

Good morning

We're continuing our series in Matthew – and having skipped a few verses we end up at a passage celebrating the first communion.

You know, when you look at the deaths of the world's great religious leaders.

You find a pattern:

Moses dies 'full of years', the undisputed leader of his people, who has brought them out of slavery to the promised land.

Buddha dies aged 80, surrounded by his disciples in peaceful surrender, a complete success.

Confucius is received home with honour, dies aged 72, surrounded by people committed to his mission.

Mohammed dies, aged 60, in the arms of his wife, having been the first leader to unite the whole of Arabia.

These people die: well/ successfully/ job done.

In one sense it is no surprise that these religions have done well because their founding leader was at the top of their game when they died.

And then you have **Jesus**,

he dies aged 33,

his ministry is incredibly short,

he is rejected by those he came to save,

abandoned by those who follow him, and

executed by an oppressive power.

He dies nailed to a symbol of shame and disgrace.

He has been tortured, stripped naked, the object of scorn from onlookers.

And the biggest historical question around this is:

"why would anyone want to follow Jesus?"

He dies: penniless, naked, defeated, a criminal,

Why would anyone want to emulate this?

And what is equally intriguing is...

Why would anyone take the cross – a symbol of disgrace and shame

and use it as a badge of honour?

Why would anyone take the cross (*which according to Cicero was a 4 letter Latin swear word*) and use that to describe themselves?

We have our first first-town wide mailing here,

I don't think I would have been able to convince the leadership team that emblazoning a 4 letter swear word over the front would have been a good marketing ploy!

The cross represented in Jesus' time: humiliation, shame and defeat,

This is absolutely universally understood -

So why would Jesus' followers say,

"this is my badge of honour!".

"this is my example!"

"this is the most beautiful symbol in the world to me!"

The answer, **must be**

There is something about the cross

that is SO glorious that it overcomes the shame

SO transforming that it overcomes any sense of defeat.

The cross (for those first Christian's) has

a centrality, a purpose and a relevance to their life

that it overcomes all the prejudice, all the negative connotations, and all the disgrace of it being a swear word.

This is a historical reality.

So why do we celebrate Jesus' **death** at all?

What is it about

the Centrality, the Purpose, and the Relevance of the CROSS

which explains

Why it has been celebrated, millions and millions / billions and billions of times in our world through the Lord's Supper?

That's what I want to talk about this morning:

the centrality, the purpose and the relevance of Jesus' death to our lives.

Let's begin with

1. The CENTRALITY of his Death

In v19 we read

so the disciples did as Jesus had directed them and prepared the Passover

Our Communion Service has its roots in the Jewish Passover.

The Jewish Passover celebrates the night when Israel (way back in the Old Testament) was freed from Slavery in Egypt by a single act of deliverance and redemption by God.

And the night before they were delivered they ate the Passover together.

After that God says, in Exodus 14:

I want you to eat this meal every year as a perpetual Memorial of the night that I redeemed you.

Keep doing this for all generations,

never stop marking this night.

This night is central to who you are.

So this is what Jesus is doing with his disciples in Matthew 26 -

They are celebrating the Passover together

and in v26 *Jesus, while they were eating, took bread, gave thanks and broke it and gave it his disciples.*

Now, Jesus is presiding at this meal.

And it is the job of the person Presiding – to explain – what is going on.

The leader doesn't just hand out the food,

it is built into the liturgy of the Passover

that the meaning and symbolism behind it all *is explained*.

And so we get to this point in the Passover meal,

where the leader would hold the bread aloft and say

"listen this is the bread of the Affliction, which our fathers ate in the wilderness",

we would expect him to explain:

"they suffered so that we might be delivered".

That would have been absolutely expected and standard.

But Jesus doesn't say that.

Instead, Jesus holds the bread aloft and says, this is the bread of **my** affliction.

"As I tear this bread – v26 this MY body,"

Jesus is deliberately, shockingly, substituting new words, new truth, new fulfilment in the place of centuries of tradition.

This is the bread of MY affliction.

He is saying.

for years we have celebrated our redemption with this meal

for 1,000s of years we have talked about how it happened symbolised in this meal

Now I am showing you something new here.

This bread is my body – it has always been about MY BODY

All the history of the people of God,
all the prophecies ever spoken
all our traditions that we have preserved
have been moving, speaking, pointing towards **this** event, **this** night, **these** words.

Here the truth to be revealed.
Every return from exile,
Every rescue by God
Every animal sacrificed
comes together in the raising of this bread
symbolic of the raising of the of my body torn on a cross.

This is symbolic of the deliverance to end all deliverances
the Exodus to end all Exodus'
the salvation of all salvations...

Do this in remembrance of me
do this again and again and again
in perpetual memory of my affliction.

Do you know that this is the only thing that Jesus Christ ever asks you and me, ritually to do over and over and over again together?

Jesus doesn't say commemorate my top ten miracles
he doesn't say remember your favourite bits of my teaching
he doesn't say dramatise my kindest acts.

He says THE central thing, that you are to do over and over again
is to remember by death in this drama of Communion.

