

## 5b) The Cross, The Resurrection & The Ascension

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Thanks so much to Tom for the invitation to come and be amongst you and thanks for your hospitality already - you always know you're going to be in a good church when you get offered a hot drink the minute you walk through the door. So, thanks for that. I bring greetings from both Trinity College, Bristol, and also the church of which I'm a part, which is St Agnes, right in the heart of the city centre in Bristol. If you ever go down the M32, you'll see St Agnes. You can see the Adventure Playground on the right-hand side. So, I'm part of that church with my family, and we have great fun there, (as it seems like you do here too). We're really grateful for all the wonderful folk you sent our way, not least some of those who are here this morning. And hopefully we've returned the favour by sending some of them back. And we just want to say, keep sending these amazing people. And maybe you're one of those amazing people this morning. And God is prompting you to come and explore a bit more with us at Trinity (I should say other theological colleges are available but you know they're not as good anyway).

Let's pray and give thanks for God's word – “Lord, we thank you that your word is living and breathing and active and you have a fresh word for each of us, today. We pray, by the power of your Holy Spirit, you would inspire our thoughts and take the meagre offering that I bring, and transform it to bless and to feed your church, so that we might leave here transformed by the power of your love. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.”

So, just a small topic this morning. We're going to look at the cross, the resurrection and the ascension. I thought I'd sum it up by calling it "the agony and the ecstasy." The agony and the ecstasy. And I just want to give a little health warning. We're going into the dark place first before we come into the light. So, bear with me. I wonder how many of you would have come to church today if you'd have known that the sermon would focus on an instrument of corporal punishment. If Tom had publicised this sermon as being on the electric chair. It's quite shocking, isn't it? To think in that way about the cross, such a horrific form of brutality, and yet that is exactly what it was. And today we look at this instrument of torture, which over the century has been sanitized for the sake of our Western sensitivities. We often talk about the cross in glib, abstract terms. And it's no wonder that folk today are not quite so convinced of its transformative message. I think we've somehow sterilized the power of the cross through our own need to downplay the horror that Jesus experienced. And we've rendered it into a nice little Easter story for school children.

And for some of us, perhaps we're sitting here today thinking "Well, we've heard about the cross so many times." So frequently in our Christian journey that perhaps we've become a little immune to its power and significance. I had my flu jab yesterday (my arm's fine), and I have it every year because viruses are clever and they transform and they find new ways of adapting, and our bodies don't always recognise the impact of them. And I wonder if we too have become immune to the story of the cross and we need to do the opposite of immunise ourselves against it and instead expose ourselves again and again to this incredible life-transforming act of sacrificial love. Remembering that Jesus died on a cross for you and for me, because he loved us too much to leave us as we were.

I wonder, have you forgotten the impact of the cross today? I wonder if you can remember the first time that you realized the reality of the cross of crucifixion. Can you remember? Maybe for some of you it was quite recently. For others, maybe in childhood.

I remember watching Jesus of Nazareth, the movie, for the first time in the Odeon Cinema in Bristol, thinking I was going with my friend and the youth group. And I gripped hold of my friend Michaela's hand as the Roman soldier hammered Jesus to the cross, and those nails into his hands and feet. And it was in that moment I realised the enormity of what Jesus had done for me and allowed it to begin to sink in. And then later as a teenager, not very far from here in Salford, there was a youth group. There was some youth event going on, and they talked about the impact of Christ dying for us. And I remember the tears just pouring down my face. And this past week, now as a middle-aged woman, as my friend shared communion at our college evening Eucharist, I was again moved to tears at the significance of Jesus' sacrifice as I heard these words said afresh: "Who, in the same night that he was betrayed, took bread and gave thanks. He broke it and gave it to his disciples saying, 'Take, eat, this is my body given for you. And in the same way after supper he took the cup gave thanks, gave it to them saying, drink this, all of you. This is my blood of the new covenant, which is shed for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins.'"

Body broken, blood shed. Our little communion wafers and small sips of wine don't quite grasp the significance, the brokenness of Jesus' body and the messiness of crucifixion. Christ has died. Christ has risen. Christ will come again. Most of us say these words week in, week out in some shape or form in our weekly worship, recounting all that Jesus has done for us through God and his death on the cross, his rising to new life, his ascension to heaven to sit at the right hand of God the Father. And every time we eat this bread and drink this cup, we announce the Lord's death until he comes again. We rehearse this narrative over and over, don't we? Even further in our creeds. "He was crucified, died and was buried. He descended to the dead." Make no mistake, there is no doubting the physical death of Jesus. the agony of the cross.

