

# The Cross of Christ – ChristChurch 26<sup>th</sup> June 2011

## Introduction

What strikes me about the time between the Last Supper and the Ascension is no matter how often I read it, when I am willing to take the time to look at it; I see more of the grace of Jesus than I saw before. I don't have the ability to explain everything that happened in those few short but world changing days. So what I want to do now is look at five snapshots of things that happened in this time, the Confusion, the Cross, the Completion, the Curtain and the Commission. This is aimed at leading us to the feet of Jesus in worship, and I hope we will all love Jesus more when we re-examine the greatest event in history.

## The Confusion

Firstly, the Confusion. If I was making up a religion, I would have had a better account of myself than we see of the disciples in the Gospels. There is not one point where you look at the disciples and think they have a full understanding of what is going on. Now this changes in the book of Acts, but not here in the Gospels.

If we read their reactions at the Last Supper, their response in the Garden of Gethsemane, their rejection of Jesus in the courtyard, their retreat into private after the crucifixion, and their return to their old lives on the road to Emmaus, we don't see the actions of people who have an inside track into what is going on.

You can hear their perplexity about where Jesus is going, smell their fear as they run away, taste their bitterness as they reject Jesus, see their pain as they watch their teacher die and feel their confusion at shattered dreams of a new world order which has failed to materialise the way they expect.

Their senses have failed them. What they thought was going on when they followed Jesus has all of a sudden blown up in their faces. They don't have a notion what is going on. Messiah has come, but He has been killed. What's the deal with that? Where is the revolution overturning the Roman occupation? Where is the new, restored Kingdom of Israel? And what's this about Him claiming to be God? From Jesus giving them bread and wine and calling it flesh and blood until the surprise at the Resurrection, the disciples show their confusion about this world changing event.

So here's a word of warning for us who know the end of the story. Let us not grow so accustomed to the Crucifixion, Resurrection and Ascension that we lose the absolute amazement and worship that should be our response. The disciples were confused because this is the King, the best man to ever live, the God of the Universe dying for sinners. That is astoundingly unbelievably confusingly wonderful amazing grace.

## The Cross

One of the ways I think we have let the story of Jesus slip into our consciousness without fully realising the implications is in our discussion of the cross, which is our second snapshot. When we echo the command of Jesus to take up our cross daily, we look on it as taking a little more burden on ourselves. But can you imagine what the people at the time would have thought. People thought you were cursed if you hung on a tree, with reference to Deuteronomy 21:23 and then repeated by Paul in Galatians 3:13. The cross was a humiliating death, reserved for rebels and slaves and the worst criminals. CS Lewis comments on how the Cross didn't become a symbol in art until anyone who had witnessed the brutality of a real crucifixion had died. How did this symbol of death and curse become such a symbol of hope for the world?

Let me reiterate what went on at the cross. Anyone who has seen Mel Gibson's film the Passion of The Christ will have some idea of the gruesomeness of this form of execution. There would have been all sorts of bodily fluids pouring out of the Son of God. He was beaten and bloody, rejected and alone. His friends had deserted Him; He had been unfairly tried and then hung on a wooden cross, where each breath became a monumental effort of strength.

And the physical pain was nothing compared to the emotional and spiritual terror that Jesus was going through at that moment. God the Father had turned His back on Jesus the Son. The perfect unity of the Trinity was broken.

The oneness, the joy, the fellowship, the intimacy and the perfect love that Jesus had enjoyed from eternity past had been taken from Him, as He cried out, asking the Father why He had been forsaken.

He was being punished. He was experiencing hell, the complete removal of the goodness of God. He was in torment, but not because He had done anything wrong.

I ask again, why was this a Good Friday? How did the Cross, the symbol of death and of punishment become a symbol of life and mercy? A place where prisoners abandoned all hope has become a place where sinners cling to for more hope than is ever imaginable, all because of three words. It is finished.

### **The Completion**

You see the story of the Bible, the story of History, the stories of our individual journeys in life are all wound up in this moment. If it is finished, what was it? It is God's completed rescue mission to save mankind. From Genesis 3, the fall in the Garden of Eden, through the promise to Abraham, the law given to Moses, the Land given to the Israelites, the Kingdom of David and Solomon, the Exile and the Prophets, God has interacted with mankind at a distance because of sin. Yes, He has allowed sinful people to interact with Him through sacrifice, but it wasn't the norm. The sacrifice of animals was never enough to appease a perfectly holy God for our continued and wilful rejection of Him in every aspect of our lives. If it was, we could have continued with that system. The sacrifice of lambs and goats was only a pointer to The Sacrifice of The Lamb on Calvary. Just as God sent Abraham a ram to take the place of his son Isaac in Genesis 22, so God the Father sends The Lamb to take our place.

