

TRAGEDY OR TRIUMPH

5th February 2017

Readings: Matthew 26:1-5; Galatians 2:19-21; 3:1

Note: The introduction draws from Tim Keller's sermon, The Last Supper

This morning we're beginning a sermon series that will take us up to, and through, Easter. Our text will be the last three chapters of Matthew and our focus will be The Passion of Christ. Originally the word passion meant suffering, though now it's common usage is very much different. So we'll pick up on his suffering that lead to his horrible death but then leads onto his glorious resurrection



Prayer

When you take a look at the deaths of the founders of other religions you'll see they're all fairly similar. For example, Moses died at 120, full of years, strong as ever, undisputed leader having brought his people to the edge of the Promised Land. Buddha died at the age of 80, surrounded by devoted disciples ready to do anything for him. He died a success and at peace. Confucius, originally exiled from his hometown, was welcomed back and honoured. He died surrounded by those who'd continue his work. Mohammad died in his sixties after uniting the warring states of Arabia. He was first political leader and died in the arms of his wife.

Now let's contrast this for a moment. When it comes to Christianity what do we have? We have a man who died young in his early 30's, perhaps 33. His ministry, at the very most, lasted but three years. He died rejected from his own people, killed by the powers of Rome, abandoned by his followers. The Bible even goes so far as to say he was abandoned by God. Jesus' death was premature, tragic and a disgrace.

Now reflecting on all this we can understand why other religions are a success. People hear the spiritual truths and teaching of the founders. People see the peace it brings. They see them dying successful, full of days, surrounded by admirers. Who wouldn't want this? So people say to themselves, "This works. I'm going to give it a shot. I'm going to look into it. I'm going to study it". And they do and they follow them.

So here's our question. "Why would anyone, looking at Jesus and the way his life ended, want to follow him?" Why? Seeing him die penniless, naked and abandoned why would anyone say, "This is the message for me. This is what I want".

There's more. Not only did Jesus die young and by all standards a failure but the Bible makes the audacious claim that he died for you and me. His death was no accident but all part of a master plan. Now this causes confusion. Some people say it's like this:

Imagine a boy and girl walking alongside a river? The boy is deeply in love with the girl, but she's hesitant. Again and again he tells her of his love. Eventually she says, "Well I'm not sure". Undaunted the boy continues to extoll his love for her. And she says, "You know, I just don't feel the same way". To which the boy says, "I'll show you how much I love. I'll will die for you". Immediately he jumps into the river and drowns. Now what's the girl going to think? What's she going to say? What does she think of this boy?... "Moron. What an idiot!"

So given that Jesus died young - given he died a shameful death - given we never asked him to die for us - why did so many early Christians say, "This is the life I want"? Why are there any Christians today, let alone over 2 billion, who say "This message is for me. I will follow Jesus and I will do it gladly"?

Well the answers are found in The Passion - the Gospel accounts of Christ's death on the cross. And Matthew doesn't just report the facts and leave it up to us to make up our own minds. No. Matthew structures his account so the explanation is clear, as we see in the beginning of The Passion

When Jesus had finished saying all these things, he said to his disciples, "As you know, the Passover is two days away—and the Son of Man will be handed over to be crucified." Matthew 26:1–2

Here, in his own words, Jesus lays out three themes that unlock the meaning of his death. Three themes that run through the whole Passion story. At Passover the Son of Man would be crucified.

- I. Passover
- II. Son of Man
- III. Crucifixion

The *Passover* gives us the **why** of the cross
The *Son of Man* describes the **who** of the cross
The *crucifixion* describes the **how** of the cross

Now we'll come back to these three themes of Passover, Son of Man, and crucifixion through the series but for now an overview.

I. Passover - the why of the cross

First let's look at the Passover theme and **the why of the cross**. What's the Passover? Well about 1,500 years before the Israelites were slaves Egypt. They were prisoners, not wasting a way in jail, but slaving under a hot sun, especially in the building sites. They were oppressed, downtrodden and without hope. They

were whipped, beaten and deprived. And most cruelly... Pharaoh ordered all Jewish boys put to death at birth. Imagine the broken hearts and families ripped apart by this infanticide. Imagine the great cry of grief and despair that rose up to God. How evil and dark those days. How desperate the need. The Passover describes how God's people were rescued. Not only that how disparate they were

And we are the same. We're no different. Let me say, you will never understand the cross until you understand your desperate need. We also are enslaved to cruel masters. Not Egyptians, but to sin and death. We're broken, our heart is black, we have no hope. Not one is exempt, not one. And Satan's greatest and most effective scheme is to hide this from as many as he can. Even to some sitting here today. Satan will do anything to keep you ignorant of your desperate need. Many walk through life in a grey fog, not understanding their unease or anxiety, making do with a quiet despair that settles over our lives. Others don't need to be told of the evil that reigns in their life. They've met evil face to face, in themselves or others. They know how crippled they are. I'll say it again, we'll never understand the cross until you realise you are slaves to sin and death just as the Israelites were to Egyptians. And the Passover was the annual reminder of this great need.

