

Good morning, good to see you, we're continuing our series in Matthew and this morning we come to chapter 20 where Jesus speaks to his disciples about the climax of his mission on earth: his death and resurrection.

About a 1/3 of the gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke and about 1/2 the gospel of John are devoted to just the last few days of Jesus' life

For Jesus it is the events surrounding his **death** that set him apart from every other great religious leader. For every other great religious leader it is their life and teaching that defines them. But for us it is his final few days of Jesus' life that are world-changing.

It is his death, that is central,
It is his crucifixion and resurrection that drives our faith,
It is the meaning of his sacrifice that inspires us

It is the cross - a wretched symbol of pain and horror - that has become the ultimate symbol of love. The cross is literally the Crux of what we believe.

But there is a very tragic trend that happens in churches. For it seems to me, that what one generation **believes** The next generation **assumes** the next generation **forgets**; and the following generation **denies**.

what one generation **believes**, the next **assumes**, the next **forgets**; and then **denies**. This is what happens to truth, in church, we go from believing, to assuming, to forgetting, to denying...

And in our country there are many churches that have simply forgotten, or worse, deny the power of the cross they are not excited about it, they are not convinced about it, they deny its fundamental purpose. and then they are surprised that their church is dying! It is a tragedy!

So I want **us** to make no assumptions
The cross is what we are about
It motivates our ministry
It is what we stand for.

As we launch new ministry after ministry
As we get mobilised to help, more and more people
As our congregations multiply and our staffing grows
We need to remember we are cross centred - not *cause centred*.

It's not what **WE** do that defines us,
it is What **HE** has done on the cross that defines us

Now it seems to me that most of the world struggles to get what the cross is all about.

- for some the cross is primitive and almost embarrassing – one leading churchman called its central idea tantamount to cosmic child abuse;
- for most the cross is irrelevant – it has no impact on their life; and
- for many it is ineffective for it fails to change us from inside out.

Tragically, the cross is seen as primitive, or irrelevant or ineffective

And I want to challenge those ideas this morning

1. Firstly, some say that the Cross is just too primitive.

In Matthew 20v17,

Jesus took his disciples aside to tell them what was going to happen to him and as importantly down in v28 **why** it was going to happen

v17 Now as Jesus was going up to Jerusalem, he took the twelve disciples aside ...

and

v28 “for the Son of Man will give his life as a ransom for many”

Now we really only know this word “Ransom” in kidnapping situations.

Someone is taken against their will and someone has to pay something to secure their freedom!

But in Jesus’ time it was a pretty normal word.

For it was usual for a “servant” or “slave” to gain their freedom by a family member coming and buying it for them.

What Jesus is saying here is –

He is that family member and he is “buying our freedom” –

freedom from guilt, freedom from condemnation, freedom to approach God freedom to know him

- But the question is how?

How does he buy our freedom?

Well the word “for” here (a ransom “for many”) is the Greek word *ante* which means “in the place of”

In other words Jesus is saying he is going to Jerusalem to buy our freedom by dying in our place, as a ransom, substitute, sacrifice for us.

Now many people struggle with this

this just makes no sense to them.

This substitutionary sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross

makes almost no sense to people living today.

And that could be true for you –

And it is certainly true for the people that surround you in your workplace or home.

The thing they don’t get is

Why?

Why is it necessary?

Why does Jesus have to sacrifice himself on the cross as a substitute?

If God is a really loving God.

Why doesn't just forgive us?

Why doesn't he just forgive everybody?

Why does he have to go through all this?

What's the matter with him?

Well let me show you why...

All life changing love is substitutionary and sacrificial

All life changing love is substitutionary and sacrificial

1.1 Take parenting.

Our children are given to us as a blank canvass but whose instincts are selfish, needy and dependent. If we leave them to themselves, if we don't input, they will not magically grow out of it

The only way that children ever grow up to be self-sufficient, responsible, unselfish adults is if we are willing to sacrifice the best part of our next 10 to 15 years for them

If we are willing to read to them, play with them, coach them, supervise them, correct them, teach them, train them.

If we are willing to read Enid Blyton to them –

not because we like it but because they do

(The Wishing Chair stories are enough to make any sane adult want to kill themselves with a dull spoon)

if we'll watch the 15th repeat of Telly Tubbies at 5:00 in the morning – water torture is more appealing

if we are willing to dodge Weetabix mortar bombs as we prepare for work

Only if Parents are willing to sacrifice their freedom, sleep, their own needs, can children grow up to be responsible

Now there are plenty of parents who won't do that –

and we saw the results in the recreational riots on our streets just last week

If parents won't disrupt their life

If they won't make the sacrifice

If they won't substitute their needs for their children's

then their kids are likely to grow up mentally, emotionally, spiritually immature and selfish

Somebody has to make the sacrifice.