The cry of Jesus that it is finished shows that the rescue mission is complete. But what has been rescued, what are the results? We are saved from our sins; we are no longer under the threat of hell if we trust in Jesus for the forgiveness of sins. If that was all that was achieved at Calvary, that would still have been the most amazing day in history, our punishment would have been paid, and we could have walked away scot free. But that is not all that happened at Calvary, as the fourth C, the Curtain, shows.

### **The Curtain**

Let me read a portion of King's Cross, by Timothy Keller.

*This is why Jesus had to go to the cross. He fell into the complete darkness for which we were headed. He died the death we should have died, so that we can be saved from this judgement ... And how do we know it worked? Back to Mark:*

*When some of those standing near heard this, they said, 'Listen, he's calling Elijah.' One man ran, filled a sponge with wine vinegar, put it on a stick, and offered it to Jesus to drink. 'Now leave him alone. Let's see if Elijah comes to take him down,' he said. With a loud cry, Jesus breathed his last. The curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. And when the Centurion, who stood there in front of Jesus, heard his cry, and saw how he died, he said, 'Surely this man was the Son of God!'*  
*Mark 15:35-39*

*Remember that the curtain in the temple was not a flimsy little veil; it was heavy and thick, almost as substantial as a wall. The curtain separated the holy of holies, where God's shekinah glory dwelled, from the rest of the temple – it separated the people from the presence of God. And remember, that only the holiest man, the high priest, from the holiest nation, the Jews, could enter the holy of holies – and only on the holiest day of the year, Yom Kippur, and he had to bring a blood sacrifice, an atonement for sins. The curtain said loudly and clearly that it is impossible for anyone sinful – anyone in spiritual darkness – to come into God's presence.*

*At the moment Jesus Christ died, this massive curtain was ripped open. The tear was from top to bottom, just to make clear who did it. This was God's way of saying "This is the sacrifice to end all sacrifices, the way is now open to approach me." Now that Jesus has died, anybody who believes in him can see God, connect to God. The barrier is gone for good.*

Keller goes on to explain that to prove his point, Mark shows us the first person to go in is a Roman Centurion, who is the first person in Mark's gospel to recognise Jesus as God. Because we are so used to rushing off little prayers, we overlook the immensity of the fact that the way to God is open. We are allowed enter the throne room of the King of Kings. And we are allowed call Him Daddy. We are not only given the mercy of forgiven sins, we are lavished with the grace of entering God's family.

The goal of the rescue plan was not sins forgiven. Let me repeat that. The goal of the rescue plan was not sins forgiven. The rescue plan includes forgiven sins so that we could reach the much greater goal of relationship with the one true God and could experience the fellowship and unity and perfect love of the Trinity.

If this doesn't lift your heart and make you want to sing, you need to ask yourself if you really have experienced the work of Jesus in your life. Dirty, selfish, arrogant sinners like me get clothed with robes of righteousness and invited to the greatest feast the world will ever see, the wedding feast of the Lamb and His bride the church. It's almost enough to make you get up and dance, but then we remember we are mostly British and Irish white people, who don't do dancing.

### **The Commission**

In closing, the Commission. The story of the Bible can be put like this, by Philip Yancy,

*The Bible from Genesis 3 to Revelation 22 tells the story of a God reckless with desire to get His family back. God struck the decisive blow of reconciliation when He sent the Son on the long journey to planet earth. The Bible's last scene ends in jubilation, the family united once again.*

And it is very easy for us as Christians to look forward to that party, the wedding. But if that is all we do, we miss the next part of God's plan. You see, while we had nothing to do in the rescue plan, God has decided that we will be the ones to pass the story on.

The last command of Jesus was this commission.

*All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.* *Matthew 28 18-20*

The story of God's rescue plan, which we have been looking at for this past few months and is really the theme of the whole Bible, is incredibly good news. But news is only news if it is told.

Do you want to be a convert, with a ticket to heaven to the party, or do you want to be a member of the family, a disciple, doing the Father's work to share the outrageous grace that we have received with a world that desperately needs it?

You have that choice every day. There is no obligation to do it; God has lavished His grace on us through Jesus, so that belief in Jesus is all it takes to be saved. But if you truly see what Jesus did on the cross, if you see the depths of your own sin and rebellion against God, the punishment that should have been yours placed onto Jesus, and see the heights of joy that you can have as a forgiven new creation, an adopted child, a co-heir with Christ, a co-worker in the Gospel, I don't believe you can sit and be silent.

If we are silent, the rocks will cry out, because what happened on Calvary is earth shattering, more than that, it is earth restoring.

The story of the Bible and the story of History led Jesus to choose the cross. He died, rose again, and is sitting in heaven now, working on our behalf to bring men and women, boys and girls, just like us, to the place where we can see that it is finished, that Jesus saves, that God is love and that His Spirit lives in us.

And that is why it was a Good Friday. Let's pray.