

God on the Cross

Date: 9 March 2025, 1st Sunday in Lent

Location: St George's Battery Point

Series: The Cross of Christ

Texts: Zechariah 12:10-14, Romans 3:21-26; John 12:23-33

At nine o'clock in the morning of 7 April, AD 30, a Jewish itinerant preacher was nailed to a cross outside the city gates of Jerusalem in a far-flung corner of the Roman Empire. It took him about six hours to die. The preacher's name was Jesus, son of Joseph, and he came from a small town named Nazareth, not too far from the Sea of Tiberias.

Crucifixion was a brutal, protracted, and humiliating way to die. Our word *excruciating* comes from the Latin "out of crucifixion". Crucifixion is literally our definition of the most extreme pain. It was utterly humiliating, as the person crucified was stripped naked, hoisted above the ground for all to see, as their body slowly gave out and in the end fatigue from pain meant they could no longer pull themselves up to breathe. It was the most degrading form of execution, designed to inflict maximum pain and humiliation and show those crucified to be less than human, nothing more than a beast. But in the first-century Mediterranean world, it was by no means rare. In fact, less than forty years after Jesus' death, the future emperor Titus would allow his soldiers to crucify so many of the Jews fleeing the encircled city of Jerusalem, that, in the words of the historian Josephus, by the end of the siege there was no longer enough wood in Judaea on which to nail their quarry.

If crucifixion was so common in the Roman world, and so degrading and shameful, how did the death of this one man Jesus come to be seen as so significant that now the cross is the most universally recognisable symbol in the world? We see the cross everywhere, not just in churches, but on gravestones, national flags, jewellery, everywhere. In fact it's so common that it has entirely lost the sense of horror and shame that would have been its immediate association in the ancient world. So why did this change, the most extraordinary brand makeover you might say, why did it come about?

The answer is because of the significance Christians find in Jesus' death on the cross. The cross is the centre of the Christian faith. That the cross is everywhere today is evidence of just how effective Christians have been at proclaiming the message of the cross over the centuries. So what is the significance of the cross? It is all about Who Jesus is and What God has done through his death. It is not just that Christ died, but that he died *for us*. Over the next 6 weeks or so as we prepare for Easter we'll be looking at the Cross and what it means. This week and next we'll be looking at who it is that died on the cross, namely the incarnate Son of God, fully God and fully man. We'll then look at what his death accomplished for us.

Why a series on the cross? First, the cross is at the heart of the Christian faith because it is how God has acted in history to rescue a people for himself. When St Paul sums up his message to the Corinthians he says, “we preach Christ crucified”. So if you’re here and you’re not a Christian, this is a great series because you’ll learn what Christianity is all about and what God has done for you. Second, the New Testament uses a number of different pictures to describe and help us understand what Jesus’ death accomplished. Theologians call these “metaphors for the atonement”. Each of these pictures speaks to a different need that we have as human beings. So my hope over this series is that as we look at these different pictures they will speak to you and be God’s means of healing the wounds of your soul. And as you experience God’s grace you’ll be drawn to worship him more. Third, with this in mind, each picture of the cross then becomes a way in which you can share the Gospel, the good news of Jesus with those around you. The cross is too big a theme for 8 sermons, so we won’t cover everything. And in the end it remains a mystery too deep to fully grasp.

Our big theme today is that because Jesus is fully God and fully man, the cross reveals who God is. As Charles Wesley’s hymn puts it, “Tis mystery all, the immortal dies. Who can explore this strange design?” Well, we’re going to have a shot. We’ll look at 2 points. (1) The Godlessness of the cross, And (2) The Glory of the cross.

The Godlessness of the cross

To say that the cross reveals who God is, is on the face of it an absurd claim. How could God have anything to do with such a grotesque and horrific death? We have already touched on the cruelty and degradation Jesus suffered on the cross. To inflict such violence upon another human being reveals not God but, you might say, the depravity and wickedness of man. For the ancient Romans, crucifixion was such a shameful and disgusting death that Cicero writes it should not be mentioned in polite company. It was reserved for slaves and other non-persons. For the Jews to be crucified was evidence that you were under God’s curse. In his letter to the Galatians, Paul quotes the law of Moses “Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree.”¹ So for the cross of Jesus to be an object of devotion, to claim God was at work in the cross, was something absurd and morally repugnant for ancients both secular and religious.