And Jesus says
I have nothing to teach you, unless you understand this,
I have nothing to say to you unless you get the meaning of
my death, my affliction, the breaking of my body.

So the first thing we see is this, that Jesus proclaims his death as **Central**.
not to be pushed aside to be ashamed of,
not an act of defeat,
not a tragic waste of a promising life,
- but something to be proud of, a victory, something full of meaning.

That's the first thing we see
The second thing we see is that
2. His death has PURPOSE.

Because if you're new to Christianity, or if you're a secular historian, or if you're an intelligent enquirer –
the obvious question is well what possible purpose did Jesus' death serve!
Why did he die?
What was his purpose?
What could it possibly have achieved?

And here we see in his second statement,
*v27 where he took the cup, gave thanks and offered it to them saying
drink from it all of you.*

This is my blood of the new covenant, which is poured out FOR many FOR the forgiveness of sins

There's the point!

poured out FOR many, FOR the forgiveness of sins!

Jesus is using the language of

sacrifice (FOR you) and

substitution (INSTEAD of YOU).

He is using the words of sacrificial substitution.

Look there are three elements to any Passover meal

The bread, the Wine and the Passover lamb.

God has said to Pharaoh, "let my people", time and time again.

And each time Pharaoh has said "no".

So now, warned them enough God says – OK here is my final act –

Here is an act of "redemption and an act of judgement" that is going to pass over you at the same time.

All those years ago in Egypt

God said "I am going to send an angel of judgement over you"

He is literally going to 'pass over you'.

And **wherever** he finds someone who has ever acted

violently, unkindly, selfishly, poorly he is going to judge them.

God says: everybody, every act, every family is going to be judged.

And the way I am going to do it is

to strike dead, the firstborn son, in every family.

Pharaoh has stubbornly refused to release God's people from oppression and slavery.

Pharaoh has lied to God, deceived Moses, and refused to repent.

Now God says, when the Angel passes over and your firstborn son has been killed. You shall "let my people go".

This one act will buy my people freedom from bondage.

But here is what you need to do.

If you want to escape this judgement,

Then you need to do this: you need to slay a lamb.

You need to take a lamb and kill, eat it, and take its blood and daub it on the entrance to your home.

This is symbolic.

Take a lamb,

Kill it, and

Hide behind its blood

and the angel of judgement will pass over you.

Do you see how God is entirely non-discriminatory about this.

He says when judgement comes

I am going to judge

the good and bad people

the Egyptian and the Jews

the slaves the free,

the rich and the poor.

Judgement affects everyone – no matter who you are.

And anyone found falling short of my goodness, anyone who is selfish, or self-centred will be judged.

In other words – NO ONE IS SAFE.

You will not be saved –

by your goodness, your education, your standing, your respectability

when the angel passes over you
unless you can take the blood of a slaughtered, innocent Lamb and hide behind it – YOU WILL BE JUDGED.

Your choice is “a dead lamb” or “a dead son”,
choose.

Therefore, for generations after that event,
engrained into the history and heritage of the head of every Jewish family Is this truth – “I survive this night only
because a lamb died: FOR/ BECAUSE OF/ ON BEHALF OF **ME**.

So this brings us to Matthew 26.
And from the text we see the bread, and we see the wine,
But no-where is the most important part mentioned... the LAMB!
Where is the LAMB?
The answer is:
The one holding the Bread, the one holding the Wine – he is the lamb!

Jesus is saying to them.
Do you really believe that our firstborn children were saved because of some woolly quadruped?
Do you really think a small lamb can save you!!
No! our firstborn sons were saved, because God substitutes **his firstborn** son for you.
I am that Son, I am that substitute, I am that lamb.

Tonight history, prophecy, 1,000s of years of ritual is fulfilled in me.

I am your shield, I am the one you hide behind!
*In National Geographic magazine there was an article about some Forest Rangers going into part of
Yellowstone National Park after it had been decimated by a forest fire.
Looking at the pictures it was like an angel of death had passed over it and nothing seemed to have survived.*

*They found a bird, petrified, burnt alive on the ground
and one the rangers kicked it over.
He said that when he did so, from under the wing of bird, shielded from the blaze, emerged three chicks.*

Jesus says “I am your shield, I am your sacrifice I will take the heat... hide behind me”.

And this means at least two things for us here this morning.

Firstly, if Jesus' death is substitutionary for us then Christianity must be all for nothing for us.

You may have heard people say that Jesus died as an example of love.
I want to tell – if that is all they say – it is woefully inadequate!

*Imagine a boy and a girl walking along a river.
The girl's not really interested in the boy,
but the boy is **really** keen on the girl.
So he says, I'll show you how much I love you!
And with that he throws himself into the river and drowns himself.*

*Does the girl really say
“Oh my! he really did love me?”
Is she impressed!*

*Or is she appalled!
Does she not say: he's a fool, disturbed, unbalanced!
Suicide doesn't show love,*

if you die when you don't have to die that is irrational, illogical, manipulative, deranged, sick, mad.

and any other word you may care to throw at it!

