

Lent Lecture 3 – The Death of Jesus.

Welcome to the third in our series of Lent Lectures. In our first lecture we explored who Jesus is and what he does. Then in our second lecture, we looked at the detail regarding the Last Supper, why Jesus may have done what he did on that fateful evening and what significance it has for us today. This week, we are going to move on from Maundy Thursday to Good Friday. We are going to consider some main themes associated with Jesus' death and think a little more deeply about what we mean when we use certain phrases in reference to the way that Christ died. We are going to explore what his death means for us. I am not an especially gifted original thinker and much of this lecture is based on extracts from Rowan Williams' book 'God with Us'.

On a very simple level, Jesus' death is important, because if there is no death then there can be no resurrection. Sometimes things have to die in order for new life to spring up – that seems obvious to us. But there is something about the manner of the life lived and indeed the manner of the death that enables such resurrection to happen. We will no doubt encounter some of this in next week's lecture, when we come to exploring Easter and the Resurrection of Jesus. For now, it is worth noting that on a basic level it was essential that Jesus, God with us, lived a fully yet normal human life in order that we may see what such a life, lived in full obedience to God, looks like. But living such a fully yet normal human life necessarily means encountering and facing up to death. We must never forget, that for so many around the world, even in our own country, living a normal human life also means putting up with oppression, discrimination, violence, hunger and poverty. But often such lives are not lived in the fullness of life in the way God intends. It is then not surprising that Christ has to face all of these in his walk to the cross, and yet in spite of them all, he carries dignity and refuses to retaliate with violence; all the time his only concern is to remain close to His Father in heaven through peacefulness and love. As such, despite the oppression, discrimination, violence, hunger and poverty vested against him, He retains His holy and godly Spirit. These external pressures do nothing to diminish His fullness of life.

As we have seen previously, a number of significant traits come through what we see in the personhood of Jesus. We have already discussed how it was Jesus' principle mission to bring about our reconciliation with God; to provide us with a way in which we can repair the relationship with the loving creator whom we, in our sinfulness, too often avoid, ignore or assault.

Through his life of dependable obedience and faithfulness, Christ shows us how our reconciliation is not just a one off event, but requires our repeated attention if we are not to fall away. We can't lower our guard for one minute or else we risk being manipulated by the deception of the world and causing damage to our souls. The focus for our attention is simply faith in him. And by focusing our attention on the Christ we slowly and surely begin moving closer to the God who is ultimate love. But Christ is more than just a good example for us to follow. Something about Christ's actions throughout the Gospel, but especially His death, has a significant part to play in our reconciliation. So this is what we need to explore further. I guess that one of the most common phrases that we are used to hearing in reference to the Crucifixion is that it was a sacrifice. So this will be the main focus of our exploration this evening.

The Crucifixion – A Sacrifice

The word sacrifice is very deep and rich. And the notion of sacrifice is as old as the human consciousness. Sacrifice conjures all kinds of pictures in our minds, many of them are not very agreeable to our modern sensitivities. When we speak of sacrifice, we envisage the killing of an animal as a peace offering to an angry deity, in order to try and appease a god's wrath. But this is somewhat of a distortion of what we actually mean when we speak of sacrifices.

One of the most dramatic accounts of sacrifice comes in the early years of Jewish history when Abraham is about to sacrifice his son Isaac. Although Abraham interprets this as a test of his faith from God, it is God who intervenes and prevents him from killing his son by providing a ram for the sacrifice. It is, of course, Isaac who becomes the father of the Jewish people, so this is a most significant saving act on behalf of God.¹ This God given gift literally secures Israel's future. Later, the book of Exodus details how a lamb is to be sacrificed day and night, every day in the Temple sanctuary in order to remember this miraculous act.² By the time of Jesus, Jewish scholars had begun to proudly proclaim that the nation of Israel was born on a gift from God.

¹ Genesis 22:1-9

² Exodus 29

There is a vast amount of other material in the Old Testament regarding sacrifices. In the Old Testament, sacrifice and ritual grow up to become a recognised way of trying to repair the relationship between humanity and God. On a simplistic level, the ancient world seems to use the sacrifice of an animal to get on the right side of God. But in the Old Testament we see that the way that sacrifice is used is far more sophisticated than modern perception would always have us believe.

First born sons were supposed to be dedicated to God's service – an honourable gesture and one that kept the nation focussed in the right direction. This meant that every family had a concern for God and a blood tie into the structures of worship and devotion. But occasionally one might sacrifice in order to buy back their first born son.³ Other examples include offering sacrifices to make peace,⁴ or to do away with guilt (a gift to say sorry, as it were).⁵ A good example of this would be in Leviticus 16, where we have the dramatic ritual of the day of Atonement explained to us. During the ritual of the day of Atonement, the sins of the whole tribe would be laid on the head of a 'Scapegoat' and it would be beaten until it ran away into the wilderness,⁶ taking the sins of the tribe with it as it went. We continue to use the term scapegoat today when referring to someone who has had to burden the consequences of someone else's actions. The book of Numbers also outlines a whole host of other sacrifices that may be offered for sin.⁷

If you look in the books of Exodus, Leviticus and Numbers you find that you don't always find the same commands for the same things. So, the sacrificial system grows up to be extremely complex. This did not make for a very ordered system; though we have no reason to believe that the Temple didn't operate a well-run ship. The trouble is, the sacrificial system becomes so complex that only the most well trained and obedient individual can hope to manage it.

