

WEEK 1: PERCEPTIONS

I'm delighted to say that I'm picking up the last point that David emphasised last week in Galatians 6:14 – Paul's perception of the cross – **May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ....** For the question that faces each one of us as we approach Easter, is: Can we be as emphatic as Paul about our perceptions of the cross. Maybe some of you have watched the TV series "Perception." The main character is a schizophrenic neurology professor. He speaks to people who aren't there. But insights from these imaginary conversations help him to solve crimes by his "perception" that gets beyond the obvious suspect to the real culprit. The point being made in each episode is that reality is often different to how we perceive it to be. Look at these images. You will all see the same ones, but how do you perceive them? At first glance, do you see a young girl or an old witch-like woman? Can you see the face in the landscape? How do those die match up? The face/vase one is self-explanatory and do you see 12, ABC, 14 or 12, 13 and 14 down the middle. Finally whose face would you say the last one represents? Easter is the time when the death of Christ looms large in our Church reality, but I'm willing to stick my neck out and say that none of us would have exactly the same perception of it.

Yes, we could all narrate the same story, but if asked "How would you regard, understand or interpret the cross?" would anyone be willing to guarantee we would all give the same answer? Could you, for example, talk about the events of Good Friday without mentioning the resurrection of Easter Sunday? It's an important distinction because it is the cross that is the most significant development in the story of God's restoration plans for humanity which have been revealed throughout the Old Testament. This is the next instalment of that story.

From last September we've been following the concept of the Days of the Lord and we saw how those Days marked significant turning points in salvation history. Conquests by Assyria and Babylon marked the first and second days when God had allowed rebellion and opportunity for repentance, time to run their course. The third day of the Lord came when a remnant returned to their ancient territorial inheritance. Then we celebrated the dawning of that fourth Day at Christmas, when God restored prophecy, priesthood and kingship to His people, all three offices combining in the Person of Jesus of Nazareth, the prophesied Messiah. But Christmas was only the start of the fourth day because it is the day in which we are still living. Old Testament prophecy foretold that it would also be the Day when all the developments that would determine the fate of every human being that has ever lived, would be put in place in preparation for the fifth and final Day of the Lord coming at the end of the age. And the determining and defining moment of the fourth Day of the Lord is the cross of Christ.

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Why am I saying that? Well, the 16 prophets were only given glimpses of this event, but they were glimpses which, according to the Evangelists, were accurately fulfilled by Jesus Christ. So the first way in which we should attempt to “perceive” the crucifixion is by way of the prophets.

Going back to the writing prophets we find these texts.

David, who died in 951BC wrote in Psalms 41:9 and 55:12-14

Even my close friend whom I trusted, he who shared my bread has lifted up his heel against me.

If an enemy were insulting me, I could endure it; if a foe were raising himself against me I could hide from him. But it is you, a man like myself, my companion, my close friend, with whom I once enjoyed sweet fellowship as we walked with the throng at the house of God.

Zechariah 11:12-13

I told them, “If you think it best, give me my pay; but if not, keep it.” So they paid me thirty pieces of silver. And the Lord said to me, “Throw it to the potter” – the handsome price at which they priced me.” So I took the thirty pieces of silver and threw them into the house of the Lord to the potter.

Three texts which the Evangelists regard as being fulfilled in the actions of Judas Iscariot

Micah 5:1

Marshall your troops, O city of troops for a siege is laid against us. They will strike Israel’s ruler on the cheek with a rod.

Isaiah 50:6

I offered my back to those who beat me, my cheeks to those who pulled out my beard; I did not hide my face from mocking and spitting.

Texts which describe Jesus’ treatment by the soldiers during the night of His trial.

Isaiah 53:12

For he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors.

Amos 8:9

It shall come to pass in that day, saith the Lord, that I will cause the sun to go down at noon, and I will darken the earth in the clear day.

Psalm 22

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

Psalm 31:5

Into your hands I commit my spirit

One of the phenomena experienced during the crucifixion and the references to the some of the words spoken by Jesus on the cross.

And perhaps the most well-known passage of all is Isaiah chapter 53.

4-5

Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities, the punishment that brought us peace was upon him and by his wounds we are healed.

Isaiah 53:9 &12

He was assigned a grave with the wicked and with the rich in his death though he had done no violence nor was any deceit in his mouth.....Therefore I will give him a portion among the great, and he will divide the spoils with the strong, because he poured out his life unto death, and was numbered with the transgressors.

These extracts depict what Jesus suffered and point to Him being buried in the tomb of Joseph of Arimathaea, for only a rich man in that time could afford a family tomb.

It has to be admitted that it would have been impossible for anyone to fulfil these prophecies even if they had had an impeccable knowledge of the Old Testament. Scholars generally agree that Old Testament Scripture had been completed by in the 400s BC. That means that at least 400 years had elapsed before Jesus was crucified at Calvary. No fair-minded person could give credence to Jesus deliberately arranging to be crucified, especially when we consider that some of these prophecies come from nearly 1000 years before that event. And while it is still true that prophecies should first be interpreted according to the circumstances of the times they were uttered, there can be no doubt that the Evangelists regarded them as Messianic, and their perceptions of Old Testament prophecy have become part of the infallible Word of God. Scripture from the beginning has always insisted upon at least two witnesses and today we have two of the most reliable witnesses available – the Old and the New Testaments. So combining what the two say about the Easter events give us a solid basis for our faith and belief that the crucifixion of Jesus is a

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historical fact and that it was an essential and crucial development in salvation history.

Bearing in mind that the four Gospels were written at least 30 years after the crucifixion, it is obvious by the amount of coverage they devote to the Easter events that they regarded this moment in time as a very important and significant development. Between one-third and one-quarter of the accounts in the Synoptic Gospels are devoted to Jesus' last few days on earth. Nearly 50% of the Gospel of John covers the same ground. But the Gospel accounts themselves were published at a time when perceptions were already very sharply divided as the New Testament letters show.

It was the apostle Paul who first recognised the difficulty in overcoming these perceptions.

1 Corinthians 1:22-25

For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, BUT WE PROCLAIM CHRIST CRUCIFIED, A STUMBLING BLOCK TO JEWS AND FOOLISHNESS TO GENTILES, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength.

We ended the Christmas talks with the assurance that the eternal Prophet, Priest and King had arrived in the world, but of the three offices, only His role of Prophet was recognised during His lifetime. Today, the everlasting nature of that office is still apparent, for there is no dispute between the three major world religions that Jesus was a prophet. As for everlasting priesthood and kingship, as far as two of those religions are concerned, the cross ruled out those two offices because, in their perceptions, it was only a human being who died on that cross.

To be fair to the Jews, crucifixion was a major stumbling block because they had to get past what they had been taught in the Torah.

Deuteronomy 21:22-23

If a man guilty of a capital offence is put to death and his body is hung on a tree, you must not leave his body on the tree overnight. But be sure to bury him that same day because anyone who is hung on a tree is under God's curse.

Paul, himself recognised the force of this Scripture when he told the Galatians in 3:13

Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us— for it is written, “Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree”—

It takes a tremendous leap of faith for a Jew to believe that Jesus is the prophesied Messiah. In effect, Jews are still saying that Old Testament prophecy regarding the Messiah has not yet been fulfilled and, as a consequence, Christians, have been deceived into believing that they have been fulfilled in Jesus Christ.

As far as Muslims are concerned, they cannot accept that a major prophet could come to such an ignominious end. They believe the Jews have falsified the account of the crucifixion. They do not deny that it took place, but believe that the Jews substituted someone else for Jesus at the last moment. And if Jesus did not die, then He could not be resurrected. Also Muslims see no need for a sin-bearing death of a Saviour because the Koran states at least 5 times that “no soul shall bear another’s burden.” The cross is thus, the demarcation line between Christianity and the two other religions that believe in one God. In John Stott’s words “There is no greater cleavage between faith and unbelief than their respective attitudes to the cross.”

But, today, are many of our fellow citizens, who have all the information they need about it, any different? For example, what we might regard as a trivial denominational difference can influence our perceptions about the cross. Why, for example, is one of these images more acceptable than the other? Why is one called a crucifix and the other, a cross? In Northern Ireland, people would immediately identify the crucifix with Catholicism and the cross with Protestantism, but if you asked even some evangelical Christians why Protestants don’t approve of crucifixes, they would not be able to say why. They would not be able to tell you that apart from the commandment not to make graven images, Christ has not remained on the cross. Protestants celebrate a risen Saviour at Easter. And while that is the crowning moment of the whole Easter event and, quite rightly, a cause for great celebration, perhaps we need to ask ourselves if Protestantism has gone too far in shifting our perception of Easter too much from the crucified Messiah to His resurrection from the dead?

I know there are Holy Week services to remind us of the crucifixion, but please don’t take this the wrong way. I don’t mean to be blasphemous or irreverent, but the resurrection is the work of God the Father, not God the Son. Raising people from the dead is no big deal for God. He breathed life into the dust of the ground to make a living human being. Ezekiel saw that His breath could give life to bones dried out in the desert sun and made brittle by its night time cold. Through the power of His Holy Spirit, Jesus raised Jarius’ daughter, the

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widow of Nain's son and Lazarus from the dead. Yet each of these people died again eventually. Jesus' was the only human being to be raised from the dead to eternal life. What made the difference was His death on the cross and the Bible is very clear as to how we should regard, understand and interpret it.

Paul is particularly vehement as to this fact. For him, Good Friday, not Easter Sunday was the defining moment of the Fourth Day of the Lord. The title for these talks is taken from his words to the Corinthians. The primary message of his preaching and teaching was the cross. What the world saw as a disgrace Paul saw as an expression of the glory of the wisdom and power of God. And, could anything be more emphatic than his words in Galatians 6:14, which David highlighted last week.

“May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.”

Paul did not have the accounts of the Evangelists because it is believed that Paul was martyred under the emperor Nero around AD64 and the general scholarly consensus is that the Gospels were written after that date. Yet so immersed was he in the preaching and teaching and eye-witness accounts of the disciples that, through the insight given by the Holy Spirit, he became convinced of the centrality of the cross for the salvation of humanity. And this gives us another example of how perceptions can differ. Systematic theologians emphasise the implications of his perception, concentrating on the great doctrines of justification, propitiation, reconciliation, sanctification and eschatological second coming of Christ, which will usher in the fifth and final Day of the Lord. While each of these is extremely important, Oswald Chambers, when addressing the task of a missionary, puts it like this:

“Paul did not say – “Woe to me if I do not preach what Christ has done for me,” (in other words justification, sanctification etc.) but “Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!”. This is the Gospel – ‘The Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world!’”

