

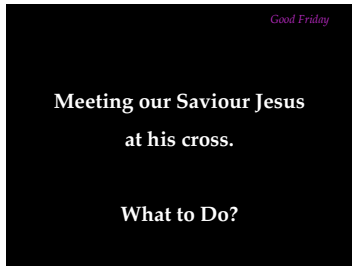
The cross of Christ and us.

Good Friday 2023

Intro

We are Christians here today.

This is church.



The cross of Jesus is central to our faith in God's love and salvation.

It's the place God choose to engage the darkness of the world – a world he had created and blessed with life that had become captive to the consequences of it's own rebellion giving Satan rights over us and wounding our humanity in ways we could not overcome.

The cross of Christ is pivotal in the salvation of God - but it's not everything. The cross is where humanity has its primal no holes barred conversation with God, it's where the decisive battle with evil rooted within and among us was waged on God's terms within the fallen world but it's not the full salvation of God for his people over sin in all its dimensions.

The incarnation -or the Word becoming flesh- was step 1 in the Jesus salvation campaign. It put God actually on the ground with us identifying with our need to be saved and redeemed back to him.

Once in place and forever embedded in humanity, the ministry of Jesus in all he said and did as the Light of the World is so important. We know about this only from Matthew, Mark, Luke and John.

God gave us himself within the human mode of being and we engaged. Our big defining engagement and response came in the form of a cross. What did we say to God among us? Just as with most of the prophets before, our response was to shut him up for good. The one who represented and was God was nailed to rough timbers and made to die.

We then put God-among-us in the ground and expected him to stay there.

You know what happened next and we will celebrate that on Resurrection Sunday three days hence, then, a while after, he ascended back as a new human in resurrection mode to his heavenly realm and sent his Spirit. He was forever changed.

Today we stand at that pivotal point in the story of this saving work of God in what can be an intensely difficult moment for us.

We are facing the cross of Christ that he embraced **for us** and it's very poignant – even unsettling. This is not an easy place to go to but Good Friday has come again.

I want to ask a question as we stand here before the cross:

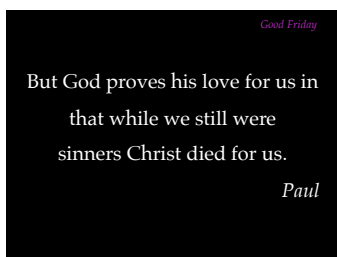
Q. Given all that we recognise, how should we now respond to the Cross of Christ?

My answer has two parts:

A1: Accept that this brutal torturous death was for you - both collectively and personally – and that it was totally necessary.

Why would I need to say that? Because the cross was only good if we really need saving from something we cannot overcome ourselves. Otherwise, it's a grand pious gesture or heroic inspiration that merely offers the moral influence of a dying hero – which incidentally, is not a new idea about Jesus.

So let's ground this in scripture:



Paul says to the Romans (5:8)

But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us.

In other words, before we may ever have resolved to move from darkness to light or from sin to righteousness, Before we considered God at all, God's love for us led him to embrace a death of on the cross.

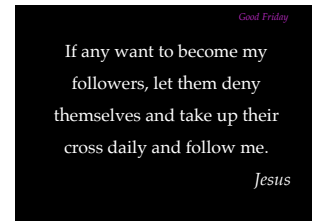
His death - and only his death on that cross for us - neutralised, cancelled, paid and tore up the legitimate burden of humanity's shame, guilt and powerlessness brought about by our corporate and individual rebellion against God.

That all becomes real if we take sin seriously. If we don't then the benefit of the cross is cheap grace where it's nice that Jesus died for us but actually, we are not so bad and we are adjusted to things anyway. There is more than a bit of that in the church today!

A2: The second aspect of response I want to suggest is even more challenging.

Jesus expressed it this way in Luke 9:22-24

²² ... 'The Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.' ²³ Then he said to them all, 'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me.



There it is: Whatever you make of my suffering on my cross, if you want to be a genuine follower you will need to take up your cross – and take it up daily. That is the response Jesus seeks to his cross.

Application:

So now let me say something that might surprise you.

The cross of Jesus is really very important, but he does not call us to go there and embrace his cross for ourselves. It is not offered as a focus for devotion or piety. It's his cross *for* us. It's where he did *his* saving work as the Father directed *him* – for us.

It's where Jesus stood his ground as the first human to remain loyal to his father as a true son and he did that *-for* us.

But Jesus does not want his cross to be a shrine or pious obsession whether in a Catholic or Evangelical way.

A while before his cross Jesus went up the mount of transfiguration – You know what happened: He was joined by Moses and Elijah. Peter suggested building three huts for them all so the event could be maintained.

No, No, No! A great thing happened but it happened and things moved forwards. It's not the purpose to fixate and stay at that point. The Father rolled in and was

heard to interrupt Peter saying: “This is my beloved son, Listen to him!” - Stop inventing religion and just do as he says!

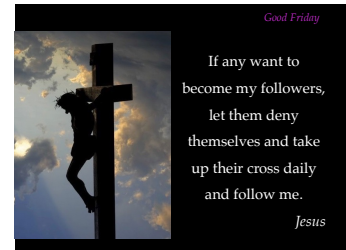
The cross was terrible but he wears the nail scars with satisfaction and could easily invite Thomas to explore them. Jesus moved on.

So if Jesus moved on from his cross,

Q: why do various strands of Christianity so want to keep going back to his cross?

A: It’s our basic religious instinct but not what Jesus really calls for. He never asked for his followers to venerate his cross or build a cult around it. Early Christianity did not have the cross as an image. That came later.

Instead, Jesus calls his followers to deny themselves and then take up their *own* cross to follow Jesus that way. Jesus does not seek to be a focus for pious devotion but be the pioneer who opened up a way for people to follow, with our own cross. That is Christianity ala Jesus.



Q: So what might that cross consist of?

Q: What might we need to pick up that constitutes a cross for us as Jesus points to?

A: Jesus links it with denying ourselves. That’s the clue. That’s the basic cost of love – denying oneself for another.

So let’s think about this a bit:

How many songs do you know about denying ourself and taking up your cross?

There are a few but not many.

Then to link this with something this church has been walking through in the last year – Holy Communion or ‘Table Fellowship’

We come to table with bread and wine because Jesus told us to. It was his provision – away of representing himself in food elements for us to eat.

The broken bread and the poured-out cup point clearly to Jesus crucified.

The way Jesus instructed us to share the bread and wine representing him is profoundly social. It involves being close to other people. Other people can be difficult. They inherently require adjustment to enable unity.

Q: So how do you overcome that?

A: Deny oneself. Prefer the other, seek the welfare and advancement of the other. That sounds like a cross – place where we die and lose life in order to gain it.

That is perhaps in keeping with the cross Jesus points us to pick up. Deny ourselves, prefer others – be there for the other, God and Persons.

Conclusion:

Jesus wants us to receive his saving work on the cross. Then he wants us to live it.

That is my message:

Let's not just be sentimental about the drama and passion of the cross. Let's pick it up and live it as followers of the one who loved us to death.