So that's the dark bit. We're moving into the light, you'll be glad to hear. But hold on to the darkness just for a moment, just to recognise the significance of what it means for us. And then, "on the third day he rose again. Hallelujah. He ascended into heaven. He is seated at the right hand of the Father." On high, the ecstasy of resurrection and ascension. And to understand more of what Jesus did in this act of defiance against the powers of hell and darkness, we look today at our reading from Philippians 2, which was read so beautifully for us just now. And it highlights just what was going on for Jesus as he dies on this cross of shame. Paul speaks to this church in Philippi who have become so distracted, not just by the world around them, but by their own selfish needs and concerns. They focused on becoming better people in their society, climbing the social ladder to get more honour, more social status. And he reminds them at the heart of Christian unity - at the heart of the gospel - is not wealth and significance, but a cross of humility and shame. In our reading today, verse three:

*"Do nothing from selfish ambition or empty conceit but in humility regard others as better than yourselves."*

And who better to look to for an example of this embodied humility than to Jesus himself - verse 6:

*"Who, though he existed in the form of God did not regard equality with God as something to be grasped, but emptied himself."*

Jesus, who had every right as God made man to put himself front and centre of everything as we see worldly powers do today and instead voluntarily takes on the form of a human and even more the form of a slave. If Philippi was all about social status and being better than others, then Jesus has turned the situation on its head and he has placed himself as the lowest of the low.

But Jesus doesn't even stop there. There is one place even lower in society than a slave, and that's a dead slave. And even worse than a dead slave, one who has been crucified. To die in the most publicly humiliating way, flogged, stripped naked, hung up in public for all to see as you suffocate under the weight of your own body. A death reserved for criminals and the lowest of the low. Jesus did not deserve to die a death like this, and yet he did it not for his own sake, but for each of ours. The very point of the cross is that it's a symbol of grace. We don't deserve what Jesus did for us, and that's the very point. Grace is a gift. There's nothing we can do to make God love us anymore or any less. It's freely given, and it's available for each of us to receive the moment we open our hands and say "Lord receive me, a forgiven sinner." By contrast, when we give gifts, there can be so much more going on can't there.

At Trinity, we do this lovely at Christmas amongst the staff where we make our handmade Secret Santa gifts. And some of the team are incredibly gifted. We've got Dave, our site manager. You give him a piece of wood, and he makes the most beautiful things. And so, if you get Dave's gift, wow, you're in for a good gift. And then we've got Giuseppe, our Italian chef. And he will take flour and milk and goodness knows what else. And he would make it into the most amazing panettone. So, if you get Giuseppe's gift, you've got a really good gift. And then Alison, our operations manager. She is amazing at crochet, she made me the most amazing gold coasters. And then Sean, the principal - if it's not bad enough that he's just so brilliant, he also makes biscotti and fudge. And by contrast I sit there and I think "What have I got to provide for this poor group? Whoever gets me, gets the short straw." I'm a knitter and my gifts have often been a bit less impressive. I've got to be honest (mostly because I'm a little bit last minute and leave everything until there's not much time to make something), one year, I thought I'm going to really enter into the spirit of this and I'm going to make a hat for my colleague. So, I took to the knitting. If you've ever knitted with black wool it's quite tricky to see the stitches, but anyway I pressed on. But it was also around the time that my father and I spent hours back and forth at the hospital. It was during COVID, and thankfully I had this focus of this hat for my colleague.

More love and prayer went into that hat than anything else I've made because I had to just sit there and knit while I waited. And it might have been a little bit big being honest, he might have had to roll it up a few times. But a few weeks later he said to me "Helen that hat is so warm, I love it because I can pull it right down when I'm really cold. because it's so big." And it reminded me of that old saying, "it's the thought that counts." It sounds trite, doesn't it? To even begin to think of gifts in these ways. But when we put our selfish motives aside and we really focus on the individual in front of us, when we really love and care for them, we can give our small offering, and God will use it for God's glory.

I wonder how much more God does for us through the cross. When God sent his son to die for us, all he was thinking about was you and me and this whole world. God sent his gift of his son as the answer to the world's sin. He sent his one perfect, unblemished, precious, spotless lamb to be our gift of life. Before Jesus, we only had access to the Father through sacrificial atonement and animal sacrifice. Our sin was a barrier between us and God. We were slaves to our sin. If you want to read a bit more about that, you can turn to Romans 6 and hear about the cost of our sin being death for Jesus. But Jesus, who takes the form of a slave for us, carries our sin to the cross. And dies so that we might live. Every bad thing we've ever done. Every lie we've ever told. Every time we've sinned. Every time we've hurt someone else. Every time we've wished for something bad to happen to somebody else. Every time we've hurt God. Jesus took the weight. And he took it to the cross. And he hung there instead of us.

We were dead in our sins and yet Jesus refused to allow us to suffer the punishment of death and sin and instead chose to go to the cross so that we might be free. Jesus' death is not a form of punishment for us. It's a demonstration of God's love and care and concern and kindness and generosity and abundant love. And God, through Christ, overcame death so that we might live.