In another devotional he adds: “Paul’s whole heart and mind and soul were taken up with the great matter of what Jesus Christ came to do, he never lost sight of that one thing. We have to face ourselves with the one central fact – Jesus Christ and Him crucified.”

So our perceptions of the cross can depend on Paul's emphasis on the primary Biblical fact of Christ dying to take away the sins of the world, which focuses on the Person; or the theological explanations of the **work** that was done on the cross. Even as far as the 5th Day of the Lord is concerned, the focus is the Lamb of God.

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It's perfectly legitimate to argue that Paul also talks much about the resurrection. In 1 Corinthians 15:17 that **If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins.** But the word 'if' gives us the clue as to what Paul is getting at. Paul insists God raised Christ from the dead. Ephesians 1:20 says **God put this power to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come.**

What Paul means in the Corinthians texts is that if God had not done this, then the cross became meaningless, and relying on Christ's death in the matter of cleansing from, and forgiveness for sin, would be futile. Simply put, without the cross, there would be no Gospel.

Whether we like it or not, even as Christians who believe by faith that Jesus is the Messiah who rose from the dead, we still need to adjust our perception of the cross, in order to realise that Christ's death by this particular method, is the most significant event in this Fourth Day of the Lord. It is the make or break point, for the accuracy and truth of prophecy, for the future direction of salvation history, the consequent eternal fate of humanity; and the nature of God's ultimate restoration of the perfection of His original creation. It is the make or break point because it can become so **knotted** with theological concerns like the dual nature of the One who died on the cross; how an immortal being can die, and how the Person who is actually God communicated with Himself on the cross. It can actually break under the strain of trying to give a rational explanation for what happened on that day, if our faith can't simply accept in the words of Charles Wesley:

'Tis mystery all, the Immortal dies. Who can explore His strange design?

David made the point again last week - there are theological questions that simply cannot be answered and for that reason, the cross is "foolishness" to the world. I have to accept that the cross raises some unanswerable questions. But that doesn't mean that I have to refuse to face the problems that it causes for both believers and non-believers alike. Peter told us that we need to be able to give an answer for the hope that is in us. People will challenge our faith with these kinds of questions and may not want to listen to anything else we have to say about the cross because we can't answer them. What matters though, is that we, as Christians, are convinced of the centrality of Jesus' death for salvation. To help us, we have the knowledge to join together ancient prophecy with the actual events of that Good Friday and on the basis of what we find, decide

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whether or not the thread we are following has emerged thicker and stronger than ever.

As we have just seen, we are fortunate in having the perceptions of the prophets, the Evangelists, the apostolic messages to the early church and the theological reflections of the apostle Paul. Add to that, the writings and the hymns of those down through the ages who have meditated on the cross. But there is also a danger here. We can become so engrossed in what people have said about the cross, that we lose sight of the actual event and particularly the One who died on that cross. And that is why these Lenten talks will focus on what the New Testament tells us about Jesus' own perceptions of His death and His words from the cross. But for that death, we would not be sitting in this Bible study

1 Corinthians 1:18 tells us

For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.

And all because Jesus

Philippians 2:8

....humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross.

WEEK 2: THE WORDS OF THE PROPHET

This week, most of what I will be saying will be very familiar to you. But drawing together these familiar texts from the Gospels makes the point that Jesus went knowingly and willingly to His death. We talked last week of our perceptions of the cross, but how did Jesus perceive it? This is something we don't have to debate because Jesus spoke before and after His death about that event. I'm starting with the after references because what Jesus said became part of the teaching of the early church. Both Jesus and that teaching show us that the Old Testament revelations are still very relevant to the church today.

Luke 24:26-27 and 45-46

Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?" Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures.

Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, and he said to them, "Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day...."

Hebrews 2:10

In bringing many sons to glory, it was fitting that God.....should make the author of their salvation perfect through suffering.

1 Peter 1:10-11

Concerning this salvation, the prophets who spoke of the grace that was to come.....It was revealed to them that they were not serving themselves but you when they spoke of the things that have now been told you by those who have preached the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven.

Just these examples, which come through the benefit of hindsight, show us that our salvation came through the suffering of Christ. But what was Jesus' perception of His death before He was crucified.

Perhaps this painting may help us to focus on that. I don't know what your reaction to this painting might be. I've got to admit it wouldn't be one I'd like hanging up in my house. However, I also have to admit that the points the painting is making are theologically sound. Jesus lived His life under the shadow of the cross. The implements and materials that He grew up with and used as a youth and adult in his father's workshop on a daily basis, were the instruments of His death. We can never know exactly when Jesus realised that He would eventually be crucified, but we do know that when He started His three year public ministry, He knew how it was going to end. A detail in the painting also points us very significantly to another truth about Christ's death. It's not immediately clear in the picture, but it is assumed that the woman at the chest is Mary and what she is looking at are the gifts of the Magi – the gold, the frankincense and the myrrh. Myrrh was a bitter gum resin used in the east for medicines and perfume. Mark records for us in 15:23 that **“They offered him wine mixed with myrrh, but he did not take it.”** Scholars agree that this was an act of kindness for myrrh had pain relieving and/or mind numbing properties when mixed with wine. Jesus did not take it, instead choosing to endure the fullest extent of the humiliation, pain, suffering and death involved in crucifixion.

Just thinking about what Hunt is conveying to us in that painting I think brings home to us that Jesus lived with the fact that His death on the cross was central to His mission. I know I've found it hard to function when circumstances of life have dealt a bitter blow, or when I'm really worried about something. It makes me wonder how Jesus lived with the knowledge of His death and the manner of His death and despite that, did not allow it to hinder His life or His ministry. That in itself gives us an amazing insight into the dedication, perseverance and courage of Jesus to fulfil His God-given task.

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What also seems amazing when you think about it is that during His ministry Jesus openly talked about His death in different ways. Yet it was never in a self-pitying way. Given the horror with which crucifixion was viewed in the whole of the Graeco-Roman world, Jesus' composure regarding His fate is astounding, as the accounts of His foretellings reveal. Certainly, the disciples did not display the same composure. Before we unfairly criticise the disciples for their reactions however, we have to bear in mind that the crucifixion was in their future: we see the cross from the retrospective memory of the Evangelists. We need to remember that these men looked back on the events of Easter from a post-Pentecost experience and knowledge. That is perhaps why, after some three to four decades after Jesus died, their reflections had matured to the extent that they realised the cross was such a significant event, that they had to arrange their materials in such a way that Jesus' whole ministry moved towards that momentous event, and why it is given such prominent coverage in the accounts. What they also tell us is that Jesus prophesied His own death, the nature of His death, events surrounding His death and what would happen after His death. It is also a testimony to their diligence that they did not omit what could be regarded as highly negative responses from themselves, for these, too, serve to emphasise Jesus' complete and utter commitment to His mission, even knowing how it would affect His followers.

What we do know for certain is that when Jesus embarked on His public ministry, He knew what it would lead to. Like prophets before Him, Jesus gave His predictions explicitly, implicitly and figuratively. Firstly, there are three very explicit references to His coming death. Generally speaking, Matthew and Luke follow Mark's account of Jesus' earthly ministry, just adding some further details that were perhaps not available to Mark when he wrote his account. All three Evangelists agree that three times Jesus prophesied His own death and the manner of His death. The first time is Mark 8:31-32, just after Peter's confession that He believed Jesus was the Christ. Mark records that Jesus spoke "**plainly**" about what would happen to Him when He went to Jerusalem.

Mark 8:31-32

Jesus then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again. He spoke plainly about this.

Matthew 16:21-23

21From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. **And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, "God forbid it,**

Lord! This must never happen to you.” But he turned and said to Peter, “Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”

Putting this foretelling of His death in the context of Peter’s confession, we can perhaps see where Peter was coming from when he tried to stop Jesus going to Jerusalem. As a Jew, who believed Jesus was the Messiah, it was just inconceivable that the Messiah would die and especially in such a horrific way. Jews made no difference between a tree and a cross and given the Deuteronomic curse that applied to anyone who was crucified, Peter’s reaction is a very human one.

A second prediction is made in **Mark 9:31** when Jesus was passing through Galilee.

The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into the hands of men. They will kill him, and after three days he will rise.

It appears that the disciples hadn’t picked up on the foretelling of Jesus’ resurrection for we are told that even on this occasion the disciples did not understand what He meant and were afraid to ask Him. Being told that He would be betrayed into the hands of His enemies would also have been a puzzling statement, because, probably, none of the disciples would have contemplated that He would be betrayed by one of His own. It appears from Luke’s account that it was after this occasion that Jesus **“resolutely set out for Jerusalem.” (Luke 9:51).**

The third foretelling provided even more details. Here the role of the Gentiles is included, but according to Luke, the disciples simply could not take in the implications of what Jesus was telling them.

Matthew 20:18

17While Jesus was going up to Jerusalem, he took the twelve disciples aside by themselves, and said to them on the way, 18“See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and scribes, and they will condemn him to death; 19then they will hand him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified; and on the third day he will be raised.”

Luke 18:31-34

Then he took the twelve aside and said to them, “See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and everything that is written about the Son of Man by the prophets will be accomplished. For he will be handed over to the Gentiles; and he will be mocked and insulted and spat upon. After they

have flogged him, they will kill him, and on the third day he will rise again.” But they understood nothing about all these things; in fact, what he said was hidden from them, and they did not grasp what was said.

It is understandable that during His ministry, these predictions proved unpalatable to the disciples. As we mentioned, Peter’s responded in a very negative way and this led to the rebuke of “Get thee behind me Satan!” We get a further glimpse of their perception, when on the journey towards Jerusalem, Jesus was told of the death of Lazarus. On that occasion, knowing they were coming nearer to their destination, John 11:16 records that “Thomas, who was called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, **“Let us also go, that we may die with him.”** It certainly doesn’t seem to be a statement of faith and we know that it was Thomas who wanted proof that Jesus had been raised from the dead. His statement about dying with Jesus seems to indicate that it was as if the disciples not only had accepted that Jesus was serious about His death, but had become resigned to it. The words are those of despair because if they expected to die too, it meant they had no hope of anything coming from His death and/or that their mission in life would also end with His. For even though Jesus had also foretold His resurrection, it was a concept beyond the disciples’ understanding or expectations. Why it was **“hidden”**, at this point in time is not explained for us.

