

SURVEYING THE CROSS LUKE 23:33-46

The world is full of instantly recognisable marks; images that advertise famous products or world-wide companies; BP, Rolls Royce, Nike, McDonalds, Vodafone, Marks and Spencer, Shell. I'm sure you would know most of them. The ad-men and graphic design teams will have worked for hours, days, weeks, and months to get something that will be just right. McDonald's golden arches began in the 1950's when 2 brothers started their hamburger stand and now it is one of world's most recognisable brand-images, whether you like their product or not. Some images have gone through changes: the BP logo is now designed to be more friendly to the environment, but the same basic image is there; they once did a Television advertising campaign in which all that you saw were very small BP logos on hats, jackets, and other equipment; the image was enough to tell people what they were watching.

The Church has the most powerful and instantly recognisable Christian symbol in the world. You see it on buildings across the world and it comes in all sorts of shapes, sizes, and kinds from wooden and metal to neon. People wear it round their necks in versions that are wooden, gold, silver, large, or small; or it is worn as a lapel badge. It comes on the covers of Bibles and hymnbooks. You see it in windows and doors. You know that wherever you see this symbol that this is Christian building, or person wearing this is a Christian with some kind of Christian faith, sympathy, or upbringing. The symbol, of course, is the cross. The cross is one of the most easily recognisable brand-images across the whole world and it is symbol of Christian faith. If you want a symbol to represent Christianity then the cross is it! Which is strange in some ways, because the cross is the place of execution, an instrument of torture in the Roman world, but for Christians it is also the place of salvation, the place where God's rescue mission was completed.

How are we to understand the cross? Some people would say that it is a tragedy: that someone so young, their life should be cut short by the brutal, unjust actions of some powerful people who wanted rid of a trouble-maker. Others would say that it is a simple miscarriage of justice, like so many others we see in our world, even today; a person is convicted of a crime they didn't commit because someone concocted evidence against Him. How did Jesus see the cross? He went to Jerusalem deliberately: "*As the...*" (9:51) He set out to go to Jerusalem, knowing what would happen; several times, He predicted to His disciples that He would die and be raised and even said that it was necessary that He die. For Jesus the cross was not simply a tragic suffering, though it was that; for Jesus it was not simply a miscarriage of justice – though it was that; for Jesus the cross was necessary so that He could be the Saviour of the world.

Luke chapter 23 continues the story of the cross from the end of chapter 22. Last time (& the sermon from last week is on the web and in print!) we watched Jesus spend His last evening (the Thursday) with His friends around the table sharing a Passover meal. Then He went out into Gethsemane to

pray and was arrested as Judas betrayed Him and Peter denied Him; He was left alone. The story tells us that Jesus was dragged before the Jewish leaders, a kind of religious court; then He appears before Pilate, in the civil Roman court; then He is taken to Herod who seemed to treat whole thing as some kind of side-show, looking for Jesus to perform a miracle on demand; then He is taken before the crowd who demand His death. There are two things going on here: first, there is the story of historical events in which these real people take part; but secondly, in the background, God is at work to achieve the salvation of the world and it is this that turns the cross from tragedy to triumph; with the resurrection on Sunday morning, the cross is no longer a place of defeat, but becomes the place where all God's plans were gloriously and once-for-all-time achieved.

We can't look at every part of story, much as I would love to; there isn't time; but you will have the chance to do that at end of March in the Discovery Group when the whole Easter story will be up for discussion; anything you've wanted to ask, bring it and discuss with the others. **1989:** The Guildford Four are released by the Court of Appeal. The detectives at the centre of the case are later cleared of fabricating evidence. **1991:** The Birmingham Six are freed. Prosecutions against officers accused of tampering with evidence are halted because of "adverse publicity". **1997:** The Bridgwater Four - minus Patrick Molloy, who died in jail - are released after 17 years in prison. **2000:** The M25 Three are freed by three Court of Appeal judges who say there had been a "conspiracy" to give perjured evidence. A miscarriage of justice can result from poor evidence, evidence that is fabricated; or from the judge giving misdirection to jury.

At one level, the 'trial' of Jesus (if we can call it that) was a huge miscarriage of justice. Pilate: "*I find...*" (23:4) "*I have...*" (23:14f) The thief beside Jesus on the cross, said to his friend: "*We are...*" (23:41) The soldier on guard at the foot of the cross: "*Surely...*" (23:47) They all say he was innocent. The trial was based on charges that were made up: "*We have...*" (23:2), twisting Jesus' words into the worst possible light for the Roman governor. The trial was conducted by a man who gave in to the will of the mob. Pilate wanted to let Jesus go: "*I will...*" (23:16) though even to punish Him would have been out of order. But the crowd, whipped up by the religious leaders, "*kept shouting...*" (23:20) So, on evidence that was invented, under a judge that was weak beyond belief, and in answer to the baying mob, Jesus is handed over to be crucified, an innocent man condemned to die.