Somebody has to invest themselves

Somebody has to pay the price to raise children

All real life changing love is substitutionary sacrifice

1.2 Take Forgiveness

If someone wrongs you – I mean really wrongs you,

Let's say harms your reputation and screws up something that you really want to do

the most natural thing in the world to do is to make **them** pay.

If they have run you down – they you can run them down

If they have destroyed your reputation then you can destroy theirs

You can show where they have distorted the truth, and wronged you and been unfair.

You can go around and make them pay.

But of course when we do that

we become like them ourselves, we become part of what makes this world so horrible;

we begin a feud, we start a series of tit-for-tat reprisals, we feed a vicious cycle of hurt; and

And we say good-bye to any chance that this person will ever come to their senses and see the error of their ways and see that they were wrong and apologise.

We can make them pay... or

if we want to break the cycle, if we want to be part of the solution and not the problem, if we want to seek reconciliation

Then WE can pay.

“when we want to run down, we can instead take it on the chin - ourselves”

“when we want to scratch their eyes out we can take the suffering”

“when we want to shout ‘foul’ we can bear the injustice”

We know that the only way to reconciliation is to take the hurt and shoulder it ourselves.

This is exactly what our young people are learning in Rwanda – how does a country move on from Genocide?

All real life changing love is substitutionary sacrifice

We see it in parenting, in relationships,

1.3 We see it in our best stories,

When Harry Potter’s Mother *Lily puts herself in between, Lord Voldemort and her son as Voldemort is sending his death curse she is killed in his place.*

*It is this **one** act that forms the basis of every single Potter book*

Dumbledore says to Harry, and I quote,

"Your mother died to save you. If there is one thing Voldemort cannot understand, it is love. He didn't realize that love as powerful as your mother's for you leaves its own mark. Not a scar, no visible sign ... to have been loved so deeply, will give some protection forever".

Now this is a children's book, and yet what JK Rowling sees is the truth of the Gospel

“**all** real life changing love is substitutionary sacrifice”.

This is not primitive at all.

God cannot just forget injustice – that would be primitive – that would be monstrously unfair

God cannot simply ignore evil and brokenness

He can’t sweep it under the carpet and forget about it.

We have already seeing in our own society that if people feel they will NOT get caught and punished for their selfishness

then this leads to **less** responsibility, less respect, less rehabilitation, less resotation rather than more,

God cannot just shrug at evil,

pretend it has no consequences

that no one need be held accountable

that no debt needed paying.

THAT would be primitive!

No, God sees the need and understands the deepest truth that

All life changing love is substitutionary and sacrificial

And what is absolutely unique about Jesus

and what makes Christianity stand head and should above all other philosophies

Is that God sacrifices **himself** to pay our price.

God substitutes himself to save us

Anyone who has ever changed us.

Anyone who has ever made a difference in our life

Anyone who has ever shown love - has made a sacrifice for us.

It is true of faith.

There is nothing like this in any religion.

There has never been anything like this.

This is an outrageous concept - that God would humbles himself to take our place and pay the price.

Far from this being a Stone Age, bloodthirsty primitive idea.

It is the most beautiful, sophisticated advanced concept of God ever suggested

And this is what WE stand for.

Its not primitive.

2. And neither can it be irrelevant!

Because when Jesus took his disciples aside and said

v18

and the Son of Man will be betrayed ... and

they will condemn him to death and

turn him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged

and crucified.

He is talking about humanity doing this to God

Our decision to reject God as God of our lives; and

our rejection of his love

will not be counted at the end of time as irrelevant

And what changes our life is when the theological theory of “substitutionary sacrifice” becomes for us: personal history.

This happened!

You and I may know what it is to be betrayed.

To be betrayed is for those closest to us,

those that we shared our life with,

those we trusted to get behind our defensive screens,

to take that very trust and use it to destroy us

You and I may know what it is to be betrayed.

Well so does Jesus – he knows what it is to be betrayed by those he came to save –

by people like us.

You and I may know what it is like to be condemned...

To be written off, silenced, judged unworthy, given no chance, no hearing,

to be given no more value –

You and I may know what it is to be condemned perhaps for something we did

Jesus knows what it is to be condemned for something he DIDN'T do –

condemned by those he came to save – by people like us.

You and I may know what it is to be mocked

it makes your blood boil, to be ridiculed, belittled, run-down, without being able to respond

it is humiliating and cruel

God knows what it is means to be mocked.

He knows what it is to be flogged.