Thus, on three occasions, Jesus could not have been more explicit about what would happen to Him when He went to Jerusalem for the last time. We could ask why John did not record these words for us, but turning to that Gospel, we find that John gives the same information, through the Jesus’ implicit references to the coming tragedy. The reference to ‘hour’ is an indication that Jesus was fully aware of the time-frame in which He was operating and that what was about to happen would be according to God’s timing.

John 7:30

Then they tried to arrest him, but no one laid hands on him, because his hour had not yet come.

John 8:20

He spoke these words while he was teaching in the treasury of the temple, but no one arrested him, because his hour had not yet come.

In both these instances the time for Jesus’ death had not yet arrived and His enemies could not bring that time forward no matter how they might try. The failure to arrest Jesus even when He was in the Temple teaching was because Jesus knew God was in charge of that timetable. And when that ‘hour’ does come, Jesus sees it as a time as a time to be glorified for it is only through His

death that a living movement will emerge. A movement that will focus on a Living Saviour and the prospect of eternal life.

John 12:23-25

Jesus answered them, “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life.

John 12:27

“Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say—‘Father, save me from this hour’? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour.

This reference in John may be his way of presenting Jesus’ anguish in the garden of Gethsemene. As a human being, anticipating the painful and humiliating ordeal that lay before Him, it was natural that praying for deliverance from it would have crossed His mind. But, just as in Gethsemene Jesus pushes that option aside and instead asserts that dying on a cross is the reason why He has come to this ‘hour’. This purpose is reaffirmed in John 13:1 which shows Jesus has complete knowledge of His coming death and that His leaving of the world would mark the decisive end of His earthly ministry.

John 13:1-2

Now before the festival of the Passover, Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. The devil had already put it into the heart of Judas son of Simon Iscariot to betray him.

Knowing what lay before Him, and, having given His farewell message to His disciples, Jesus’ prayer acknowledges the cross is in immediate prospect.

John 17:1, 4-5

After Jesus had spoken these words, he looked up to heaven and said, “FATHER, THE HOUR HAS COME; GLORIFY YOUR SON SO THAT THE SON MAY GLORIFY YOU,....I have brought you glory on earth by completing the work you gave me to do. And now, Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world began.

That Jesus’ starts and ends this personal petition with reference to the Father, and that this relationship is at the very heart of the rest of His prayer, shows that Jesus saw the cross, not as an instrument of shame, but one of glory. Hence these words can be understood as a prayer that the Father’s will may be done in what Jesus suffer, for the glory of the Father is bound up in the glory of the Son and vice versa. So, although John does not make the Jesus’ foretelling of His

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death as explicit as do Matthew, Mark and John, nevertheless, he gives us enough information to come to the same conclusion. That is, that Jesus knew His ministry would end in death and was so certain and prepared for that eventuality that He was able to accurately predict its occurrence.

We can turn to John too for significant instances of the figurative way in which Jesus foretold His death.

John 3:14-15

And just 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.

When the Israelites were punished in the wilderness by being bitten by poisonous snakes, Moses was commanded to mount a bronze serpent on a pole so that any Israelite who looked up to it would be cured. Scholars are in no doubt that John recorded these words as an indication given by Jesus about being lifted up on to a cross. But He could also have been alluding to the fact that after the shame of the cross would come the glory of exaltation to the right hand of the Father. Whatever was in Jesus' mind when He spoke these words, the prophecy in them holds true today. Whoever looks to the cross for salvation is at the same time claiming the merit of the exalted Christ.

Another figurative way of referring to the occasion of Jesus' death was the reference to the destruction and rebuilding of the temple in three days. In Mark's account it appears that false witnesses are attributing these words to Jesus.

Matthew 26:60-61

but they found none, though many false witnesses came forward. At last two came forward and said, "This fellow said, 'I am able to destroy the temple of God and to build it in three days.'"

Matthew records that two witnesses separate from the false witnesses claimed that they heard Jesus say He would destroy the temple. The testimony was serious and given by two witnesses, so Jesus' guilt would not have been in doubt. But these words alone were not deserving of a death sentence and eventually, Jesus was condemned by Jewish law through blasphemously agreeing with the high priest that He was the Son of God and would one day sit at the right hand of God (Matthew 26:63-64) Yet this story of the destruction of the temple became common knowledge and was used to mock Jesus on the cross, even though He had not claimed that He personally would destroy the physical temple.

Matthew 27:40

Those who passed by derided him, shaking their heads and saying, “You who would destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself!”

It is John who seems to have set the record straight by showing, firstly, that the witnesses had incorrectly quoted Jesus and secondly, by putting what Jesus did say in its prophetic context.

John 2:18-22

The Jews then said to him, “What sign can you show us for doing this?” Jesus answered them, “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.” The Jews then said, “This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?” BUT HE WAS SPEAKING OF THE TEMPLE OF HIS BODY. AFTER HE WAS RAISED FROM THE DEAD, his disciples remembered that he had said this; and they believed the scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken.

A third figurative reference is to be found in Matthew and for anyone who knows the story of Jonah, the message is self-explanatory.

Matthew 12:40

For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the sea monster, so for three days and three nights the Son of Man will be in the heart of the earth.

No convoluted reasoning could deny that being in the “heart of the earth” refers to burial.

Just from these records alone, we cannot deny Jesus’ prophetic role in proclaiming that salvation would be achieved through the suffering of the Messiah. We can be thankful that the Evangelists have given us these records of Jesus’ own foretelling of His death on a cross. Old Testament prophets knew that they would suffer for their faithfulness to carrying out their missions, but none was called upon to so organise their public ministry that it led them to certain death. The fact that Jesus not only knew His fate, but could declare “**No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour.**” is a testimony to Jesus’ unwavering obedience to carrying out the will of the Father. It is a testimony to His own sense of mission for He had declared according to Luke 19:10

For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost.” And if the cross was the price that had to be paid to do that, then Jesus voluntarily paid that price for each one of us..

WEEK 3: THE PRAYER OF THE PRIEST

I started off these talks by mentioning how often perception can affect the way we see things. It's the same with the Bible. We can see the things it mentions from a worldly perspective or a faith position. Think first of the worldly view of crucifixion. From Jewish, Greek and Roman historians we know that it was a horrific means of punishment and an excruciatingly painful way to die. We also learn from their accounts that the usual reaction of the victims was to curse and swear at the soldiers undertaking the task, to protest innocence or to be crying out in pain. Meanwhile a crowd would be standing around. Some there through macabre curiosity, some encouraging the soldiers, some levelling vitriolic scorn and mockery at the victims and some, also perhaps mourning them.

The faith position concentrates on the One who died in this way. For, in the midst of the noise and high tension and brutality of the occasion comes the words **“Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.”** Very probably, it was the first time in the soldiers' experience they had ever heard a prayer for forgiveness for what they were doing. That focuses our attention on what impact those words have, not just for that occasion, but for what happened afterwards. What is clear from the secular accounts of a crucifixion scenario, the composure, calmness and graciousness of these words must have had an impact at some level on those who heard them. We can only speculate as to whether or not they influenced one of criminal's attitudes to Jesus. We can only speculate also as to whether or not this initial utterance caused the centurion in charge of the crucifixion to pay closer attention to Jesus' demeanour and further words as He hung on the cross. Together with the supernatural events of the occasion, did this lead him to the conclusion “Truly this was the Son of God/Righteous Man.?” Whatever the answer, we know from the Gospel accounts that the way Jesus died had a profound impact on all who witnessed the crucifixion, Luke 23:48 telling us that the mocking crowd went away beating their breasts – a sign of sorrow and mourning. Why the change in perception?

The first step in our understanding is the fact that Jesus' first utterance from the cross was a prayer. We saw at Christmas that one of the key activities of the prophesied priest was intercession, but what is truly amazing about this intercession is that it was not for Himself, but for others. At the direst and most traumatic moment of His life, Jesus fulfilled the office of priesthood, in spite of His personal circumstances. This was the role He had fulfilled in life. It was the role He continued at the time of imminent death and it was the role that was to come to the forefront in His future heavenly ministry on behalf of His people.

I couldn't help but wonder if this prayer was the inspiration for the writer of the Hebrews, who is the only New Testament author to write directly and explicitly

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about the priesthood of Jesus in chapters 7 to 9. It is this writer who explains priesthood from its inception with the appearance of Melchizedek to Jesus' "permanent" priesthood.

Hebrews 7:24-25

But because Jesus lives forever, he has a permanent priesthood. Therefore he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them.

Significantly, the writer to the Hebrews does not attribute this activity to the resurrection, but to the fact that

".....he sacrificed for their sins once for all when he offered himself. (v27b)

And, going back to Jesus' words, we need to emphasise the first word – Father. Just the address "**Father**" speaks volumes. It indicates the relationship that Jesus had maintained with God throughout His earthly ministry, had not been jeopardised even in these harrowing circumstances. It further emphasises that when Jesus prayed to the Father He expected an answer from Him. Because Jesus always prayed according to the will of the Father; and because His whole life and work, including what was now happening to Him, had been perfectly conducted according to the Father's standards, He knew His prayer would be answered in the affirmative. But we need to go beyond this rather objective view of Jesus' words because we lose sight of the kind of Person Jesus was, if we fail to remember **that when** Jesus' first instinct was to turn to God, He was in the throes of agony **as a human being**. He had already suffered hours of humiliation and torture: the pain of being nailed to the cross was what He was experiencing as He uttered these words.

David has told us that often when natural disasters strike or when personal tragedy hits a home, one of the hardest questions to answer is "Why did God let this happen?" The cross was the situation where, as God was doing His best for humanity, humanity was doing its worst to God. Jesus knew that in life's most terrible circumstances, God was there and that no matter what happened, in Paul's words in Romans 8:28, He had the faith to believe

28....that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.

