

Marks of a Christian - week 5 - Jesus and the cross (John 12. 20-33)

I'm talking about "what is a Christian?" The Marks of a Christian, the things that are core to us - and so far I've said we believe in God, and we use the bible as source, and we pray and talk to God and we belong to the church, as a community. But everyone is going to say - what about Jesus Christ? Surely being a Christian must be something to do with Jesus?!

And yes, it is.

And some would say - you have to believe in him, or trust him.

And some would say its specifically about his death on the cross, and your sins.

You have to believe that Jesus died for you, that his death paid for your sins.. that we are saved by his death.

And when people say - as Dougal might in Father Ted "well how does that work then? I didn't' even know I was a sinner? What's all this about Ted?"

We can come up with several theories of how the cross *works*, what God does for us on the cross. All of them can be backed up with verses from the Bible, solid theology and lots of hymns - and all have stood the test of at least 400 years.

So one theory goes that perhaps we have an un-payable level of guilt before God - so we deserve eternal punishment - but God sent Jesus to suffer in our place - so we can be let off - "he was bruised for our transgressions" as Isaiah has it.

The suffering really matters - in fact its not the death or resurrection.

He suffers for humanities sins, but also my individual sins - it was my sin that held him there, until it was accomplished.

Of course, if Jesus has paid such a price - then surely we are now all saved - he has done his work on the cross, whether we believe it or not.

Another theory has it that its the death that matters - his sacrifice, like the lamb, pays our debt. Humanity has failed somehow to honour God, and there's a terrible imbalance in the moral universe. Only humanity must pay the debt, but only God can pay the debt - there was no other good enough - as the hymn says. Jesus, as God adn man, is uniquely placed to pay the debt - and with extra - so we have merit that can be drawn on through the sacraments. This is a more Roman Catholic view.

Sometimes this theory is about a debt owed to Satan, to ransom humanity back from its slavery to him, to redeem us. But of course Jesus tricked the devil by rising from the dead.

Or, another theory, we look past the cross and the death to resurrection - Jesus takes our sins, and gives up his life, but in the eternal law court he is found to be innocent - and so the system is broken, death is broken and dismantled - and his resurrection is a foretaste of our resurrection. Jesus has the victory.

In reality - we may not think about why there is a cross, a death or resurrection. Or we might have a range or those views or others, about how it works - how it is the means of our freedom and liberation. And I shouldn't neglect that there are also well established and scripturally backed theories that have Jesus life as more important than his death, and his example on the cross being something that transforms us, rather than his death actually changing anything in the material world. But the point of all of these is that Jesus

death is essential, inevitable, and that through Jesus, God is doing something FOR humanity.

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But I don't know if you've ever thought about the fact that all these ways of thinking about the cross and Christianity are trying to address the elephant in the room.

You see - if the story goes that there was this great guy, Jesus - who was basically God himself, come to live on earth amongst us, as one of us. He was lovely - he healed people, he fed people, the blind could see, the lame walk. He was on the side of the poor. He was a powerful speaker, with such wisdom. But somehow, he got himself caught by his enemies, somehow he allowed himself to be killed.

I mean if he was God - well that couldn't happen could it?

Or if he was God - why did he let it happen?

The cross was a huge problem for the early church. All the heroes and rescuers the Romans knew about didn't get themselves arrested and killed. So for the Gentiles - this Jesus was a weakling.

And for the Jews, how could God allow his Son to be killed, and in such a way. It was foolishness and a stumbling block.

There were no images of Jesus on the cross for 400 years. That's how hard it was for people to accept. The early church was not all about - "what a miserable sinner I am and how much Jesus was tortured in agony to save me". The early church was about the wonder of the resurrection, and life in the power of the holy spirit. The cross and death of Jesus Christ seemed like a tactical defeat before God's inevitable victory.

It wasn't until the middle ages that the church began to speak about the cross. About it being some kind of necessary atonement for sin, a payment for debts owed.

The theologians made sure the cross was essential - there was no other way.

And it became about .. because God had to do this for us.

Because otherwise it makes no sense that Jesus dies at all.

But these are just theories to help us grasp at the mystery of the crucifixion.

The trouble is, we've made them core bits of being a Christian. We've made them certain - this is how the cross works as a mechanism to deal with sin!

But the trouble with making it essential, is that you then have to present Christianity as the answer to a question no-one's asking.

"You may not know it, but you're in trouble

But it's ok - God has sorted it - you're rescued."

"There was a problem - sin - you didn't know about

But Jesus has fixed it for you by dying.."

So Christianity comes across as something to make you feel down, so you can feel better again. We're all sinners, but it's ok we can be forgiven.

Here are some headings of some of the weeks from a range of Basic Christianity courses

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Why is life so messy? (I didn't know it was!)

The Necessity of the cross

Sin

Jesus - death on a cross

What is a Christian - repenting

All this trying to rouse a sense of guilt in people, in order to tell them God loves them anyway.

I mean if you are burned by guilt and sin - hurray - I've got the answers! The books, the courses!

But most people aren't. Most people feel absolutely fine.

What if in our desire to understand the death and resurrection of Jesus we've missed something on the way.

What if there was another way of understanding the cross?

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When we make the cross essential - to deal with this problem - we work back to Genesis and we say - aha! Adam and Eve in the garden - the apple, the Fall - that was the problem - and then God had to change his plans and implement a rescue.

But maybe God always meant to send Jesus?

What if he always planned to come and be with us? That the incarnation is part of the original plan?

And what if his death was not part of the original plan? Perhaps it became inevitable, but it was never essential?

What if the Cross was not about something God was doing, some problem he was fixing - but something he was saying?

What might God be saying?

In Romans, Paul lists 17 things that cannot separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our lord - hardship, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, peril, sword, death, life, angels, rulers, things present, things to come - this list could be seen as describing Christ's experience going to the cross. And yet - they don't separate us from God being with us.

The bible starts with God with us in the garden, and then there is separation, and God calling to Adam and Eve - he wants to be with them. What is the promise to Abraham, remade to Jacob - I will be with you, wherever you go. Where does the Bible end - in Revelation - God says he will be with us. After all the tears are wiped away, there won't be anything for God to do FOR us. We will be together again.

And with God and Christianity, the means are always as important at the end. What if the means of salvation, is the same as the goal of salvation? I often think of the cross as God dealing with the barriers to our friendship - things I've put in the way - so the cross

reconciles me to God - to be with him. What if the message of the cross is about - God showing how much he wants to be with us, how far he is prepared to go without letting go.

That even if we betray him, change sides, present false charges and find him guilty, even kill him - he will not stop being with us. God with us - Emmanuel.

Even, if it means his being separated from the Father - a rip in the Trinity - even that doesn't stop him

“Jesus work on earth was not straightaway to destroy death, dismantle sin, or dispel evil; neither was it to rescue souls for heavenly bliss that they might temporarily escape bleak earth and eternally avoid excruciating hell.

It was to display the purpose of God ultimately to bring a kingdom beyond death, sin and evil, and to demonstrate conclusively the original design of God to be with us always, most especially in our moments of distress and isolation.

Jesus ascended into heaven when in his resurrection he had demonstrated the promise of the kingdom, and in his crucifixion he has shown the will never to be separated from us.

The cross doesn't make everything perfect straightaway. But we put it in our churches, and on our wall, and around our necks to say - the God who will go to that length to with us, will, I believe, be with us always.”

The 5th mark of being Christianity is saying - This God who wants to be with us - we want to be with him too.