We get a sense of this from the earliest picture of the cross of Jesus to survive from the ancient world, the Alexamenos graffito, dating from around AD200 in Rome. The graffito is a crude sketch of a figure on a cross with a donkey’s head. Next to the cross is a figure with hands raised, and underneath are scrawled the words, “Alexamenos worships his god”. The message is clear, to worship a crucified man is absurd, worthy only of ridicule. In the contemporary world, the place we get the closest to the ancient feeling of revulsion to the

¹ Galatians 3.13

cross is in Islam. There the cross offends for two reasons. First, Christians claim it is their God who hangs there in death. This is utter blasphemy for Islam, where God cannot be associated with any created thing. And second, even if Jesus were only a prophet, as the Quran claims, God would not let his prophet be subject to such a humiliating death.

Paul recognises this challenge in 1 Corinthians where he tackles it head on. He writes,

... the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.

Jews demand signs and Greeks look for wisdom, **23** but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling-block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, **24** but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.²

The message of the cross upsets and overturns all human notions of power and wisdom. We find the actions of a bully in the White House so disturbing, I suggest, because we live in the long shadow of the cross, because they stand so counter to the imprint the cross has left on our collective consciousness. But in a world that values intelligence and power, then and now, the cross may look like stupidity and weakness. Nevertheless God's wisdom and power are on display through Christ and in this shameful and gruesome death. How so? That brings us to point 2.

The Glory of the Cross

In the magnificent opening of John's Gospel we read these words:

The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.³

The Word here is the eternal Word of God who was with God and was himself God. It is John's way of speaking about God's self revelation in the person of his Son. It is this one, who became one of us, whose birth we celebrate at Christmas, and who grew up to be the man Jesus of Nazareth. When John says "we have seen his glory", the question the reader asks is, where? Where have we seen his glory? In our Gospel reading from chapter 12 we find the answer.

Jesus says, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified." The Son of Man is Jesus' favourite way of referring to himself. So when is this hour in which he will be glorified? He gives us a clue in the following verse. "Very truly I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds."

And then again in verse 27:

² 1 Corinthians 1.18, 22-24

³ John 1.14

‘Now my soul is troubled, and what shall I say? “Father, save me from this hour”? No, it was for this very reason I came to this hour. **28** Father, glorify your name!’ Then a voice came from heaven, ‘I have glorified it, and will glorify it again.’

Finally, in verse 32 Jesus says, “And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.” And to help us as readers John adds, “He said this to show the kind of death he was going to die.”⁴ The hour when Jesus will be glorified, that is, when we will see his glory, is the hour of his crucifixion, when he is “lifted up from the earth”.

The point is even clearer in the next chapter. As soon as Judas leaves the last supper to betray Jesus, Jesus says, “Now the Son of Man is glorified and God is glorified in him. If God is glorified in him, God will glorify the Son in himself, and will glorify him at once.”⁵ It is through Jesus' death that not only will he be glorified, but that God the Father will be glorified. The cross is where we see the glory of the Father and the Son displayed.

This is a vital point, that in the cross we see both the Father and the Son at work together to save the world. Sometimes presentations of the cross can make out that Jesus is an innocent third party whom that Father punishes instead of us. Critics name this as “divine child abuse”. But this is to misunderstand who it is who dies upon the cross. Yes, Jesus is innocent. And Yes Jesus substitutes himself for us and dies in our place. But he is not some random, otherwise uninvolved third party, roped in to die as a sacrifice. He is nothing other than God the Son, come in the flesh. He is the Judge against whom humanity has offended, willingly obeying God the Father, willingly giving himself to be judged in our place. This is why in Jesus' death God's word to Zechariah is fulfilled: “They will look on *me*, the one they have pierced.”⁶ The cross then is the work of the Father and the Son together. Indeed the cross is where we see the glory of the eternal God, Father and Son in the power of the Spirit, displayed in the salvation of the world.