How do we know that? Well, we can look at Romans 6:3 we can see that we were baptised into Christ. And as we are baptised, we were also baptized into his death. Those of us that have been baptised know the significance that our baptism makes. We enter into baptism as unclean, unworthy. We die to self, we go through the waters or the sprinkling of baptism. We are washed clean through the death and the blood of Christ, who has atoned for our sin and we raise to new life in him. Paul in Romans 6 describes it like this –

*“We were buried with him by baptism so that just as Jesus is raised from the dead by the glory of God the Father, so we might also walk in newness of life.”*

It's in our baptism that we know freedom and resurrection from sin. I love baptising children. It's one of the blessings of my job. They're so open to knowing more about God. And I go through this little rigmarole where I get all the children to gather around the font and I'm holding the child that's about to be baptised. And I was going through my usual explanation, and I said to the children around me, while I'm holding this little girl in my arms, that “in a minute [let's call her 'Lydia'], we're going to put the water on Lydia's head.” And Lydia shook her head and very loudly into my microphone said, “No!” And I thought, “Okay, I know toddlers. If you're going to try and make them do something, it's not a good idea.” And all kinds of thoughts were running through my head. “Can I baptise her without her consent?” “What do I do now? Do I need to stop and ask them? Do they still give permission?” Everybody else is just laughing. And so, I just laughed and went along with it. And I thought “we never covered this at Bible College.” And so I thought, “I know I've got my top trumps still hidden away, my rubber duck.” I get a rubber duck out and I float it on the water. And thankfully, all was fine, and Lydia was distracted enough by the duck to be happily baptised without further objection. I still have a little wonder in my head about whether she was really up for it, but I think she was.

But in a similar way, in order to receive this gift of grace offered upon the cross, we too need to say “yes”, but so often we're doing this to God - “No, Lord, it's too hard. It's too complicated.” And really, if we just say “yes”, the Lord will lead us in his ways. We need to say “yes” over and over again to God. Not because God needs to hear us, but because we need to hear ourselves. That even when things are hard, even when we don't, even when everything points to a “no”, there is still a “yes” in God. It can be a costly “yes”, but it's never as costly as the “yes” that Jesus gave when he went to the cross for us. Thankfully, Jesus doesn't remain on the cross - he is dead, buried and resurrected. The ecstasy. How do we know this? We have these gospel accounts, the empty tomb, his appearance in front of so many people (even 500 on one occasion, and we can read about that in 1 Corinthians 15).

So, what is the significance of Jesus' resurrection? Why does it matter? So that we might not only know the man Jesus, but know him as fully divine. Death has no hold over him. And (as Peter reminds us in Acts 2:24

*“But God raised him having released him from the agony of death because it was impossible for him to be held in death's power.”*

Death has no power compared with the power of God. I don't know what you're going through at the moment, but it's got no power compared with the power of our God's, and the resurrection of Jesus points to the one who has that power - God Almighty.



And it is then, after the witness of Jesus' resurrection, when he appears to Mary, that he knows it will not be long until he returns to his father. And he turns his mind to his ascension. He sees Mary outside the empty tomb, and he says to her,

*“go to my brothers and say to them, I am ascending to my father and your father, to my God and your God.”*

Jesus has done all that was required of him to do. He is now able to ascend his rightful place in heaven alongside his father's right hand. It signifies the end of his earthly ministry and that God has accomplished all that he set out to do through Christ. And Jesus is exalted. Philippians tells us that:

*“at the name of Jesus, every knee should bow, every tongue confess that he is Lord.”*

Why?

*“For the glory of God the Father.”*

God is glorified in Christ Jesus. We are set free from sin and from shame. Jesus is the mediator of a new covenant, sealed with his most precious blood. Jesus goes ahead of us to prepare a place for us. We read about that in John 14, and Jesus now intercedes as our great high priest on our behalf. And Jesus has also set a pattern for his return as we read about in Acts 1:11 - Jesus crucified, resurrected and ascended.

So you might be thinking “well that's all well and good, but what does this mean for me today?” Well, if you don't know Jesus as your Lord and Saviour, hear all that he has done. You are set free from anything that binds you, and you can know eternal life through him. Say “yes” to God. And if you're feeling a little overwhelmed with fear at the state of the world, then let's look again to our God who has overcome evil, who has had the victory, who has overcome darkness, and we trust him to hold all things, our Alpha and Omega, our beginning, our end, and every moment in between. And as we're reminded by Paul in our reading from Philippians, let me just share with you these final words.

*“If then there is any comfort in Christ, any consolation from love, any partnership in the spirit and any tender affection and sympathy, make my joy complete. Be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or empty conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to your own interests but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus.”*

All week as I've been thinking about this sermon I've been having a hymn run through my head. It's been revamped recently but it says

*Jesus paid it all*

*All to him I owe;*

*Sin had left a crimson stain*

*He washed it white as snow*

The agony of the cross the ecstasy of the resurrection and ascension and of sins forgiven. May we know this as our hope and our example for his sake and his alone. Amen