In the middle of all this is one very basic belief, that a sacrifice is something given over to God. That 'gift' is more dramatic and costly when it involves a gift of life or blood. Somehow the blood casts a veil over the sin, sickness or disorder that has damaged the relationship with God. It removes the consequences of sin and offers a renewed relationship with the distortion of guilt removed. A covenant between God and humanity is renewed by the spilling of blood – such as 'the blood of the covenant' in Exodus.⁸

Sacrifice is costly, because it involves real life and death so that peace and communication may once again be restored between heaven and earth. This is why an animal set aside for sacrifice must be the best animal one owns, often the unblemished firstborn. If an individual didn't own one, then they would have to buy one and it would cost a pretty penny. Scrimping on a cut price alternative simply would not do – such tightfistedness would do nothing to repair the damage.

The sacrifice would always, after death, be cooked and shared with the community, symbolising that fellowship with one-another and God had been restored. The gift is given and God promises to cover over the sin and be there for his people.

This language of appeasing God doesn't sit too well with us today. The idea of animal sacrifice is certainly an oddity, if not to say repulsive to our sensitivities. The idea that we need to give God gifts in order to calm him down, doesn't seem to fit with our New Testament understanding of God either. And yet all of these examples are used by New Testament writers to try and describe what Jesus achieves for us on the cross.

Paul uses quite widely this idea that sacrifice makes peace with God. Paul refers to the Day of Atonement in Romans, and the author of Hebrews (who was almost certainly not Paul) draws heavily on this language associating Jesus with the scapegoat who burdens our sins so that we may be made clean.⁹ The very rich meditation that Hebrews gives us reveals how Jesus' sacrifice provides us with these benefits not just for one year but for all time.

In the first of the letters from Peter and in the Book of Revelation we get a deep meditation relating Jesus to the ram that is provided by God in order to save Isaac. These draw on a rich Jewish tradition that believed God foresaw Abraham's intentions even before the beginning of the world. God, then,

³ Exodus 34

⁴ Leviticus 3

⁵ Leviticus 4-7

⁶ Leviticus 16

⁷ Numbers 15

⁸ Exodus 24:8

⁹ Romans 5:10; Hebrews 8-10

provides the male lamb from the very beginning of creation. In Chapter 1 of his Gospel, John reminds us that Jesus is in God from the very beginning. Drawing on these two theological principles, Revelation states that Jesus is likewise the 'Lamb who was slain from the creation of the world'.¹⁰

The New Testament, then, clearly interprets Christ's death as a sacrifice that benefits humanity by enabling humans to repair their relationship with God. Let us look more deeply at how this may be the case.

The New Testament and Jesus' Sacrifice

The New Testament writers speak of Jesus' death as a sacrifice a number of ways. First, it is a rescue operation. Second, it is a way of averting catastrophe for both individuals and the entire world. Third, as a result of all this, it re-establishes the covenant.

Let's look at each in turn:

- 1) Jesus' death is a rescue operation – it saves our bacon. The New Testament writers see in Jesus acts which avert the inevitable spiritual danger, terror, pain, suffering, punishment that result from lives lived without repaired relationship with God. Jesus' actions strike a mortal blow to the hold that evil thoughts, evil actions and evil consequences have on our lives.
- 2) In this way, Jesus' sacrifice helps avoid the inevitable catastrophe that humanity is facing as a result. Once the cycle of evil is broken, no longer do the consequences of evil rule our lives.
- 3) The spilling of Jesus' blood then, quite literally, re-establishes the covenant between humanity and God. It seals the relationship and provides the means by which the relationship may continue on a secure footing. God is so committed to this relationship that he is willing to sacrifice himself to secure the covenant. As such, this becomes the foundational event that secures the relationship between God and the community. And Jesus' sacrifice is once for all time. His sacrifice is eternally valid and humanity has access to its benefits through faith. By simply by believing in Jesus, our belief opens us to His Spirit and unites us to His eternal body in heaven, at all the benefits that blessed body secured.