Jesus complete and utter trust in His Father's goodness enabled Him to look beyond His own horrendous circumstances to the extent of thinking more of the spiritual needs of others. And the most pressing spiritual need was for forgiveness. It's a word that comes easily to our lips, but one of the most difficult things to put into practice. Someone, I don't know who, has said that

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we should forgive others, not because they deserve forgiveness, but because we deserve inner peace – the peace that comes from obedience to Jesus’ command to forgive. While peace may come when we do forgive others, divine forgiveness goes beyond what any human being has ever had to forgive. In fact, to be able to truly forgive others, we need the divine power of the Holy Spirit.

That was the power behind Jesus’ prayer for forgiveness for those responsible for His death. In the past, this was possible through the fulfilment of ritual, for the forgiveness of sins was a central role of the Old Testament priestly activity. But a new dynamic regarding forgiveness was introduced by Jesus. And in **Luke 6:37-38**, He spells out the implications for all who would believe in Him and become His disciples.

“Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven;

Forgiveness also had an especial mention in the prayer He taught His disciples and which we still pray to the present day.

Matthew 6:12, 14-15

Our Father....Forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors.... For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.

The message is clear. If Jesus could pray for forgiveness for those who were killing Him, then we have no excuse for failing to live out what is taught in the Lord’s prayer. What we also have to remember again takes us back to Hebrews, for forgiveness comes at a price.

Chapter 9:22 reminds us that **“without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness”** and continues to state **“But now he has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself.”** When Jesus prayed, He knew that God could only forgive on the basis of the shedding of His blood. Throughout the ages there have been persecuted saints, who have followed Jesus’ example and whose forgiveness for the wrongs they have suffered have been a beacon and an example to us. It’s a sobering lesson to realise that in our still privileged religious environment, whatever wrongs we have suffered has not reached, in the words of Hebrews 12:4 **“the point of shedding your blood”**

So, praying for forgiveness for those who were directly responsible for the unjust shedding of Jesus’ blood has enormous implications, for it faces us with the problem posed by the words **“for they do not know what they are**

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doing.”? The crucifixion of Christ was the darkest deed ever committed by human beings and as such deserved the highest penalty and judgement. The sin was of such magnitude that we could hardly blame God if He had said – I will never forgive it. But horrifying though it was to crucify God’s eternal Son, our Lord prayed that God would not allow the magnitude of the crime to prevent Him from offering forgiveness to those who crucified Him, on the same basis that He offered it to everyone else. Thus, Jesus’ prayer was for the extension of God’s mercy to include those implicated in His death, if they were prepared to repent of what they had done.

John Stott in “The Cross of Christ” makes the point that Jesus did not just ‘die’ on the cross **“he was killed, publicly executed as a felon.”** (p47). That meant that someone was responsible for that killing. Here is one of the thorniest theological dilemmas. If God sent Jesus into the world to end His life by crucifixion; and Jesus knew that was His destiny, how can human beings be held responsible for His death? Here God’s will and human responsibility seem to be on a collision course. When Jesus adds the words “for they know not what they do,” that, however, did not mean that they were guiltless or that they bore no responsibility for His death. Jesus is here referring to the rule and ritual regarding unintentional sin as recorded in Leviticus 4:13-14.

If the whole Israelite community sins unintentionally and does what is forbidden in any of the Lord’s commands, even though the community is unaware of the matter, they are guilty. WHEN THEY BECOME AWARE OF THE SIN THEY COMMITTED, the assembly must bring a young bull as a sin offering and present it before the Tent of Meeting.

Even today, the legal principle is that ignorance of the law is no defence. According to Leviticus, guilt was incurred, but it could be forgiven if appropriate atonement was made in the form of a sin offering. At the time of the crucifixion those involved in orchestrating the event were unaware that they were killing the prophesied Messiah. Thus, even for killing God Incarnate the door to forgiveness was still open. I said a couple of weeks ago that this was the most important and significant event in the age of the fourth Day of the Lord. It was the event that would determine the eternal fate of every human being living from that moment on and until Christ’s return. As the writer to the Hebrews has put it in 9:28

So Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many people; and he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him.

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From the world-wide, perennial perspective of this fourth Day of the Lord, from the moment Jesus prayed these words, forgiveness for sin rests on accepting the shedding of Christ's blood as an atonement for sin. Since the sin of the world past, present and future, was borne on the cross, not just those involved in the killing of Christ, but every human being who has or will come into the world from that time, bear responsibility for the event, and that recognition needs to be followed by true repentance if forgiveness was and is to be granted.

And when we delve into the immediate context of the crucifixion of Christ, we can clearly see how human sin contributed to it and hence the need for repentance and forgiveness. Firstly, the soldiers bear direct physical responsibility for Jesus' death. In those circumstances the soldiers were part of a Roman judicial process which involved the use of the death penalty. The soldiers were simply carrying out their duty and, given the harshness of Roman army discipline, had no option but to carry out their orders. Yet it is from the lips of their commander that the first glimmer of recognition of what has been done is to be found. **"Truly this was the Son of God/Righteous Man"** is, at the very least, an admission that an innocent man had been put to death. Matthew's and Luke's recording of his words imply that much more than that should be read into them. That's something we cannot be dogmatic about. But after the resurrection those soldiers would have had to face up to the conclusion they had come to about Jesus' innocence and on the basis of that, to make the decision about whether or not to accept the message of the apostles when they preached that repentance and belief in Jesus' atoning sacrifice was the only means of salvation. And they would have heard this message because they were based in the Antonia fortress in Jerusalem which overlooked the temple precincts. Of all the participants, this centurion is the only one whom church tradition holds to have become a Christian. He has been given the name Longinus and a statue of him stands in the Vatican

Also, the soldiers were ultimately, the last link in the chain that had led to that moment. The first link was Judas Iscariot who proved to be a traitor when He betrayed Jesus' whereabouts to the Temple guards. Jesus' close companion for three years, yet when he had to make the choice between his own agenda and that of Christ, he chose to be self-serving. He betrayed Jesus for money – 30 pieces of silver, the price of a common slave.

John 12:6but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it.)

John 13:2

2The devil had already put it into the heart of Judas son of Simon Iscariot to betray him.

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Had he acknowledged that the sin of avarice or lust for power motivated him, had he repented of that, forgiveness was there for the asking. Judas could not face that. Scholars reckon Judas expected Jesus to reveal Himself as the Messiah and fulfil all the Old Testament expectations of the Davidic messiah and when it became clear that Jesus was going to die instead, he realised his mistake. Having no prospect of sharing in the earthly reign of the Messiah, he took his own life. Again this is something we cannot be dogmatic about, but certainly the actions of Judas were self-seeking. He had served Jesus for what he thought he would gain, not because of love and devotion to Jesus Himself.

Herod, too, played a part when he entered into an unholy alliance with Pilate. Because Jesus came from Galilee, Herod's territory, he had the right to judge but not to impose the death penalty.

Luke 23:11-12

Even Herod with his soldiers treated him with contempt and mocked him; then he put an elegant robe on him, and sent him back to Pilate. THAT SAME DAY HEROD AND PILATE BECAME FRIENDS WITH EACH OTHER; BEFORE this they had been enemies.

But the Evangelists put the greatest blame on the Jewish authorities, because in John 19:11 tells us that Jesus told **Pilate "the one who handed me over to you is guilty of a greater sin."** Jesus had undermined the authority of the Jewish religious establishment and had exposed their failings. Jesus offered spiritual inclusion and participation in God's blessing to the majority of people excluded by the religious system. Such was the determination of the Sanhedrin to kill Jesus, that they had to resort to employing a traitor, making an illegal night time arrest, and relying on false witnesses in an equally illegal night time trial. The very people who were charged with upholding the law of God were the ones breaking it to the extent that it led to a judicial murder. Ironically it is Pilate who recognises the motivation behind their actions.

Matthew 27:18

For he knew that for envy they had delivered him.

Mark 15:10

For he knew that the chief priests had delivered him for envy.

Furthermore, they made the crowds complicit in the injustice.

Mark 15:11

But the chief priests moved the people, that he (Pilate) should rather release Barabbas unto them.

And then they stooped to blackmail, which was compounded by hypocrisy for they hated Roman rule.

John 19:12-16

From then on Pilate tried to release him, but the Jews cried out, “If you release this man, you are no friend of the emperor. Everyone who claims to be a king sets himself against the emperor.” When Pilate heard these words, he brought Jesus outside and sat on the judge’s bench at a place called The Stone Pavement, or in Aramaic Gabbatha.... He said to the Jews, “Here is your King!” They cried out, “Away with him! Away with him! Crucify him!” Pilate asked them, “Shall I crucify your King?” The chief priests answered, “We have no king but the emperor.” Then he handed him over to them to be crucified.

As far as Pilate was concerned, in many ways the judicial system he was part of restricted his room for manoeuvre. Nevertheless, his human responsibility cannot be denied. He knew Jesus was innocent of all the charges against Him and that He did not deserve to die. But

- He tried to ‘pass the buck’, first to Herod, whom he knew had no power to pronounce a death sentence.
- Then three times he appealed to the crowd arguing that they should choose to save Jesus, even though he did so in the full knowledge that the Jewish authorities had already incited the crowd to save Barabbas.
- He ignored his wife who told him to have nothing to do with “that just man”
- He tried to get Jesus to incriminate Himself by stating that He was King of the Jews – a treasonable claim.
- Finally, he bowed to the political blackmail of the Jewish authorities, knowing that their motivation for wanting Jesus’ death was envy over His popularity with the people.

Ultimately, it was cowardice that led to Pilate’s decision to allow an innocent man to be killed.

In the face of all of this comes Jesus’ words: **“Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.”** It is true that they were probably unaware that their collective motivations and actions were leading to the execution of the prophesied Messiah. But given the subsequent resurrection of Jesus from the dead and the post-Pentecost preaching and teaching of the apostles and Paul, all but Judas, would have had to face the choice between believing or rejecting the apostolic preaching of Jesus as Messiah, Lord and Saviour. Had they repented and accepted the sacrifice He made, a reminder of this prayer would surely have brought an overwhelming freedom from guilt over whatever contribution they had made to the death and also a spiritual “peace that passes all understanding” in knowing that they had been truly reconciled to God through Christ.

We could regard all those whose human contributions led to Christ's death as the "vilest offenders" but, knowing that God would give Him a positive answer, Jesus' prayer guaranteed an immediate pardon through repentance and belief. We may not hold ourselves responsible for physically putting Jesus to death, but because of sin, we too are guilty and have contributed to the necessity of Jesus' death. Once we know where the Bible is coming from in teaching that, we too have to make the same choice facing those who were involved in that event 2000 years ago.

