneness;
we come with our brokenness and our pain;
we come with our sin and our selfishness;
we come with our fears and our doubts;
we come to the empty Cross for a Saviour;
we return from the empty tomb with a Lord.

Lord, pour Your Holy Spirit into our hearts and lives,
that we may not go alone,
but in the healing and wholeness of Christ,
who goes with us,
always and forever.

Amen.

[Transcribed by Hamish Blair with help from <https://otter.ai>]

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