Following Jesus' words I've been saying that the humiliation of the cross is paradoxically, the place God's glory is revealed. The clearest moment of the revelation of God's glory in the Old Testament is when Moses stands on Mt Sinai and he asks God, “now show me your glory”. God came down, and proclaimed his name to Moses as he passed by. “The Lord, the Lord, the gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished.” In these words we see God's glory revealed in his love and

⁴ John 12.23-33

⁵ John 13.31-32

⁶ Zechariah 12.10. Cf. John 19.34,37

forgiveness on the one hand, and in his justice on the other. That pattern is followed in the revelation of God's glory in the cross.

Let us consider God's justice first. We live in a world full of injustice. So often the innocent perish and the wicked get away with all kinds of injustice. Jesus' trial and death itself are the most gross miscarriage of justice. We can wonder "what is God doing?!" It's a question the writers of the Bible ask over and over again, "Will not the judge of all the earth do right?" The Bible gives two answers to our deep longing for justice. It looks forward to the coming day when God will judge the world. And it looks back to the decisive judgement accomplished in the cross. This is the theme of our text from Romans 3. Before we read it, it's worth knowing that in Greek, the language this was written in, the word of righteousness and justice is the same.

But now apart from the law the righteousness of God has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. **22** This righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference between Jew and Gentile, **23** for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, **24** and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. **25** God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of his blood – to be received by faith. He did this to demonstrate his righteousness, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished **26** – he did it to demonstrate his righteousness at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus.

Now there is so much that could be said about this text. But I want to focus on Paul's argument that the cross is the demonstration of God's justice or righteousness. Paul picks up that universal human question about God's justice: Where is God's justice in the face of so much unpunished evil? "In his forbearance [God] had left sins committed beforehand unpunished." Paul's answer here is that God was patient in the Old Testament period, even as he is patient today, not wanting anyone to be destroyed, but all to come to repentance and so receive his mercy.⁷

But, this is only one side of the story, the second comes in verse 26.

[God] did [this, that is presenting Christ as a sacrifice of atonement,] to demonstrate his righteousness at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus.

⁷ 2 Peter 3.9

How is it that God is both just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Christ? How can he both execute justice and, at the same time, put guilty people in the right? The answer comes in the earlier verses. Everyone has fallen short of God's glory. We all have sinned. We've done what we shouldn't do. We've not done what we should. We've not loved God, we've not loved our neighbours. By rights we stand under God's judgment. But God has presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement in our place, such that the judgement that we rightly deserved has fallen upon him. Now, because of Jesus' death we might be declared righteous, that is, right with God. In Jesus' death, sin is justly judged, and justice is done. No one can accuse God of not caring about injustice and wickedness, because he has judged it on the cross. And at the same time, all those who trust in Christ, receive God's mercy and forgiveness. This too demonstrates God's justice, in that he is utterly committed to the people he has made. In the cross He is the God who is gracious and compassionate, abounding in love.

And this brings us to our final point. The cross reveals the love of God. Paul writes in Romans 5. "God demonstrates his own love for us in this, while we were still sinners Christ died for us." The injustices of this world not only make us question the justice of God, but also the love of God. But just as the cross is the place for us to look to see the justice of God, so the cross is also the place we see the love of God. In the cross we see God's love because in Christ he has given himself, utterly and without reservation. In the cross we see God's love because he gave his Son to *die*. In the incarnation God the Son emptied himself and became one of us. In the cross he humbled himself and became obedient, even to the most shameful and degrading depths. And that means that there is no place so dark his light cannot shine, no humiliation where his love cannot find us, no suffering where his love cannot be present. And in the cross we see God's love because Christ died *for us*. For us *sinners*, people like you and me, of ourselves godless, rebellious, sinful, helpless.

The humiliation of the cross reveals nothing less than the glory of God, his justice to deal with evil, his love to pardon sinners. If you want to know what God is like, come to the cross. If you want to know where he is in this world of cruelty and suffering, come to the cross. If you want to know whether he loves you, come to the cross, and trust in the one who died for you.