WEEK 4: THE GRACE OF THE KING

Going back once more to the Advent talks, we saw how the birth of Jesus restored kingship to the Jewish nation. We had no problem welcoming Him in song as the "new born king." Yet seldom, if ever, in talks or in prayers do we ever refer to Him as 'King Jesus'. 'Lord Jesus' rolls off the tongue, and while we have no problem singing a chorus like 'Majesty,' using the title 'King Jesus' in speech seems to have an awkward ring to it. Maybe that's just me, because I don't have any theological reason for thinking like this. But when I started preparing this talk, a possible reason emerged. References to Jesus' kingship during His three year ministry are rare. While the 'Kingdom of God' theme is common in Matthew, Mark and Luke, only John gives two explicit examples of Jesus being regarded as a king.

John 1:48-49

Nathanael asked him, "Where did you get to know me?" Jesus answered, "I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you." Nathanael replied, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!"

John 6:15 after the feeding of the 5000

When Jesus realized that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, he withdrew again to the mountain by himself.

That remains the case until the time of the crucifixion. Here the title comes to the fore, first in relation to Jesus' entry into Jerusalem.

Matthew 21:3-5

If anyone says anything to you, just say this, 'The Lord needs them.' And he will send them immediately." This took place to fulfil what had been spoken through the prophet, saying, "Tell the daughter of Zion, Look, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey."

Luke 19:36-38

As he rode along, people kept spreading their cloaks on the road. As he was now approaching the path down from the Mount of Olives, the whole multitude of the disciples began to praise God joyfully with a loud voice for all the deeds of power that they had seen, saying, “Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!”

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John 12:12-15

The next day the great crowd that had come to the festival heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem. So they took branches of palm trees and went out to meet him, shouting, “Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord—the King of Israel!” Jesus found a young donkey and sat on it; as it is written: “Do not be afraid, daughter of Zion. Look, your king is coming, sitting on a donkey’s colt!”

Mark mentions the event but does not use the term ‘king’ in his account. Yet it is clear from the consensus of the Evangelists that the occasion was notable because it was regarded as the fulfilment of prophecy in **Zechariah 9:9**

Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem! Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.

And then kingship becomes a major issue during Jesus’ trial before Pilate. To claim kingship was a treasonable offence punishable by death, hence that was the false charge the Jews put before Pilate. **Matthew 27:11-14 and Mark 15:9-14** give the account of the silence of Jesus before His Jewish accusers and Pilate’s attempts to release Jesus to avoid having to pronounce the sentence of crucifixion. It is Luke, however, that highlights one accusation that Pilate could not ignore – Jesus’ alleged claim to kingship. Jesus then speaks to tell Pilate, that is a charge that has come from his lips.

Luke 23:3-4

Then Pilate asked him, “Are you the king of the Jews?” He answered, “You say so.” Then Pilate said to the chief priests and the crowds, “I find no basis for an accusation against this man.”

We get a fuller account of that exchange in John. John tells us that Jesus gives a tacit admission that He is a king, but makes it clear that He does not claim to be a king in an earthly sense.

John 18:33-37

Then Pilate entered the headquarters again, summoned Jesus, and asked him, “Are you the King of the Jews?” Jesus answered, “Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?” ... Jesus answered, “My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here.” Pilate asked him, “So you are a king?” Jesus answered, “YOU SAY that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.”

It was an exchange that led to Pilate asking “What is Truth?” (v38) – little knowing He would by his actions declare the truth of Jesus’ identity to the world.

Probably because of this conversation and also probably to spite the Jews who had forced him into having to crucify a man he knew to be innocent, Pilate ordered a notice “Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews” to be written in Aramaic, Latin and Greek and nailed above the cross of Jesus. In response to Jewish protests, Pilate declared **“What I have written, I have written.”** John 19:19-22, thus making a final and emphatic assertion that this was the only charge against Jesus deserving the death penalty. Aramaic was the language of Palestine; Latin was the language of officialdom; and Greek was the common language spoken throughout the Graeco-Roman world. It was thus the crucifixion that gave the widest publicity imaginable to the kingship of Jesus. When Pilate asked, “What is truth?” he had no concept that he was giving the world the truth when he ordered that notice to be written.

But what kind of a king did the cross show Jesus to be? At the very beginning of his Gospel John emphasises a major characteristic of Jesus – Grace. And through Jesus’ relationship with the Father, that grace is part of the very nature of God. John 1:14-18

And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth. (John testified to him and cried out, “This was he of whom I said, ‘He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me.’”) From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father’s heart, who has made him known.

We regard grace as unmerited favour and two utterances from the cross give us an indication of the graciousness of Jesus even in the midst of His own agony.

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And two utterances show that grace was a matter for our earthly well-being as well as our heavenly one. I'm dealing with Jesus' words to Mary first, even though, they come after the words to the criminal. Under the Old Testament covenant, kingly grace was to be extended to all regardless of their status in society. Jesus' concern for His mother exemplified how kings were intended to act under the Sinai covenant. Exodus 22:22 explicitly states

You shall not abuse any widow or orphan.

The writing prophets highlight the extent to which this law was ignored, referring to it time and time again to such abuse as one of the chief social evils of their ages. We can only speculate about Mary's thoughts and feelings at that moment, but as a mother, knowing what she knew about her Son, from the angel's words announcing His birth, it must have been heart-breaking to see His unjust suffering. Especially, she might have recalled Simeon's prophecy: **This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel...And a sword will pierce your own soul too. Luke 2:21-35 vv34-35**

When Jesus turned to the plight of His mother, He was displaying kingly grace to one of the most vulnerable members of society – a widow. And in this case, a widow, whose Son had been publicly executed by crucifixion and therefore in the eyes of her Jewish compatriots, was cursed. The words of concern for His mother, knowing how society would treat her, was a demonstration of compassionate grace, which in the norms of contemporary society, would have been unheard of, especially under these circumstances. But we can go even further than that. Even, in the agonising suffering He was experiencing, Jesus was true to His commitment to fulfilling the law in every detail.

He had declared in **Matthew 5:17**

Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfil them.

Kingly grace was extended in full accordance with the justice of God's law. This is an aspect of this episode that I hadn't come across before, probably because it is only mentioned in the Gospel of John. And there seems to be a good reason for that. Christians believe the Gospel, Letters and Revelation were written by John the Apostle. In John 19:35 in relation to the soldier piercing Jesus' side, there is the statement:

The man who saw it has given testimony, and his testimony is true. He knows that he tells the truth and he testifies so that you also may believe.

In 1 John 1:1 the same point is made. John is talking about what he has personally witnessed. Jesus, by committing His mother's well-being to the care

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of John is confirming John's presence there. By that time, Jesus had been betrayed by Judas, denied by Peter and the others had fled. To risk being seen as a supporter of Jesus was an act of both courage and love by John. He took his stand by the foot of the cross where he could see everything and not only was he seen but he was spoken to by his dying Master. Jesus must have seen in John a loving, caring nature and, although John does not give us any further details, there seems to be no reason to doubt that Mary's future was safe in his hands. Mary's situation put her in the category of being one of the most vulnerable people in contemporary society. Grace came to her when she was in a situation over which she had no control and for which she was not responsible. Grace came to Mary in a time of greatest need and vulnerability, when her earthly circumstances were extremely perilous.

But not as perilous as those of the criminal who, in the beliefs of Judaism was already doomed to eternal damnation. In the case of the two criminals crucified with Jesus their fate was deserved. They are variously referred to as a thieves or robbers and as crucifixion was reserved for the worst of criminals, it is more likely that they were robbers, because the definition of robbery is theft involving the use of violence. Yet in spite of the crimes committed, grace was still available where repentance and faith became apparent.

The words, **"Today, you will be with Me in Paradise"** are very familiar to us. These words were in response to the request, **"Lord, remember me when you come into your kingdom."** Both grace and truth are combined in this exchange. We said last week that forgiveness was available to all on the basis of repentance and belief. This criminal had already publicly recognised that he deserved his fate, and he also recognised Jesus innocence. Then his words testify to his belief that the charge Pilate had ordered to be put on the cross, had credibility. Lord, was a term of respect, but to refer to Jesus as having a kingdom, went beyond mere respect. It was an acknowledgement, in the face of the absence of any actual evidence, that Jesus was indeed a King. Bearing in mind that this criminal had also initially joined in the mocking of Jesus, Jesus could have delayed His answer. Instead, His reply was immediate and emphatic.

It is only as we consider these 8 words we begin to realise that, in comparison to their straightforward simplicity, their significance for salvation is immense. "Today" indicates the immediacy of what is to come. Charles Wesley captured this sense when he wrote "The vilest offender who truly believes, **that moment** from Jesus a pardon receives." Faith believes who Jesus is and that all He has done on the cross, brings immediate salvation. There is no delay while your case is considered; no probationary period to check your credentials and suitability if accepted; no threat of withdrawal of privileges if you fail to live up

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to your commitment. Instead, grace pronounces immediate acceptance the moment repentance is genuine and faith is expressed. Paul's words in Romans 10:9 refer to a post-resurrection confession of faith, something the criminal could not have anticipated, but the principle behind Paul's words remains valid for the situation of the criminal.

because if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.

It may be stating the obvious, but the criminal's audible words to his fellow criminal and then to Jesus indicate beliefs which the situation, in normal circumstances, would not warrant. He specifically stated his belief in Jesus' innocence of all charges against Him. They indicated a belief in Jesus' kingship, which to everyone else was simply a matter for mocking. They affirmed a belief in the afterlife, common among all people at the time, but they went further in implying that in the afterlife, Jesus would be in a position of authority and that His word alone would guarantee the criminal's place in that kingdom.

For the criminal, "Today" would also have had an added significance. We are used with having the assurance of salvation upon repentance and confession of faith in the shed blood of Christ as an atonement for sin. In the criminal's world however, no such assurance was possible because the Jews believed that at judgement good deeds would be weighed against the bad ones and the final balance would then decide the eternal fate of the one being judged. On this basis, the eternal fate of the criminal would seem to be a foregone conclusion. Yet Jesus' words indicated that He recognised true repentance in the criminal's confession.

(Luke 23:41 "We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong.")