*However, if the girl was in the water herself,
IF **she** was drowning,
IF the boy then dived in, saved her - but drowned in the process
Then he is a hero, is a model of self-sacrifice.*

Celebrating Jesus death only makes sense if he dies in our place,
if he dies for our sins,
if he dies to save us.

Otherwise his death is a ridiculous and meaningless waste.
So if people say 'there are many ways to God'.
if people say we can reach God by ourselves
if people say we can escape judgement
then
what they're saying is that Jesus didn't need to die.
And therefore his death was misguided, irrational and disturbing!

SO it's an all or nothing thing
Either Christianity is based on something that is ridiculous; or
it is THE way to get to God,
But Jesus death cannot be understood in any other way.

Firstly, the purpose is that He is our Substitute; and
Secondly, that makes him different to all other religious leaders

All other religions say,
getting to heaven, finding God, living at peace with God is dependant upon us.
Its about how much WE are willing to sacrifice,
how much we are able to follow,
how much we are able to be good.
In other words, **in every other religion**, God says show me your sacrifice.

But Jesus says
NO, don't you see
getting to heaven, finding God, living at peace with God is dependant,
on MY sacrifice for you, God's willingness to find you, God's desire to give himself for you.
See this bread broken, torn, afflicted,
See this wine poured out, spilt ?
This is my committed, my promise, my sacrifice for you.

This is why we celebrate!
This is what it means!

If we are to escape judgement
If we are find God then
We need God himself broken, afflicted, poured out FOR us.

This is why its central,
This is what it means
And finally,

3. thirdly, we need to make our Own.

There is nothing automatic about this...

*You can starve to death in the presence of a meal;
You can drown within reach of a life-ring;*

To live you must eat, to survive you must reach out.

This is why Jesus says

v26 *“this is my body, eat it”*,

v27 *“this is my blood and drink it **all of you**”*,

Don't rely on someone else's response to get you into a relationship with God, it has to be personal.

“this is my body, eat it”,

“this is my blood, drink it

Now, you probably know that these words have been much debated down through the ages.

What does Jesus mean when he says “this is my body, this is my blood”.

Well, on the one hand you have a view where this is taken literally.

The idea is that this physical food is changed, transformed, in some real and substantial way to Jesus' real body and blood.

The outward appearance is the same

but the spiritual substance (so to speak) is changed.

Therefore if you want to appropriate the benefits of the cross for yourself what you need to do is to eat this, and actually ALL you need to do is eat this.

In other words, taking communion is an effective means of grace, by simply by the eating you are blessed and saved.

That is one view.

On the other hand (and we are coming from) is that

when Jesus says “this is my body”, he is saying,

this bread is a symbol, a metaphor, it **represents** my body.

Like when Jesus said “I am the door” he didn't mean in any sense that he was a physical door ;

Like if I said to Owen trying to explain the battle of Waterloo,

and I say “this salt pot is Napoleon” and “this pepper pot is Wellington”.

I mean they represent Napoleon and Wellington.

When I receive a love letter (and I have had one or two in my time) the meaning and the power behind the message is not found in the ink or the paper – but the meaning that they represent

It is the meaning which transforms the heart.

And Paul is clear –

he said, when taking communion we need to understand the meaning behind the message – otherwise we eat and drink judgement upon ourselves.

If we have not made these symbols our own –

if we have not taken into our soul the implication of Jesus' death for us

then eating this DOES NOT mean that judgement WILL pass over us.

It won't.

We eat and drink Judgement on Ourselves for we are refusing to hide behind the sacrifice of the lamb.

No. We need to see that what lies behind these symbols is the sacrifice of the lamb of God for us... and when we do...

This truth takes the shame of the cross and makes it our glory.

When we see that the God of the universe is willing to come,

to take the shame we heap upon him/ the ridicule and scorn we pour on him

When we see that he is willing to do that and we ask – why???

We see that it can ONLY be because he considers us that precious.

Take this truth into your blood-stream,

make it part of the fibre of your being

You are **THIS** valuable to God – and it takes any sense of shame, inadequacy, failure and replaces it honour.
Do you see?

Take this truth (what lies behind these symbols) **and it turns what seems defeat on a cross and into VICTORY.**

Death is not the end,
Sin is defeated
Forgiveness is ours
There is life with God forever.
Do you see it?

Take this truth (what lies behind these symbols) **and it turns hostility into peace.**

We kill God on the cross,
We murder Christ,
And yet God forgives
so our peace with Him becomes our Peace with each other.
Self sacrifice becomes our model and our inspiration to how we live in community.
The Cross is the key to this.
The world doesn't understand how or why we should sacrifice ourselves for others.
Only the cross makes this truth real.

And therefore
Why do Christian's celebrate the horrific death of their founder
Why does the cross become a badge of honour rather than shame?

Because through it
We find our glory
We find our victory
We find our peace.

So make it yours
Meet Jesus at this table
Eat the bread, drink the wine and recognise the lamb and
see the staggering love and grace of God for you.