

To reflect on

Q: Do you think there is a difference between the death of Jesus and other religious leaders, martyrs, or war heroes?

Introduction

If you think about it, the cross is a weird thing to represent an entire religion, isn't it? There's nothing wrong with that, but has it ever struck you that in a way it's quite a surprising thing to do, because the cross was a form of execution. What would you have felt today if I was wearing an electric chair around my neck? The cross was a form of execution, which was so cruel that even the Romans eventually abolished it, in 337 AD.

Well, the cross is a symbol of Christianity; it is like a logo of Christianity. About a third of the Gospels are about the death of Jesus. Half of Mark's Gospel is about his death. Much of the rest of the New Testament is explaining why he died.

Why? Most leaders who have influenced nations or even changed the world are remembered for the impact of their lives. Jesus, who more than any other person changed the face of world history, is remembered for his death even more than his life. Why is there such a concentration on the death of Jesus? What is the difference between his death and the death of, say, a war hero or a martyr? Why did he die? What did it achieve? Why is it important? What does it mean? An expression appears in the New Testament: *'He died for our sins'*: What does that mean? How can it be relevant to your life tonight, or to my life?

John, chapter 3, verse 16. This is perhaps the most famous verse in the whole Bible, and in a way, it sums up the message of the whole Bible: *'For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.'*

The Problem

In a nutshell, the answer to the question 'Why?' is, because God loves you.

So what was the problem? Sometimes people say, 'I don't have any need of Christianity. You know, I am very happy. My life's full, and I try to be nice to people. I lead a good life.' It's true that every human being, according to the New Testament, is created in the image of God. Therefore, there's something good, noble about every human being.

Sometimes people say, 'I know this amazing person who's not a Christian.' Of course — every human being, in one sense, is amazing, because we are all created in the image of God. However, there is also another side to the coin. Certainly in my own life, I would have to admit, there are things in my life that I do that I know are wrong; I mess up.

St Paul writes in Romans, chapter 2, verse 23: '... for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God'

Who is it, for a start? He says all have sinned.

I find it so hard to admit that I ever do anything wrong. The words 'I was wrong,' they get stuck in my throat, I find it so hard to say, 'It's my fault.'

My friend once gave her husband, who is a little bit stubborn, a birthday card. It is a picture of a man with a shopping trolley full of groceries, and he is walking through the mountains, followed by his wife three foot behind. What the caption says is this, ‘Having insisted that this was the way back to the car, Bob is unable to admit that he is wrong.’

St Paul says, actually all of us have done wrong we have all sinned. What does it mean, ‘sinned’? Sometimes people say, ‘Well, I lead a good life.’ I suppose it depends to whom we are comparing ourselves. There are so many different standards.

To watch

“The Good Person Test”

To reflect on

Q: How would you define sin? Do you see it in the world around you?

Q: What is sin in the first place? YouCat #315

A sin is a word, deed, or intention by which man deliberately and voluntarily offend against the true order of things, as God’s loving providence has arranged them. [1849-1851, 1871-1872]

Q: How does a person know he has sinned? YouCat #312

A person knows that he has sinned through his conscience, which accuses him and motivates him to confess his offenses to God. [1797, 1848]

Q: Why must a sinner turn to God and ask him for forgiveness? YouCat #313

Every sin destroys, obscures, or denies what is good; God, however, is all good and the author of all good. Therefore, every sin goes against God (also) and must be set right again through contact with him. [1847]

The standard is not the ceiling — it’s the sky. Because the glory of God was revealed in Jesus, and compared to him we all fall a long way short.

So, someone might say, ‘Well, if that’s the case we’re all in the same boat. What does it matter?’ It does matter, because there are consequences. They can be summarised under four headings.

Pollution of sin, power of sin, penalty of sin, partition of sin.

First is the pollution of sin. The pollution of the environment is now recognised to be a major problem. However, Jesus said it’s also possible to pollute our own lives.

Jesus said in Mark, chapter 7, and verse 20: *‘It is what comes out of a person that defiles. (makes you unclean) For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly.’*

Now, as I went through that list, you may have said, ‘Well, I don’t do all of those things.’ However, if it is just one, that is enough. When you make scrambled eggs and you have one bad egg and eleven good eggs, it is going to affect the whole batch.

The apostle James says this: *‘Whoever keeps the whole Law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it.’*

Third, there is the penalty of sin. Something within our nature cries out for justice. When, for example, we read in the newspapers of children being hurt or abused; old people attacked brutally in their own homes, something within us says, ‘That’s wrong! The people who did that should be caught and brought to justice. There should be a penalty for that.’