Jesus' Obedience

All of this talk of blood offerings and lives being offered to avert catastrophe sounds difficult and primitive to us. But our first century Christian and Jewish ancestors are not nearly as stupid or morally obtuse as we would like to think they were. At the time of Jesus, Jewish scholars had begun to see the problem with talking about a God who required blood to be poured out to be calmed down. The prophets had long lamented Israel's misinterpretation of such things.¹¹ Isaiah sums it all up brilliantly;

11 "The multitude of your sacrifices—
what are they to me?" says the Lord.
"I have more than enough of burnt offerings,
of rams and the fat of fattened animals;
I have no pleasure
in the blood of bulls and lambs and goats.
12 When you come to appear before me,
who has asked this of you,
this trampling of my courts?
13 Stop bringing meaningless offerings!
Your incense is detestable to me.
New Moons, Sabbaths and convocations—
I cannot bear your worthless assemblies.
14 Your New Moon feasts and your appointed festivals

¹⁰ 1 Peter 1:19-20; Revelation 13:8)

¹¹ Isaiah 1:11; Hosea 6:6

I hate with all my being.
 They have become a burden to me;
 I am weary of bearing them.
 15When you spread out your hands in prayer,
 I hide my eyes from you;
 even when you offer many prayers,
 I am not listening.
 Your hands are full of blood!
 16Wash and make yourselves clean.
 Take your evil deeds out of my sight;
 stop doing wrong.
 17Learn to do right; seek justice.
 Defend the oppressed.
 Take up the cause of the fatherless;
 plead the case of the widow.
 18“Come now, let us settle the matter,”
 says the Lord.
 “Though your sins are like scarlet,
 they shall be as white as snow;
 though they are red as crimson,
 they shall be like wool.
 19If you are willing and obedient,
 you will eat the good things of the land;¹²

Israel had begun to realise that God only wished for good lives to be lived in his goodness – for people to be obedient so as not to distort their godly image. There is a Jewish tradition that says in each generation there are 36 individuals who keep the world going. Were it not for their faithfulness, God would simply let the world destroy itself. There is something so pure about these obedient lives that God is able to work through them. We never know who these 36 are, but we are all reliant upon their obedience to save us.

At every stage of his life, Jesus gives his entire heart to God a little like those first born sons who were supposed to be dedicated to God's service in ancient Israel. But unlike those dedicated firstborn sons who never quite hit the mark, Jesus dedicates himself in such a way that God is able to work directly through him without deviation or interruption. In Jesus, the Godly image in humanity is completely unobstructed. In this way Jesus' whole life is a sacrifice of obedience to God. At every moment he is giving his heart as a sacrifice to God, he is doing what God wants.

The problem is that obedience to God and his goodness puts you lethally at risk in this world of manipulation and sin. Just like with those martyrs before and after Jesus, it leads to death. In the words of Rowan Williams; 'This is a world in which if you try and give your heart entirely to God you may find your blood shed; it's that kind of world'.¹³

So the New Testament speaks of Jesus having to pay the price for his obedience, a price paid on our behalf; he buys us back!

¹² Isaiah 1:11-19

¹³ R. Williams: God With Us, p.31

This life is paid on the Cross, it is given over to God, so that our sins may be covered over, peace may be restored. It costs a life and the shedding of blood!

Jesus is a Gift

But in many ways, this is still and incomplete picture of the sacrifice of the cross. Christ's obedience is essential in who he is and what he provides us with, but there is something more too. In order to look deeper at all of this, we need to think what obedience is really all about. Obedience isn't about doing whatever you ordered to do, obedience is more about supporting and serving someone you love or respect so that they may be fulfilled and flourish. For example, I do not always do as my wife tells me, I try not to overtly disobey her and in a broader sense I always try to be obedient to the things that help her personality to flourish and the real her to shine through. Obedience to God is not obedience to a General Major in the Army, it is more like obedience to a lover. Obedience is a harmony in our response to God, so that God might see himself reflecting back. The New Testament tells us that 'God is love', and 'those who live in love live in God'.¹⁴ Therefore, the most pleasing thing for God to see is the love which he is being multiplied and returning to him.

In the New Testament, we see Christians beginning to better understand this mystery. In Jesus there is divine love reflected back to God through the form of a human life. Humanity as it was designed to be.

In the Trinity, we see God in his three personalities of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, all held together in a relationship of love. That relationship is shared with us through the Spirit who draws us into the life of Jesus. It compels us to live in love and action, the very attributes of God himself; a God who is giving and receiving and responding. God pours out his love for us and draws it back to himself.

The effect of the death of Jesus is to bring us into the everlasting relationship. The Father pours out his love for us and gives the world his Son. The Son watches what the Father is doing and replicates it in perfect harmony. The Spirit comes down to enable us to share in that response to the Father, watching and loving.

And this is the gift. A free gift offered to humanity so that it may be invited in to the divine relationship. It is our sin. It is us who allow the destructiveness of evil to destroy our divine dignity, but it is God who makes the peace. It is God who works through us and acts for us in the person of Jesus. It is God who secures our freedom, and is not up to us, but is something which God has accomplished on our behalf.

And this is how the humiliation of the cross, this machine of torture is turned upon its head to become the greatest symbol of victory over the most unrelenting and corrosive enemy the world has ever known.

This is why on Good Friday, we will come into this church and stare up at our crucifix at our nailed God and be distraught that our sinfulness was so costly, and yet so grateful that, just as for Abraham on the mountain, God provides us with the very gift necessary to repair all the brokenness.

¹⁴ 1 John 4:16