That he subjected his eternal fate to the verdict of Jesus was the evidence he believed Jesus was the only One who could do anything about it and make a decision one way or the other. So "Today" for the criminal was a pre-death decision and he went to his death with the knowledge and assurance of his eternal destination.

In a sense the episode involving the criminal was a practical example of what the early church would preach and teach.

Hebrews 3:15

As it is said, "Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion."

...WE PROCLAIM CHRIST CRUCIFIED.... (I Cor. 1:23)

At the cross, we see the example of an immediate and positive response to the spiritual light that had been given at that moment in time. And Jesus responded to this in like manner. The instantaneous reply also takes us back to Jesus verdict on a penitent sinner.

Luke 15:7 and 10

Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance. Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”

We don't know if the criminal grasped the full significance of Jesus' words, but if he had, he would have realised that a personal and intimate relationship had been already established. Martin Luther once said that the heart of the Christian faith lies in its personal pronouns. Nothing could have been more personal than those of Jesus on the cross. **“You will be with me”** speaks of a close, personal relationship. The words convey the notion of friendship, harmony, the mutual enjoyment of knowing each other and being in each other's company. With these words Jesus went right to the essence of what the Kingdom of God is all about. The simplest definition of Christianity is that 'it is a relationship with God through faith in Christ's atonement for sin.' Everything else about Christianity stems from this one fact and the bottom line is: that if that relationship does not exist, then there is no Christianity.

That Jesus' reply to the criminal's request was so instantaneous, indicates the certainty of what was granted. Jesus was certain that a place had already been prepared for He stated in John 14:2

In my Father's house there are many rooms. I go to prepare a place for you that where I am you may be also. And in that place a relationship with Jesus included a relationship with God the Father as well. We know this because Jesus, in His prayer for all who would believe in Him, had asserted that those who accepted Him would be accepted by the Father.

John 17:1

My prayer is not for the alone, I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you.

But Jesus did not finish there. He added **“In Paradise.”** **In Greek, the word ‘paradise’ is used of a ‘park, garden, or resting place’.** That is why the Garden of Eden is more often referred to as ‘Paradise’. We do not normally associate the Garden of Eden with heaven because it was created on the earth.

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Scholars debate whether or not the two are identical, but the one thing that connects them is the Tree of Life.

Genesis 3:24

He drove out the man; and at the east of the garden of Eden he placed the cherubim, and a sword flaming and turning to guard the way to the tree of life.

Revelation 22:2

through the middle of the street of the city. On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations.

It is possible that Paradise refers to the place where believers await the reunion of body and soul, the establishment of the New Jerusalem, the final and eternal dwelling place of God and His people. Whatever our interpretation, however, the meaning is clear in Jesus' words. Believers will be wherever Jesus is after death. And this assurance to the penitent robber is also our assurance that on that fifth and final Day of the Lord, whatever the completed New Jerusalem will look like or will be, all those who are there will know they will be in Paradise – God's original creation, made altogether new – because all who do enter there will have done so because of the "Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" by the shedding of His blood on the cross. And, unlike Mary or the robber, we have the words of John Newton, to praise the 'Amazing Grace' of the King of Kings and Lord of Lords in the dying moments of His earthly life.

WEEK 5: THE ANGUISH OF THE SON OF MAN

The Bible has a wealth of information about the Triune God, humanity and all aspects of life. Sometimes, the greatest difficulty in preparing these talks has been deciding what has to be left out because there just isn't enough time to cover all the Biblical references that could be used. But with this talk we come to a different situation entirely. David has said many times that there are some things in the Bible that simply defy human intelligence and human understanding. This week, we come to perhaps the most poignant and the most inexplicable of those times for it is the time when Jesus gives expression to what is going on in His heart and mind and when He also expresses a personal physical need. So this is the time when any preacher or Bible teacher has to tread with extreme caution and a great deal of humility, because none of us has the dual nature of Jesus and none of us has ever experienced death on a cross as a human and divine Being. When you look at the two expressions – "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" and "I thirst", it seems to be arrogant

presumption to talk about what Jesus was going through, for to do so we would have to have the mind of God Himself at that particular moment in time. Somehow the words of that old hymn **“We may not know, we cannot tell, what pain He had to bear”** takes on a more profound meaning. “We may not know” can be taken in the sense of ‘perhaps we don’t know’ but makes more sense as “permission has not been granted for us to know.” And given what has been said about not being able to penetrate the mind of a God-Man as He died on a cross, the sense of “I cannot tell” is absolute and final.

However, although God has denied us access to the divine mind when Jesus said these words, He has given us insights from other texts that help us to interpret them and come to an understanding of why they were uttered as and when they were. This is an important task for these words go to the very heart of why humanity needs salvation and why only Jesus could make it possible. He could do so only by virtue of the fact of His unique nature. For that we need to look at the title He gave Himself, rather than the prophetic offices He fulfilled

Matthew 26:1-2

When Jesus had finished saying all these things, he said to his disciples, “You know that after two days the Passover is coming, and the Son of Man will be handed over to be crucified.”

Son of Man was the title Jesus gave Himself and after the crucifixion, was a title never used by the Church. Today, the most common perception of the title is that it refers to Jesus’ humanity. But the title is also refers to His divinity.

When He gave Himself this title, Jesus would have been aware of Daniel’s vision of a divine figure ‘like a son of man’ and one which John in Revelation 1 identified as Christ.

Daniel 7:13-14

I saw in the night-visions, and, behold, THERE CAME WITH THE CLOUDS OF HEAVEN ONE LIKE UNTO A SON OF MAN, AND HE CAME EVEN TO THE ANCIENT OF DAYS, AND THEY BROUGHT HIM NEAR BEFORE HIM. And there was given him dominion, and glory, and a kingdom, that all the peoples, nations, and languages should serve him: his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom that which shall not be destroyed.

Had Jesus only wanted to assert his humanity, this title would therefore not have been the most appropriate one to choose. And during His lifetime, Jesus used

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the title to give indications His divinity. When He healed the paralysed man He said

Matthew 9:6

6But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins.

He was accused of blasphemy on this occasion because forgiving sin was an exclusive prerogative of God. On another occasion He said,

Matthew 12:8

For the Son of Man is lord of the sabbath.”

By this He stated that He was the ultimate interpreter of the Law, again only the prerogative of the One who had given the law.

Because of Jesus’ dual nature, this cry therefore has to cover the range from the physical pain experienced by any normal human being to the inner spiritual agony experienced by a divine Being. Considering how Jesus had conducted Himself up to this point and when we consider Jesus as perfectly Man and perfectly God, somehow what scholars now call His “cry of dereliction” strikes a discordant note. So, while we can’t presume to state what Jesus was thinking or feeling at that moment, we can explore the reasons why He did cry out “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

If we look at Jesus’ cry in human terms, we can find human reasons for these words. As a human being, Jesus experienced the full impact of the physical agony of crucifixion. His divine nature did not in any way mitigate the full impact of the manner of His death. It has been suggested that His long silence was due to the **intense physical pain**. Human reasoning could justifiably admit this possibility, and suggest that Jesus’ words indicated a lapse in His faith and trust in God the Father because of the extent of His physical pain. But, in many ways that is the least likely reason. We have all known or have heard of people who have been tremendous witnesses for God in spite of severe physical circumstances, and to suggest that Jesus was weaker than folk like this, is to suggest He was flawed in some way. Jesus’ words in Gethsemane indicated that He was fully aware of the pain He would suffer, and like any human being, He would have preferred to avoid it, if possible. However, “Not my will, but thine be done” coupled with His own stated purpose in

Matthew 20:28

just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.”

instead indicate that Jesus not only was aware of what He would suffer but voluntarily accepted the pain it would entail.

And it is that purpose that brings us to another way of looking at His words. We know that Jesus words echo those in Psalm 22. David wrote these words in circumstances of innocent suffering. Jesus who had lived a perfect life and exercised a perfect ministry before both God and man; and was totally innocent of all the charges brought against Him, was suffering through injustice. Jesus knew the Scriptures and He would have known that David's psalm ends with deliverance from his situation. Jesus also knew that, unlike David, there would be no deliverance from His fate. So, although the plain implication of the words indicate that Jesus felt deserted by God, the fact that He expressed this in Scriptural terms, indicate that, whatever He was suffering, His focus was still Godward. We can also look to the previous words from the cross to deny that His words were brought about by the thoughts or feelings of an innocent Man who was suffering unjustly. This would have amounted to self-pity, and as we have seen, this was furthest from Jesus' whole conduct as already, He had put others' well-being before His own.

I've quoted Oswald Chambers who said that while God was doing His best for man, man was doing his worst to God. God was an integral participant in all that the crucifixion of His Son entailed and what hurt the Son, hurt the Father and vice versa. Selwyn Hughes is worth quoting in this respect for he shows how the whole world was involved in contributing to that inner hurt. Taking his cue from the three languages on the notice on the cross he writes.

The Romans had achieved a level of jurisprudence that had hitherto been unequalled and here was the finest that law could produce – crucifying the Son of God. The Jewish religion was the greatest religion on the face of the earth, but now it was involved in crucifying the very Son of God whom its sacred book honoured and praised. Greek was the language of culture and beauty. Yet the highest level of civilisation the world had ever known turned its back on Jesus and thus, it too, was represented at the cross. How it must have hurt our Lord to realise that the best that human beings could do in law, faith and culture had turned in direct revolt against God who had created them and the One who was His only Son whom He had sent into the world.

And it is when we consider that undeniable fact, that we come closest to knowing why Jesus cried out “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

When the cry came is significant. Jesus had been hanging on the cross for six hours. It has been calculated that Jesus' previous words were spoken in the first hour of the crucifixion. He was silent for a further five hours, and for three of those hours, darkness had covered the land. The cry came as the darkness

lifted. We do not know what transpired during those hours of darkness, but we do know that darkness, in Scripture, is always associated with God's curse and wrath against sin, as well as demonic activity. It also marks the absence of the Presence of God. Lane (P571) says that "The darkening of the sun marks a critical moment in history and emphasises the eschatological and cosmic dimensions of Jesus' sufferings upon the cross." Lane draws this conclusion from references in as the prophecies of Amos, Joel and Zephaniah.

Amos 8:9

"In that day", declares the Sovereign Lord, "I will make the sun go down at noon and darken the earth in broad daylight."

Joel 2:31

The sun will be turned to darkness and the moon to blood before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord.