For myself, I find that easy to say about other people: ‘Yeah, they deserve it!’ I find it much harder to say it about myself. I guess I am a hypocrite: I’m happy to judge others, but not myself.

St Paul writes in Romans: *‘Therefore you have no excuse, whoever you are, when you judge others; for in passing judgement on another you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, are doing the very same things.’*

Have you ever heard the expression, when we point the finger, three fingers point back at us?

Then, fourth, the partition of sin. St Paul writes in Romans 6, verse 23: *For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

‘The wages of sin is death.’ By ‘death’, Paul is not just talking about physical death; he’s talking about a kind of spiritual death. That comes from a kind of cutting-off from God: like a partition between us, and God caused by the things that we do wrong.

The prophet Isaiah says it is not that God cannot hear you, he says; it is the fact that your iniquities have caused a separation between you and your God. The things that we do wrong have the potential to cut us off from him eternally, actually.

It is like when you fall out in a human relationship and you cannot look the other person in the eye. Sometimes people say, you know, ‘I’ve tried praying, but my prayers seem to hit the ceiling. It does not seem like there is anyone there. There’s this kind of partition.’

All that, if you like, is the bad news. Of course, the very word ‘gospel’ means good news. The message of Christianity is overwhelmingly good news. The good news is God loves you and me. He does not just leave us there; he chose to do something about it. ‘God so loved the world’ — that is you and me — ‘that he sent his one and only Son’ to do something about it.

To watch

“Why did Jesus have to die the way he did”

To reflect on

Q: Can you see how the death of Jesus on the cross takes away our sin?

Q: How do you feel about the idea that Jesus had to die a painful death on the cross in order for you and me to be forgiven of our sins?

Resurrection

After being seemingly defeated by the Empire, Jesus’ followers declared that he had been raised from the dead. Why would they say that? Everyone knew at the time that no one could get themselves raised from the dead but that’s what they said happened to Jesus.

New ideas started to emerge around Jesus’ time. They had started to look at the after death. Remember they were politically oppressed. They had been conquered a couple of times since their independence, most recently by the Romans. They still had hope for a saviour, the messiah that would overthrow the pagans and change the way the world was run. A hope for this world with God in the middle of it. This hope transformed people’s ideas about what happened after death. They started to believe that when God’s kingdom arrived, at the end of time, people would be brought back into a new bodily life.

The message that Jesus was preaching had an urgency about it. “The Kingdom is at hand” – he was saying that the kingdom was arriving even as he spoke here and now and it was time for everyone to get on board. Jesus was echoing the growing apocalyptic views of the time. People believed that Kingdom would indeed come at the end of time. What is interesting is that he never explicitly mentions his resurrection, that he will be raised bodily from the dead. Yet the disciples claimed that their leader himself had already been raised from the dead.

In all their tradition, nothing could have prepared them for such a thing. Not from the Romans or Greeks or their own Jewish tradition nor even in what Jesus said. It seemed such an unlikely claim that they must have had a good reason for making it and even dying for it. Did it actually happen?

When Jesus came into Jerusalem, on Palm Sunday, in the final week of his life, it looked as though he was staging triumph but that was not what happened. Within a few days, he had caused uproar, challenged the temple authorities, and implicitly threatened the rule of Rome. People were getting angry they wanted him gone.

According to the gospels, Jesus gathered the disciples in an upstairs room for what we call the last supper. The disciples had no idea what was coming in terms of the resurrection. They thought there might be something happening in terms of the Kingdom of God but they got it wrong about what that actually looked like.

At Gethsemane Jesus was arrested, and then tried and condemned. The following day he was forced to carry his cross to his execution ground. When Jesus was hung on the cross, it must have felt like total failure for the disciples; It was the end of everything they had hoped and worked for. In his humanity, Jesus cried, “My God, my God why have you abandoned me.” The disciples fled.

The clearest possible sign that someone was not the Messiah was to be put to death by the Romans.

All the gospels tell us that after Jesus died his body was removed and buried in a nearby tomb by some rich supporters. Jewish custom at the time was to anoint the body with spices and wrap it up in a shroud and then the stone is rolled over the cave.

The resurrection was unbelievable then and today.

Some people believe that Jesus did not rise from the dead. Some thought the disciples had a profound spiritual experience. Others thought that they spoke metaphorically. People understood at the time about

ghost not being real. Yet, all the early Christian writers really did believe Jesus was raised bodily from the dead. The disciples did not just say they saw Jesus but that they had begun to share a meal with him. This was not the mass resurrection at the end of time. This was the resurrection of one person in the middle of history. Someone who could go on a walk with you, talk with you, and leave footprints in the sand. There was something very strange about him. He appeared and disappeared at will. He was no longer conditional to space and time. Jesus had seemed to come through death and out the other side into a new and transformed body. All the gospels share this same peculiarity.

