

**Growing in Faith 9**

**A Sermon preached in St John's, Walton-on-Thames  
on Sunday 21<sup>st</sup> March 2010 – "Once for all, why did Jesus die?"**

**Readings:**

Isaiah 53.1-9; Romans 5.1-8; John 3.33-37

From Luke 24.26-27: "Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into glory?" Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures." Jesus spoke those words to two grieving disciples on the Emmaus road. This morning, we're on a journey too. In fact, we're going on a yomp. Anyone know what a yomp is? Perhaps the most famous yomp of recent years was in the Falklands war, when the royal marines marched rapidly across a lot of terrain, in order to gain a strategic advantage over the enemy, and take a high position. That's a yomp. And this morning we're going on a yomp through the Bible to try to answer the question 'why did Jesus die?'

As with many journeys, it's important that we start off from the right place. Our yomp begins by recognising that humankind had a problem, and the Bible's word for it is sin. Many people aren't comfortable with that word. When I was training to be a teacher, the man who taught the Religious Education subsidiary subject course really, **really** had a problem talking about sin (which, of course, ensured that my friends and I mentioned it all the time). But it's not just him. Nowadays, it's the self-help gurus who don't want us talking about sin; they think it's bad for our self-esteem, or that it just makes us feel like failures; whereas recognising our sin is in fact the first step to being set free from its power, which in turn leads to us becoming more truly ourselves. Perhaps we can think of it like this: if we're ill, we want to know what's wrong with us; so we go to the doctor for an accurate diagnosis, and we want the doctor to be honest with us about the problem. Why settle for anything less, when it comes to diagnosing what's amiss in our inner being?

The reason this matters is just the effects of sin are so serious. Sin separates us from God; it cuts us off from the life God wants to give us. It stops us living as we want to live; it mucks up relationships and damages communities. It's a killer. "For the wages of sin is death", writes Paul (Romans 6.23). Is that

to say that we're entirely bad? No; but every part of us is stained by sin. The trouble is that the way the world thinks of sin, if it does, goes something like this: the sins worth bothering about are the really serious ones, and they're always done by somebody else; I only tell white lies; as if there's a sliding scale with Hitler at the bottom and Mother Theresa at the top, and as long as we're more than half way up and live a fairly good life, we'll be all right; and, anyway, I'm not a merchant banker. Whereas the Bible teaches that "all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God" (Romans 3.23). Now, this may come as a surprise, but the Pope is a sinner; Archbishop Rowan is a sinner; even Jose Mourinho - the special one - is a sinner; and so am I; and so are you. For **all** have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.

Having identified the problem, on with our yomp. Romans 5.8: "But God proves his love for us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us." How can we begin to get a handle on what that means? Perhaps you have heard the story of Fr Maximilian Kolbe, a Polish priest who died in Auschwitz. In July 1941 a man from Kolbe's barracks vanished; as a punishment, and to deter other potential escapees, 10 men were picked from the same barracks to be starved to death. Father Kolbe offered himself in place of Franciszek Gajowniczek, a young husband and father. After two weeks of starvation and thirst, only Fr Kolbe of the ten survived; he was eventually killed by lethal injection.

As Paul says, "rarely will anyone die for a righteous person", though stories of personal self-sacrifice (such as Fr Kolbe's) are not unknown. But what Jesus does by his death is even more remarkable: "For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God" (1 Peter 3.18). Jesus' death on the cross was **once for all**. It wasn't just for those who were around at the time; it was for you; it was for me; it was for our children.

Peter also makes explicit the connection between Jesus' death and our sin: "He himself bore our sins in his own body on the cross, so that, free from sins, we might live for his righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed" (1 Peter 2.24). Jesus bears our sins, so we don't have to. Indeed, says Peter, because Jesus bore our sins, we are set free from the power of sin over us, that we can live in a new way.

One of the most wonderful promises associated with that new life and that fresh start is that we are forgiven: "In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins" (Ephesians 1.7).

Forgiveness and freedom go together. Remember the Jubilee Campaign to relieve many of the poorest nations of the world of the crippling burdens of debt they were carrying? Those nations couldn't begin to pay off the debt; trying to pay the interest was enough to plunge their people into deeper poverty and misery. The solution was to wipe the slate clean, clear the debt; and set them free to build a new future. It's the same with us. There is no way we could ever pay off the debt of our sin. In the same way, we human beings needed the slate to be wiped clean, and at the cross it was. For me, this is summed up in a song I learned about 30 years ago, which distils so much of what the Bible teaches about Jesus' death: "At the cross of Jesus, pardon is complete; love and justice mingle, truth and mercy meet. Though my sins condemn me, Jesus died instead; there is full forgiveness in the blood he shed."

That also resonates with the prophetic words of Isaiah 53: "Surely he has borne our infirmities and carried our diseases ... he was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities, upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray, we have all turned to our own way, and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all" (Isaiah 53.4-6). But isn't that unfair? How could God lay all that on someone else?

This is one of those moments where we need to remember to look at things from a post-Easter perspective. Isaiah wrote about the 'suffering Servant' writing centuries before the birth of Christ. He only knew that God was one. We read this passage now, knowing that God is Father, Son and Spirit; that there are three persons, yet one God. So when Jesus dies on the cross, God is taking onto himself – **into** himself – the penalty of human sin. As Paul puts it in 2 Corinthians 5: "in Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them". Ephesians 2.14-17 makes a similar point: that, in Christ, God was reconciling us to himself and to one another. In Ephesians 2 the image is of Christ breaking down the barriers between Jew and Gentile, creating "in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it."

Finally, our yomp takes us to today's gospel: "As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life". In the wilderness, the Israelites were being bitten by poisonous snakes, and many died. When Moses cried out

to God, God told him to set up a serpent on a pole; so that if anyone was bitten, they just had to turn and look at the bronze serpent, and they would live.

And this is the context of the most famous verse in the Bible, John 3.16: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have everlasting life”. God doesn’t want us to be stuck in sin; He loves us far too much for that. And so he gives his Son, to be lifted up on the cross; so we can turn to him, and find life in all its fulness, in this world and in the next. And all this, says Jesus, is for love. It’s because God so loved the world that he gave his only Son; not to condemn the world, but so that through him the world might be saved.

We’re now on the strategic height. Having yomped our way through all that Biblical terrain, what are we going to do now? We have a choice. We could ignore it all and, in effect, say something like, “I never asked you to do that for me, so I’ll just carry on as before, if that’s all right with you”. Or we could choose to feel guilty (though in fact it’s a false guilt), and feel so bad unworthy of what Jesus did that we couldn’t possibly avail ourselves of all that flows from his death and resurrection.

Or we can say: how amazing is this love, that God gave his only Son to die on the cross, that whoever believes in him will not perish, but have everlasting life.

Having yomped our way to the strategic height, we’re now in a position to look forward towards Palm Sunday and Holy Week; while also looking back at the ground we’ve covered, from the perspective of those words of Jesus from the Emmaus Road - “Was it not necessary?”

To which the answer is, ‘yes, it was’. For us to be forgiven, to be released from the penalty of our sin, to be set free to live in a new way, to be reconciled to God and to one another, to receive eternal life – for all this to happen it was indeed necessary for Jesus to suffer and to die, once for all. Once for all time, once for all people; and to him be the praise and the glory. Amen.

Charles Stewart