II. Son of Man

This brings us to the second theme signalled here by Jesus. That of the Son of Man, **the who of the cross**. You see the Israelites, enslaved and facing the slaughter of their babies, needed a saviour. So God raised up Moses. Moses, whose birth was miraculous. How? For despite Pharaoh ordered midwives to kill Jewish boys at birth Moses was spared. Does this remind you of anyone? Remember Herod ordering the death of all infant boys in and around Bethlehem in an attempt to kill the baby Jesus. Then Moses grew to a man and defeated Pharaoh with great signs and wonders. The Nile turned to blood and there was plague upon plague. Yes, with signs and wonders the Israelites were freed. Does that remind you of anyone? Jesus. Jesus who performed signs and wonders such as turning water into wine and feeding thousands in the desert. Yes, God raised up Jesus, the Son of Man, to defeat not Pharaoh but sin and death. Jesus, the Son of Man is the true and better Moses who rescues us from slavery

III. Crucified

Finally we come to the third theme Jesus highlights at the beginning of his suffering. That of the crucifixion - **the fact of the cross**. Again remember back to the enslaved Israelites. What was the final miracle that defeated the stubborn and arrogant Pharaoh? It was the death of his firstborn son and every other firstborn throughout the land. No one was exempt. Neither Jew or Egyptian. We forget this part. We think it was just the Egyptians that deserved death but no - all stand guilty before God. Jewish and Egyptian – all deserved death.

Except - and oh the wonder of God grace - except those who had the blood of lamb over their doorway. When the angel of death came to that house and saw a life had already been given, that blood had already been shed, he passed over the house to the next. This then is the Passover. The blood of a lamb protected, turned aside,

the rightful judgment of God, so those sheltering under the blood might live. Bringing this forward to Christ's passion what does the Passover tell us? It tells us that our freedom, our rescue from slavery, can only come through the death of the first-born son.

And so again the Passover sheds light on the meaning of the crucifixion. Jesus, God's firstborn son, died on the cross shedding his blood, so that all who shelter under his blood are spared the righteous judgment of God. Because God's first born died on the cross we are set free from slavery. Yes, for everyone who repents and believes in the Son of Man is rescued from the grip of sin and death.

Can you see why, despite Jesus dying young, dying shamefully, dying when no one asked him too, the early Christians said, "This is what I want in my life. The cross. This is the message for me. I want to be set free from sin and death". Can you see why some 2 billion Christians today are saying the same thing?

Let me pull it all together before we finish. Let me redefine the story I told earlier of the boy and girl walking beside a river. Remember the boy jumps into the river and drowns to prove his love. Remember her response? "Moron, idiot..." But that's not what it's like at all. It's actually like this...

Imagine a boy and girl walking beside a river and the girl falls in. She can't swim, the river is deep, the current is swift. There's no chance of rescue by any other means. What does the boy do? He runs ahead, jumps in and saves her life... but in the attempt he drowns. Now how does the girl respond? What does she say...? Completely different now...

Now, today I've only scratched the surface. We're going to follow these great themes of Passover, Son of Man and crucifixion over the next few weeks. We'll drill deep, mine the riches, experience Christ's saving work but today... what's our response?

Maybe this is new to you. You're not a Christian and you've been sort of interested but not really. Well, God is calling you now, to himself. Jesus died on the cross to free you from sin and death. Why? So you can be adopted you as a dearly beloved daughter or dearly beloved son. Until Jesus dealt with our rebellion, our sin, our corruption on the cross this could never happen. Now there is door and it's open for you Today, as we come to communion put aside all that would hinder. Put aside pride. Put aside the sin we hold onto... and give our live to Christ, as he give his for us.

Or maybe you thought you understood what Jesus did, but you've seen there's so much more. Maybe you've asked Jesus to be Lord of your life at some time but there's a stirring within you - an understanding that there's more. Today, as you take the bread and wine, rededicate yourself to Christ, whose blood you shelter under. Ask God to rekindle that first love that's been so long lacking.

Maybe all this is not new to you. You regularly thank God for Christ's victory over sin and death. Today open yourself up to more. As you taste the bread, sip the wine, pray you'll know more a greater sense of Christ's victory in your life and that you'll live a life pleasing to God in such a way that others will want to know why. And you will be able to tell them that Jesus, the Son of Man, went to the cross, destroyed sin and death that we might God's children and might have eternal and abundant life. Amen