Do you remember the story of doubting Thomas? He touched Jesus’ scars. Because I am not a ghost, I have flesh and bone. Then he proclaimed “My Lord and my God.” All the stories agree that it was a physical appearance and that Jesus showed his scars of the crucifixion. The appearance convinced the disciples that Jesus was the Messiah. Jesus is who he said he was.

Radical rethinking of the traditional belief would only have occurred if it had actually happened and they were not expecting it. It was more than just a strong feeling. There were many prophets before and after Jesus. It must have been something more and real that put the wheels of Christianity in motion. It began not as a new religious experience but as a claim of something that actually happened. That changed the world.

The first evangelists – Peter, Paul, James, Philip – had comparatively little to say about the teachings and actions of Jesus, but they could not stop talking about his resurrection from the dead. Can you imagine St Paul arriving in Corinth with the earth-shaking message that he found a dead man to be quite inspiring? Can we really imagine St Peter enduring his upside-down crucifixion because he and the other disciples had “felt forgiven”?

The early Christians saw this event, Jesus’ bodily resurrection, as the beginning of God’s new creation. That is why Christianity exploded across the world. The only way, from a historical standpoint, that could happen is Jesus actually rose bodily from the dead.

It was now about a way of life for all people. Everything derives from one and what happened to him. It gives us new hope. He went to the place of the dead, but after he rose into a new body. That is what is promised to us as well. Jesus’ resurrection is indispensable to Christian belief. It is the fundamental bedrock of Christianity. It underlies everything we think or do as a Christian. If the resurrection is true, then God’s new creation has already begun.

The cross would mean nothing without the empty tomb. It would just be about a mad man who thought he was God. Because he rose, the cross means everything.

St Paul said, *“For I have decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.”*

Death is the ultimate weapon for the bullies of the world. However, Jesus has defeated that weapon and because of that, there is life, new life, resurrection life promised into the future. The resurrection was not the reversal of a defeat but the manifestation of a victory.

St Peter’s sermon in the Acts of the Apostles, chapter 3, verses 13 to 15, he says, *“you rejected the Holy and Righteous One and asked to have a murderer given to you, and you killed the Author of life, whom God raised from the dead. To this, we are witnesses.”*

“You killed the author of life”. The fathers embrace is what the cross has made possible. This is the answer to what would otherwise be something totally barbaric. If it was that Jesus was a kind of innocent third party that God punished instead of us, that would be barbaric. What the verse says is this: ‘God was in Christ.’ That is why last month’s session is so important: because if Jesus is not God, it does not work. However, ‘God was in Christ.’ God, the author of life, came himself in the person of Jesus Christ, to die for you and for me.

In Christ, God has gone to the very limits of our forsakenness. Into our fear, into our dysfunction, into our sin and into our death. He had gone there to find us and to bring us back, to swallow it all up. He did not do this abstractly or figuratively. He did it in an embodied state. In the Holy Spirit, God brought Jesus back bodily. He wanted to save us in our totality. This is not just about our souls or our spiritual selves being saved. This is about our whole life, right now, our bodies, who we are right **NOW** saved by God. Resurrection affirms this life and the next as a seamless reality. God never gives up on his creation. HE NEVER GIVES UP ON YOU.

2 Corinthians 5:17-19 - *“If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us.”*

Paul intends for us to see the world in a completely new way, so that our actions stem from this new understanding, not just from trying harder or from a place of guilt. It transforms the way we see God, the world and ourselves – everything has become new! There is a new dignity and identity attached to it all. Paul wants us to become so thoroughly transformed that we become members of a “new creation.” God brings the new creation into existence by sending his Son into the old creation to transform or “reconcile” it by raising him bodily into a new reality. “In Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself.” Not just one aspect of the world, but the whole world. Those who follow Christ, who are reconciled to God by Christ, are appointed to carry on Christ’s work of reconciliation.

We, as parents live this every day, bringing reconciliation to our family, among our children. Every good deed, word, thought only builds up God’s new creation. There is no room anymore for death in God’s kingdom.

God loves us — that is the heart of the Christian message: he loves you and he loves me. The way that St Paul puts it in Galatians 2, verse 20 is this: *‘The Son of God loved me and gave himself for me.’* It is as personal as that. If you had been the only person in the world, Jesus would have died for you.

To watch

“Resurrection”

To reflect on

Q: How do you feel about the idea of Jesus’ bodily resurrection?

Q: Can you see how this transforms how we see God, the world and ourselves?