So why did it happen? Somehow the small things in this story tell us why! They all mean something! One that seems insignificant, unimportant, but is actually symbolically at heart of this story. "*And the...*" (23:45) The curtain is torn in two! The curtain in the temple was round the place called the 'Holy of Holies', the 'Most Holy Place'; that was the place which symbolised for Israel the presence of God, the place where God lived. Only the High Priest was allowed through the curtain and that only once a year with a sacrifice on the Day of Atonement; the curtain was there to keep people out of the presence of God. People were kept out because of their sin; they were people who had made mistakes, who had got things wrong, imperfect people who had to kept

at distance from a holy God, from a pure and perfect God. The people to be kept out, had to be kept away, had to be kept at a distance and the curtain did that.

When Jesus died that curtain was torn in two. Now the way is open to come into the presence of the great and glorious God; now the way is open for people to come to God in faith and prayer. Why? What happened to change things? The simple answer: Jesus has died. When He died, He took on Himself all that the Bible calls 'sin'. Here we have an innocent man, a man whom everyone agrees has done nothing wrong, yet He dies bearing other people's sins and misdemeanours, our sins and misdemeanours. Here are the words with which we opened the service, from Isaiah 53: "*He was...*" (Isaiah 53:5,6) All the wrong things we have done, the times when we have made mistakes, the times when we have come up short of what we should be, the times when we have neglected God, the times when we have even deliberately disobeyed God – all of that is piled onto Jesus' shoulders, for all of us, for all the world, once for all time. Jesus has taken this to the cross and has died for us.

The result: we are forgiven people. Stand in a court-room for a moment: we are in the dock, we have done something wrong and the judge has passed sentence on us for our crime and we just about to pay fine or be taken away when someone intervenes to pay it for us; it turns out to be judge's son who pays the fine or goes to prison in our place. What happens to us? We go free! We walk out of the court room free people. That's one picture of what Jesus has done for us and so now in God's eyes we are forgiven all of our past, we are forgiven all the wrong things we have done, all the mistakes; the slate is wiped clean and is wiped clean every morning. We are forgiven and free people because Jesus died on the cross. The way is open to us to pray, to come in faith to God, looking for peace, hope, and grace, knowing that He will hear us, accept us, and receive us because Jesus has died!

All this happened because God loves us. Here is the reason for the cross: "*God demonstrates ...*" (Romans 5:8) We are people in need; the deepest need every person has is to do with our relationship with God and that relationship is spoiled by our sin, by our faults and mistakes, by our shortcomings, by our human nature that by instinct takes us away from God. That deepest need is sorted and is sorted, not by us, but by God. Jesus came into world to heal that broken relationship by taking away our sin and He did this because of His love for us. He saw our need and wanted to sort it for us. I know parents who see their children hurting and all they want to do is sort it for their children; they want to make things right; they want to do something; but so often we are helpless to do anything and simply have to stand by and watch as our children face up to difficult things. God sees our need and wants to sort it and the difference is that He can and He has sorted it when Jesus died on the cross. Sin is dealt with and we are right with God.

Prof James S. Stewart was an eminent Churchman of a previous generation in Scotland; a man whom people would queue round the block to hear preach. He wrote a book called *The Life and teaching of Jesus* which you can find on

Amazon. It is an excellent little book, that takes the reader all the way through the life of Jesus. Chapter 18 is called 'Jesus on trial' and the last section of that chapter turns the whole thing on its head when Stewart says this: "everyone who studies the narratives has the strange feeling that the tables are being turned before his very eyes and that what he is seeing is not Jesus on trial before Caiaphas or Pilate or Herod: what he is seeing is Caiaphas, Pilate and Herod on trial before Jesus... it is they who have been judged by Him. Face to face each of them stood with the Son of man... and His searchlight played upon their souls, revealing their inmost nature, and showing them up for all the world and for all time to see... the real judge was Christ.... Every soul at some stage of its life-journey must stand – face to face with Jesus, in the place of decision." As we survey the cross, and Jesus who died there, trying to understand what it is all about, Jesus (and His cross) surveys us. His searchlight plays on our soul. The cross says to us: what do you believe? Where does your trust really lie? Do we trust Jesus, crucified, and risen? Then our sins are forgiven and we are right with God, the deepest needs of our lives are met. He is One "*Who was...*" (*Isaiah 53:5*) Jesus has done this for us because He loves us.