

1 CORINTHIANS 1:18-25  
THE GOD FOR ME!

For many years, John Stott was rector of All Souls Church, Langholm Place, London. The Church building is across the street from the BBC and features in many BBC worship events. John Stott became rector of All Souls in 1950 and retired in 1975. His ministry was world-wide through his preaching and involvement in so many other Christian causes. He wrote many books and his books changed many people's lives. Thirty years ago, in 1986, he published a book called *The Cross of Christ*. It is what it says on cover, a book which looks in some detail at the theme of the cross through the whole Bible; what it means for Jesus to die on the cross, how the cross impacted on the preaching of the apostles and how the theme of the cross should shape the life of the church today and should shape our ministry; I read it when it came out thirty years ago and I keep going back to it, since it is full of rich material for the preacher and for sharing with other people.

For me, the most profound part of the book comes towards the end. The last chapter is called *suffering and glory* and asks the age-old question about God and the suffering world. Why does God, who says that He loves us and loves the world, allow people to suffer? Either God doesn't love the world or He is powerless to stop suffering! What John Stott does in this book, in a way that I had never encountered before, is to put the cross into that question and writes about the pain of God as Jesus died on cross, and that the cross is God in solidarity with the world, sharing in our suffering world at first hand. Still, thirty years later, I'm trying to work out what that means for the people that I meet and with whom I walk through the times when you suffer. Still, thirty years later, I am trying to relate the cross to suffering in the world around me. Stott came to the conclusion that: "The only God I believe in is the One ridiculed as 'God on the cross'...That is the God for me!"

We were thinking earlier of the Somme and the immense suffering that took place there 100 years ago; the numbers are simply staggering in terms of the people who died and were injured; the worst battle in human history and for nothing! I was listening to some of the voices this week of young men going off to war, speaking as if they were going on holiday for 6 months and then would be back; they didn't know what lay in store. Siegfried Sassoon's poem *Attack* which we read earlier ends with the words: "Oh Jesus, make it stop!" Was that an expletive or a prayer? Either way, "make it stop" sums up so much of what we see and think about suffering in our world today. Many are victims of terror, war, and crime; many suffer ill-health and in circumstances we describe as tragic. Where is God in all of this? How does the cross shape our view, or change our mind?

In 1 Corinthians chapter 1, Paul is keen to show the Christians in Corinth that the cross is God at work in the world. There are two objections that were being raised in Corinth that are still raised about Jesus on the cross: the cross is a stupid idea; the cross will never work. Paul works with two themes: "*Christ the...*" (1 Corinthians 1:24) He is going to show the Christians in Corinth that the cross is both a brilliant idea on God's part and that cross works, that by dying on the cross Jesus has actually achieved something. For people in their world as in ours: "*Jews look...*" (1 Corinthians 1:22f) There is nothing spectacular about the cross from the world's point of view, but it is God at His wisest and it is God at his most powerful, doing something significant to change the world forever and all through Jesus dying on a cross.

When Jesus died on the cross He cried out "*It is finished!*" (John 19:30) When I came across that at first, it sounded like a cry of despair; "I'm done; it is over!" But then I began to realise, with the help of some wiser people, that it actually means something more than that. It actually means "it is accomplished; I have achieved it!" and so it becomes an entirely different cry; it becomes a cry of victory, that His task is complete and it is a task completed on the cross. This is what Jesus came to do; He came to die on a cross and so the cross becomes the place where Jesus completed His mission.

*“Christ the...” (1 Corinthians 1:24)* The cross on the outside looks like a place of defeat. Jesus’s enemies had trapped Him and now He is beaten; they have won and He has lost; there is no way back from this, He has suffered and has died; He is crucified in weakness. By what measure is Christ the power of God? What has He achieved? The great theme of the gospel is that the cross is the place where Jesus achieved our salvation. He died that we might be forgiven. All kinds of themes go with this: He is the sacrifice to take on Himself the sin of the world; He is the One who loved us so much that He took our place; He opens us the way for us to come to God. All of that is achieved by His death on the cross. At heart, the cross for Jesus is place of suffering and death, but it is for Him and for us also a place of salvation, the place where He achieved our salvation for us. *“The message...” (1 Corinthians 1:18)* and so Paul went to Corinth and the heart of His preaching was the message of the cross. Lives were changed. Ever since, the cross has been the emblem, the badge of Christian faith; the place of execution has become the place of salvation. Christ – the power of God.