To have his arms tied above his head to a post, to be vulnerable (without protection)

to be whipped (scourged) with something like a cat of nine-tails, with lead weights on the end to smash into his

body and hooks to rip away the flesh
to have soldiers, either side, one after the other, take turns until they were exhausted
and his body a bloody ruined mess

He knows what it means to carry a cross bar,
down a public street, to be jeered at for entertainment by people he was in the act of saving
to be shown no mercy or compassion by those who lose their humanity in mob mentality,
He knows what it is
to collapse, too exhausted to continue, to be dragged up a hill
to be stripped naked and exposed,
to be spread eagle on a cross
to have iron nails punched through his hands and feet,
to be lifted on high, jolted into place
and then to be abandoned pitilessly left to die

To treat any man like this is inhuman, absolutely shameful.
To treat an innocent man like this silences the world
To treat God like this cannot be irrelevant...

We did this, this is how humanity treats God
we betray him, we mock his sovereignty in our lives,
we are quick to condemn him,
And if Jesus says "I am Lord of your life" we will NOT accept it
And if he keeps saying it
we walk away, we would nail him down to shut him up.

The cross is not some irrelevant theological argument
It is personal history.

which thirdly, cannot leave us unchanged.

3. For how can it be ineffective?

Jesus said

v19 On the third day I will be raised to life!"

There is a scandal here that all churches and all Christians must face
we **understand** the cross in our heads.
but we don't live it in our lives.
This is as true for me as for anyone.

The resurrection proves that the cross is not a place of defeat, but a place of victory

The cross is a place of victory
because if Jesus had died **and remained dead** then
how would we know that God is able to deliver eternal life?; and
how would we know whether God has forgiven us?
We wouldn't!

But resurrection proves
that forgiveness is real – because Jesus comes back
- He comes back to those who betrayed him and reinstates them,
- He comes back to those who had lost faith in him to encourage them,
- He comes back to those who had sinned against him to forgive them –

The resurrection proves forgiveness is real
It proves eternal life is guaranteed!
So the cross is a place of victory

3.1 And we must let this victory speaks to our souls

On the cross, there is, what Luther called, the great exchange
Jesus took on my guilt, my shame, my condemnation, my punishment
And Jesus gave us his innocence, beauty and life
Both operate together,
death and resurrection are a pair!
the taking of my sin and the receiving of his righteousness are a pair!

So when you feel guilty about your past
the cross tells you that **not only** are you forgiven
but God sees you as absolutely as innocent as Jesus.
ALL THE TIME

So when the voices of accusation condemn you for screwing up again
the cross tells you that not only does God NOT write you off
but that he sees you as blameless as Jesus
ALL THE TIME

So when we think we have no right to enter God's presence and
we should stay away from him and
we should go to church and we should just get ourselves isolated,
the cross tells us that not only has the price been paid
but that we have been given a nobility and a beauty and an inheritance as God's children that dumbfounds the
angels into silence.
Not only are we NOT rubbish in God's sight – BUT we are PRECIOUS!

In fact the very things that defeat us and trip us up and cause us to want to give up
become
on the cross the very things that
reveal the full extent of God's love
The more we understand how unworthy we are –
the more we understand how much God MUST love us!

On the cross, you are
Not only forgiven but honoured,
not only cleansed but beautified,
not only not condemned but promised the reward of heaven!

We need the cross to speak to our souls
We need to keep listening to it!
because it gives us a sense of place and purpose and preciousness to God
that leaves the angels staggered
that the whole of creation in awe

So when you feel low, discouraged, unsure – will you let the cross convince you of its radical truth!

3.2 and we need to let the cross speak to our ambitions;

For IF the most life-changing love is found in receiving substitutionary sacrifice

then does it not follow
that the most life-fulfilling action is found in **giving** substitutionary sacrifice

IF life-changing love is found in receiving substitutionary sacrifice
then life-fulfilling action is found in **giving** substitutionary sacrifice
This is what we are about!

There was an article in the New York Times last year,
written from a secular perspective, about how to be happy.
The writers conclusion is startling

He says:

*if we try to do things to satisfy ourselves,
if we do things for our own pleasure
then studies show that we will never be truly deeply long-lastingly happy
We will always be looking for more, for bigger, for a longer lasting thrill.*

*INSTEAD... the most fulfilling things we can do are acts of selfless kindness.
Acts of selfless kindness deliver a deep down fulfilment that is longer lasting and more satisfying than the pursuit of
ones own pleasure.*

He didn't know it – but he has just uncovered the power of the cross!

if the most life-changing love is found in receiving substitutionary sacrifice
then the most life-fulfilling ambitions are found in giving substitutionary sacrifice

So we, as a church, and as individuals, seek to do good
- not to get to heaven
- not to earn other people's approval
but because this is the secret of meaning and fulfilment and it points to the cross.

We are people of the cross.
It drives our life.
It speaks to our souls
It changes our ambitions
It is what we stand for.

We will not deny its centrality
We will not forget about it
We will not assume that everyone knows

It is life-changing truth
It is absolutely relevant when we make it part of our personal history
It is the most beautiful, astounding, awe-inspiring spectacle we will ever encounter.