Zephaniah 1:15

That day will be a day of wrath, a day of distress and anguish, a day of trouble and ruin, a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and blackness.

There is also some consensus that this was no routine eclipse of the sun for Passover was usually held at the time of a full moon when a natural eclipse would be impossible. It therefore appears that the darkness signalled, THE pivotal, never-to-be-repeated moment in the fourth Day of the Lord, when the eternal fate of humanity was held in the divine balance. It was cosmic in dimension because there is a perennial tension between light and dark, good and evil. When the purpose of Jesus' voluntary sacrifice of Himself on the cross is considered, the divine, universal and eternal implications of what the darkness signified becomes clear.

The sacrificial death of Jesus was the price required to pay the penalty for humanity's sin. Scripture teaches He was our substitute. He bore the penalty for our sin. We are the beneficiaries of that death and very often we regard it from the viewpoint of what it did for us. But the Psalmist recognised centuries earlier, this is something we could not do for ourselves

Psalm 49:7-9

Truly, no ransom avails for one's life, there is no price one can give to God for it. For the ransom of life is costly, and can never suffice, that one should live on forever and never see the grave.

The cost of eternal life was the life of Jesus and that did not just mean He experienced the death of His physical body. I am grateful for a remark made by

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John Blanchard when he spoke in Llanelli, a remark repeated in his book “The Hitch-Hiker’s guide to Heaven.” He said “death is not termination but separation.” Jesus’ cry will be the cry of every human being who finds themselves separated from God at death. To be literally God-forsaken, is to be literally and eternally separated from God without any hope of deliverance or participation in the eschatological blessings of God’s kingdom. That is the fate Jesus died on the cross to save us from. Because, the human side of His nature has experienced the full force of such a fate, Jesus’ cry exposes the desolation and hopelessness which will be felt by those who do not accept the atonement for sin offered by His death on the cross. It was the only means by which God’s love and God’s justice could be reconciled. The last thing that God wants for any human being is to suffer the God-forsakenness that Jesus experienced as He took our place and bore the penalty for our sin.

And that brings us to the place which our finite minds can never fathom or adequately explain. By adopting this means of providing salvation, we also have to recognise that God also suffered in the Person of His Son. So when we consider Jesus words, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” we enter into a very profound theological situation. Paul’s words that “**all have sinned and come short of the glory of God**” again bring this into sharp focus.” There are approximately 7 billion people on this planet at the moment. I have no idea of how many millions or billions have lived in the past or how many billions there will be in the future. Yet, as Paul tells us, Jesus voluntarily took upon Himself the sin of every person who has lived, is living and ever will live. The reference in 2 Corinthians 5:21 implies that not only did Jesus take our place, but that He actually became sin.

2 Corinthians 5:21

For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

Romans 8:3 explains this as,

For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do: by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and to deal with sin, he condemned sin in the flesh,

If, as the Bible teaches, God’s wrath is directed towards sin, then, in that climactic moment, when Jesus was bearing the weight of the world’s sin, in a way beyond our understanding, there was, for the want of a better expression, a rupture within the Godhead. A rupture which exposed the full horror of what it meant to be alienated from and cut off from God. I could only picture it as the Jesus, who was the Light of the world, separated from the source of that Light and so experiencing only the deepest darkness. What the words do imply is that there had been a loss of contact. Jesus, as a divine Being, was experiencing, in

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Lane's words, the "unfathomable pain of real abandonment by the Father." (p573).

So, as well as excruciating physical pain, Jesus experienced the intensity of spiritual disconnection from God because of the sin He was carrying. Isaiah 53 contains familiar verses, but we seldom, if ever, quote the first part of verse 10 **"For it was the Lord's will to crush him and cause him to suffer...."**

For God the Father to be separated, even temporarily from God the Son, must have been a crushing, spiritual blow which is something totally beyond human comprehension. Jesus suffered in soul as well as body and "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" are the only Scriptural words that adequately convey that experience, as well as affirming that the relationship between God the Father and God the Son still existed. Thus, Jesus suffered a crushing suffering beyond what any man, who was not also God, could endure because of human sin.

Someone once said that Jesus' cry of dereliction is probably the best description of hell we will ever hear. Sin in its ultimate form, is the consciousness of the lack of God – hence God-forsakenness. No other being apart from Jesus has been completely forsaken by God in this life. He experienced the ultimate consequence of sin – God-abandonment? That is hell. Viewed in this way, the line of the Apostle's Creed which states that Jesus 'descended into hell' becomes clearer.

Although Jesus' personal agony is beyond our ability to know, we can tell from these words, that Jesus suffered totally the full force of God's wrath against sin. "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" is the cry that epitomises the extent of the **"punishment that brought us peace"** and the **"wounds by which we are healed."** Isaiah 53:5c&d.

And when Jesus followed these words by "I thirst" we can see that His humanity had not been compromised by the intense pressure. Remarkably, this is the only indication He gives of the toll crucifixion had taken on Him physically. A simple statement of fact without any complaint or indication of self-pity and one which also shows He was still consciously experiencing his ordeal. Mark's words do give us an insight though into the soldiers' response to that statement.

One man ran, filled a sponge with wine vinegar, put it on a stick, and offered it to Jesus to drink. Mark 15:36

The word 'ran' implies that immediately Jesus uttered those words, one man darted forward and moistened His lips. It was a kind act and we can only

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speculate as to whether or not it was an indication that at least the soldiers' attitudes had changed towards Jesus, an attitude that at the end led to the centurion's declaration that "Truly this was the Son of God."

So, to sum up. Jesus words bring us face to face with the physical, mental and spiritual suffering He experienced on the cross. They were not uttered because of the effects of extreme pain or of self-pity or even the mental anguish of unjust suffering. The ultimate reason for the words was the crisis point reached within the Godhead because of the problem of sin. We can see on the one hand a temporary disconnection was inevitable because the wrath of a Holy God was dealing with the sin of the world which Christ was bearing as He died on the cross. On the other hand, we see that the relationship remained intact. Jesus still acknowledged that God was still His God, in spite of the extremity of the circumstances.

I said at the beginning of these talks that Easter brings us to the most significant event in this fourth Day of the Lord. It is perhaps possible that when Jesus uttered this cry of dereliction the day's most significant action was in progress. The words suggest God's wrath had been unleashed against sin, Christ bearing the full force of it on the cross. But at that same moment, in Paul's words in 2 Corinthians 5:19 **"in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself"** 1 **Thessalonians 5:9-10**

For God has destined us not for wrath but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us, so that whether we are awake or asleep we may live with him.

In other words, Jesus had suffered the ultimate penalty of God-forsakenness so that we would not have to. God's love for us came at the cost of the suffering of His only Son. That is why today the Church still needs to **"...proclaim Christ crucified...."** for it's the world's only hope for eternal salvation on that fifth and final Day of the Lord.

WEEK 6: THE VICTORY OF THE SON OF GOD

This week we come to Jesus' final words from the cross. Out of curiosity I looked up "famous last words" on the internet. I was amazed when the search turned up 110m results. I read through a few and probably most would have been repeated on all the sites, but the amount of coverage given is an indication of how important some people regard a person's last words to be. There is the opinion that somehow they sum up a person's life, personality or achievements.

- **How were the receipts today at Madison Square Garden?
~~ P. T. Barnum, entrepreneur, d. 1891 -MONEY**

- **Die? I should say not, dear fellow. No Barrymore would allow such a conventional thing to happen to him.**
~~ John Barrymore, actor, d. May 29, 1942 - PRIDE
- **Josephine...**
~~ Napoleon Bonaparte, French Emperor, May 5, 1821 - PERSON
- **Friends applaud, the comedy is finished.**
~~ Ludwig van Beethoven, composer, d. March 26, 1827 -PRIDE
- **I should never have switched from Scotch to Martinis.**
~~ Humphrey Bogart, actor, d. January 14, 1957 - SENSES
- **I've had eighteen straight whiskies, I think that's the record . . .**
~~ Dylan Thomas, poet, d. 1953 - SENSES

No comment on these. I'll leave it up to you about what any of these famous last words say about the lives of those who said them. I'm not saying that there were no noble, brave or patriotic last words in the lists, and many are still an inspiration to those who know of them. But, at the end of the day, they are bound to the things of the world and human nature. It seemed that only the last words of Christians, reached beyond the human mindset and gave a sense of the reality beyond this life.

The famous Christian, Dwight Moody... awoke from sleep shortly before he died and said:

"Earth recedes. Heaven opens before me. If this is death, it is sweet! There is no valley here. God is calling me, and I must go."

Augustus Toplady, preacher and author of the hymn, "Rock of Ages":

"The consolations of God to such an unworthy wretch are so abundant that He leaves me nothing to pray for but a continuance of them. I enjoy heaven already in my soul."

John Pawson, minister:

"I know I am dying, but my deathbed is a bed of roses. I have no thorns planted upon my dying pillow. In Christ, heaven is already begun!"

Sir David Brewster, scientist and inventor of the kaleidoscope:

"I will see Jesus; I shall see Him as He is! I have had the light for many years.

Oh how bright it is! I feel so safe and satisfied!"

A Chinese communist, through whom many Christians had been executed, said to a Pastor: "I have seen many of you die. The Christians die in a

different way.

What is your secret?"

Nothing could be truer than that last statement, especially as we have looked at the death of Jesus over these past few weeks. His prophetic words which showed He voluntarily went to the cross at the will of the Father, to secure salvation for the whole of humanity. His priestly prayer for forgiveness for those directly responsible for the crucifixion, but also for our sin that put Him there. His kingly grace and compassion towards the vulnerable widow and condemned criminal – people rejected by society. His anguish, not for His own suffering but because of the agonising experience of separation from God. And then His final words, which we come to this week.

When we come to the last words of Jesus from the cross that reality begins to really hit home. For someone hearing the words, “It is finished” for the first time, the inevitable question has to be “What is finished?” Salvation is the obvious answer. But then a little niggling thought came to mind. Sometimes, it’s not so good to remember Bible verses especially when they seem to contradict another one. John 17:4 says “I have completed the work you gave me to do.” How could Jesus’ work be ‘completed’ at one time and ‘finished’ at another? The problem is that the same verb is used on both occasions but fortunately we know that the form of the word actually indicates a specific meaning. In John 17:4 the word indicates that Jesus had completed the work involved in His earthly ministry, but it was work that would have an on-going effect in the future. The ‘Great Commission’ given to the disciples to pass on Jesus’ preaching and teaching together with Jesus’ lifestyle as the model of discipleship was the work that would be on-going until Jesus’ return. The form of the word Jesus spoke on the cross, however, indicates that what was finished was a work completed on that specific occasion. It was a work that only Jesus could complete in every detail and would never again be repeated. Scholars use the illustration of a bill “paid in full” to convey this sense.