Christ – the wisdom of God. What is it about the cross that shows God at His wisest? When God sent Jesus into world, He was setting out to meet the deepest needs of the people on the planet. The Really Important Value, about which we were talking earlier, is not to be clever, or wealthy, not even healthy; the deepest need is not to be powerful and famous or even influential. The deepest need we have is to be at peace with God. That peace and reconciliation is achieved on the cross. God achieved it by the forgiveness of our sins and effected reconciliation between us. God saw that the only way to achieve that was for Jesus to come into the world and become one of us and die, as a man, on the cross. That way, our sins are forgiven and reconciliation is set. God did very thing we needed and He did it by the cross. Here is the wisdom of God to understand both the need and the remedy!

It's the cross that connects God to our world. If I were to ask you for a word that sums up our world in 2016, I wonder what that word would be? Messy? Troubled? Cruel? Turbulent? Beautiful? Full of goodness? That last might be stretching our initial understanding, but scratch the surface and it is still full of goodness. Our first impressions are quite different and one of our deepest impressions of the world is that it is messy and that there is a great deal of suffering. As I said earlier, this weekend we've been reminded of the Somme and the suffering and death that happened in that battle and to no real effect. But we can add to that so much more: the Holocaust, terrorism, disease, poverty and corruption and when we see these things and the suffering they have caused in the world, we say 'where is God in all of this?' The cross tells us that God is right there, in the midst of it all, sharing our pain! The cross tells us that God feels our pain; that He suffers with us; Jesus of the cross is part of our suffering world.

I was hearing this week, the story of David Railton; he was a Church of England clergyman whose idea it was to have the tomb of the unknown soldier in Westminster Abbey. The television programme I saw was telling his story and how he managed to bring about this place where millions of people stop to remember. During the First World War, he was an army chaplain serving on the Western Front, and was awarded the Military Cross for saving an officer and two men under heavy fire. The programme showed a piece of film of David Railton (or it might have been another chaplain) celebrating communion in the trenches before the soldiers went to war. My point: the cross tells us that God is there in the trenches with these men who are about to go to war; I don't for a minute suggest that God condones war, but I do suggest that God shares the suffering and the pain of these men in the trenches, knowing their fears, their agonies, the agonies of families as they mourn because their loved ones are killed and have died. When we've told these First World War stories of the names on our memorials, I have heard and watched you react to these stories, as you sympathise with their families at their loss, even of people you don't know. If we feel that sympathy in a little way, the God of the cross shares His sympathy in a much more profound way.

Our forefathers wrote and talked about “the impassibility of God”, that God didn’t have feelings and emotions, but was impassive in the face of everything in the world. That suggests that God is somehow incapable of suffering because He doesn’t feel any emotion of any kind. But anyone looking at the gospels and seeing Jesus will see that God is capable of the most profound emotion. Jesus shows us God being angry; God being compassionate; God being patient, loving, and kind; Jesus shows us God knowing what hell is like, wrestling with the pain and agony of hard choices in Gethsemane; in so many ways, in so many places God’s passions are made clear. Most profoundly of all, God feels the pain and agony of death when Jesus died on the cross. When he had considered all of that, John Stott wrote “That is the God for me”, to which I would add a hearty “Amen”.

A lapel badge; a gold cross on a gold chain round your neck; a wooden cross on a string round someone’s neck; a stained glass cross in the window; a sewn cross on a colourful banner; a badge on the cover of a bible; a carving on the font; an embroidered design on the pulpit fall – so many crosses! The bread and wine of the communion service, touching and tasting elements that remind us of Jesus on the cross. The cross is at the centre of church life. The cross is the centre of the way in which God relates to the world. Jesus has shared our pain and suffering; God with us in these unspeakably dark places. He has not gone away, but He is there, in the trenches, in the concentration camps, in the hospital wards, in the treatment rooms, in the front room of the family who mourn, and so much more. This is the God who touches the world I know, who touches the world where I live and this is the God who saves me and who saves people across the world. This is God of the cross; this is the God for me!