So what was finished or ‘paid in full’ by Jesus’ death on the cross? “It is finished” are the words of a Man who is confident that He has fulfilled what He set out to do and is satisfied that His task has been completed to the required standard. He is confident because He knew the purpose of His death. He knew exactly why it was necessary. He knew that both the needs of humanity and the standards of God had to be met. Upon His shoulders rested the success or otherwise of God’s plans for the salvation of His whole creation and the future nature of eternity. We easily accept what Christ accomplished on the cross, but it’s only by daring to think the unimaginable consequence of failure, that we begin to realise the magnitude of what Jesus did achieve for us.

...WE PROCLAIM CHRIST CRUCIFIED.... (I Cor. 1:23)

We could debate that His success was never in doubt because He was God. But the writer to the Hebrews reminds us in 5:15.

For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathise with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are – yet was without sin.

We must never forget that Jesus was also fully human and as His mission in life and death had to be carried out as a human being, one fact alone accounts for His success – His single-minded and consistent relationship with God the Father. As He stated in John 17:4, the glory of God was His overriding consideration in all He did.

...I have brought you glory on earth by completing the work you gave me to do.

So, in general terms, what was finished on the cross was the work of salvation. But when we look at some of the details, the word ‘salvation’ is a summary of why Jesus was able to cry out “It is finished.”

In John 17:3 Jesus had said, **“Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.”**

People can only know something if it has been revealed to them in some way and the cross was the ultimate revelation of “the only true God” and Jesus Christ, whom He sent.

It’s summed up for us in John 3:16

For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son that whosoever believes in him should have everlasting life.

Jesus brought glory to God on the cross by the revelation of the love of God for humanity. It is true that Jesus had showed the love of God to people during His 3-year ministry through His compassion, care and miracles for the marginalised in society. But the cross was the epitome of the extent and depth of God’s love for His fallen, sinful creation. And Jesus’ words “It is finished” means that we can only truly come to some understanding of the immensity of God’s love as we look to His sacrifice on the cross. There never has been and never will be a greater revelation of the lengths God was prepared to go to restore a relationship with us. In Romans chapter 8 Paul bases his conviction that absolutely nothing can separate us from the love of God on one fact alone. Verse 32

He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all – how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things.

...WE PROCLAIM CHRIST CRUCIFIED.... (I Cor. 1:23)

Paul is able to assert this because of something else that was ‘finished’ on the cross – the work of redemption. And there are two related aspects of this. We sing *“’Til on that cross as Jesus died, the wrath of God was satisfied. For every sin on Him was laid. Here in the death of Christ I live.”*

Paul puts it like this in Romans 3:25-26

God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood. He did this to demonstrate his justice, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished – He did it to demonstrate his justice at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus.

What was finished on the cross was the means of harmonising God’s love for the sinner, while maintaining His justifiable anger and hatred of sin for which His justice demanded punishment. To let sin go unpunished would make God an unrighteous judge. People don’t like talking about sin. The Archbishop of Canterbury has apparently annoyed traditionalists by erasing mention of sin in baptism rites. But sin to God is anathema. Sin is the most deadly thing known to God and humankind. Sin’s aim is to slay both the body and the soul. Jesus’ death on the cross exposed the full horror of sin for, at its root, sin is rebellion and enmity towards God. The cross exposed the extent of humanity’s hostility towards God, a hostility that has existed since the Fall in the Garden of Eden and will exist until God establishes the New Jerusalem. Unless, a final solution to the problem of sin was found, no human being could be right with God. But, in one fell swoop, Jesus, by being made sin, atoned for the sin of the whole world. It was the finished work on the cross that allowed God’s love to be extended to all, who accepted His solution to the problem of sin. Is it any wonder that Jesus was able to utter the victory cry “It is finished” for He had borne, for once and for all, the weight of and punishment for the sin of the whole world, past, present and future.

And once sin had been finally dealt with, it meant that humanity now had the means of entering into a personal relationship with God. This is one of the great themes of Pauline theology. He refers to it as ‘reconciliation’. Oswald Chambers echoes Paul in stating *“...it is the death of Christ alone that enables the Divine nature to forgive and to remain true to itself in doing so.”*

This was something engrained in Paul’s heart and mind and with absolute certainty he declares in Colossians 1:20

and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.

This is beautifully put in the words of the song ‘Here is love’.
*On the mount of crucifixion fountains opened deep and wide;
Through the floodgates of God’s mercy flowed a vast and gracious tide
Grace and love like mighty rivers poured incessant from above;
And heaven’s peace and perfect justice kissed a guilty world with love.*

In the letters to important churches in major centres like Rome and Corinth, Paul also expounds the theme of reconciliation through the death of Christ.

Romans 5:10

For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life.

2 Corinthians

17So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! 18All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; 19that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. 20So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. 21For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

Jesus was able to declare “It is finished” because His death was literally the final means whereby a sinful human being could be reconciled to a holy God, because through the atonement of the shedding of His blood, sins could be forgiven and God could accredit the righteousness of Christ to all who believed in this redeeming work.

And because of that, one more thing was finished. The final and most amazing work that was finished on the cross was the defeat of the source of sin which from the Fall resulted in both physical and spiritual death. The writer to the Hebrews attributes this achievement to the cross.

...so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death – that is, the devil Hebrews 2:10-18 v14

Both physical and spiritual death entered this world through Satan, hence removing the fear of physical death and the prevention of spiritual death would be the ultimate victory, not just over the sin which caused death, but over death itself and the one who instigated it in the first place. It would bring about the

...WE PROCLAIM CHRIST CRUCIFIED.... (I Cor. 1:23)

total annihilation of Satan's weapon of spiritual death which was the power to destroy the immortal soul of a human being. Hence the hymnist's words – "death of death and hell's destruction." In the words "It is finished" is Jesus' realisation that His death for the forgiveness of sins was a life-saving action. A view confirmed by the writer to the Hebrews 9:22 who points out that "

according to the law almost all things are purified with blood, and without shedding of blood there is no remission."

While every human being would still experience physical death, Jesus provided the means to avoid the spiritual death that would result in eternal separation from God. I found no better way to sum up this finished work than the words of Oswald Chambers

"The cross was a superb triumph in which the foundations of hell were put in a permanent state of shock which will result in their ultimate collapse."

When all these achievements are considered, and they have only been summarised in this talk, we can come to no other conclusion that Jesus' words "It is finished" are the words of a Victor, not a victim. We might also consider that had this been achieved by anyone other than Jesus, they would have acclaimed it as a personal triumph and this victory cry would have been their final words to the world. Yet, in spite of the magnitude of what He had achieved by His death, the words 'It is finished' is not a personal claim. Jesus refers only to the fact that the means ordained by God for the salvation of humanity had been completed. By implication, Jesus does not claim a personal victory, but expresses the satisfaction and even joy of the victory of God's plan being completed by His death.

And His final words would seem to bear this out for once again He refers to God as 'Father'. The relationship which had been maintained throughout His life once more came to the fore at the point of death. That one word 'Father' uttered by Jesus in His final moments, expresses, perhaps more than any other word could, His willing acceptance of the experience He was undergoing. It reveals the heartfelt union of His will with the will of the One who permitted Him to be put to death.

As I mentioned at the beginning, those who comment people's last words believe that they express the things that have been most important to a person throughout their lives. In other words, the things people live by are the things they die by. In once again turning to the Father, Jesus showed that what was supremely important in His life had been that Father-Son relationship. The agony of the Son of Man which we looked at last week was the temporary interruption of that union. But, in once again turning to the Father, Jesus was

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showing the confidence that God would answer the prayer expressed in John 17:5

And now, Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world began.

Jesus had predicted His resurrection. The resurrection in terms of the Father-Son relationship was the direct, affirmative answer to Jesus prayer. And because Jesus knew He was praying in the Father's will, He could leave outcome of His life and death in God's hands. By using the words of Psalm 31:5 **Into your hand I commit my spirit;** Jesus takes us back to what He had based His life and ministry on – the Scriptures. Scholars believe that Jews meditated on Psalm 31 before going to sleep, as a means of praying for God's protection of their souls during the hours of darkness, when sleep would make them vulnerable to the powers of evil. Now as Jesus faces the darkness of death and burial, His thoughts turn to this text. It is a measure of how Jesus had internalised the Word of God, that He was able at such a traumatic moment to find the right word for His situation and condition. The words also endorse the fact that Jesus' commitment to the Father during His lifetime, led to this commitment of His spirit to the Father in death. Jesus truly died as He had lived. His final words showed He truly believed

**The eternal God is your refuge and underneath are the everlasting arms
Deuteronomy 33:27**

All of what we have covered over these past few weeks, show us just a glimpse of why ...We proclaim Christ crucified.... came to be the be all and end all of Paul's gospel. In putting the cross in the forefront of his preaching and teaching, Paul puts the emphasis where Jesus Himself had placed it at the Last Supper. As David mentioned, we are given no instructions regarding the celebration of Jesus' birth, but the Church is called to remember the Lord's death till He comes. The centrality of Communion in the life of the Church 2000 years later is evidence that the crucifixion of Jesus was the most significant and enduring event in this fourth Day of the Lord in which we are still living. Every time we celebrate Communion, like Paul, we are proclaiming 'Christ crucified.'

And if we have accepted all that is involved in Christ's atoning sacrifice on Calvary, we too can meet the end of our life's journey with the same confidence and assurance that Jesus displayed in death. Because of His finished work on the cross that led to His resurrection to eternal life, we too will have the comfort of being able to commend our spirits to God's eternal care knowing that death is only the beginning of a glorious, eternal existence

1 Corinthians 15:53-57

...this perishable body must put on imperishability, and this mortal body must put on immortality. When this perishable body puts on imperishability, and this mortal body puts on immortality, then the saying that is written will be fulfilled:

“Death has been swallowed up in victory.” “Where, O death, is your victory?”

The sting of death is sin, But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

The victory that came via a cross