



What Christians Believe

The Apostles Creed

(6) I Believe in the cross of Jesus Christ

Mark 15:21-39

June 7th 2020

Introduction - confusion about the cross

Some time ago I was watching the English Panel Show “Would I lie to you?” Contestants read out an unlikely statement about themselves, and the opposite team has to work out if the statement is true or false. On this particular episode, a contestant said that all of his life, until quite recently, he had believed that “sheep” and “lambs” were two different species of animal that farmers kept in the same field!

Well you can imagine the jokes that followed—did he not notice that they looked similar; did he not notice that the “lamb” species only showed up at one time of the year and so on! But the statement was true—all of his life he had indeed believed that Sheep and Lambs were two different kinds of animal! That’s a trivial example of how our minds can be genuinely confused for years and years.

A far more serious confusion takes place in the minds of people all over the world, concerning the cross of Jesus Christ: What is the meaning of the cross? Is it just a convenient shape for a necklace or ear rings? Is it a moral lesson on how to handle violent opposition—just absorb it and don’t fight back?

We know that the cross must be important, because almost every church logo has a cross on it, including our own, but what is the meaning of the cross of Jesus Christ?

On Sunday mornings we are making our way through a wonderful, short summary of the Christian faith called “The Apostles’ Creed.” And today we have come to these words about the cross of Jesus Christ:

Jesus suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried.

And it is our prayer that God will help us to clear away any confusion and come to a clearer understanding of what the Cross of Jesus Christ means, and why it lies at the very heart of Christian faith.

Let's begin with the terrible event itself....

(1) The Cross of Jesus Christ

In 2004 Mel Gibson came out with the film "The Passion of the Christ" which graphically depicts the reality of Roman Crucifixion. This is what happened on that terrible day...

Right from the start of Jesus' short three year ministry of preaching and doing good, the religious leaders were jealous of his popularity. People flocked to Jesus because he loved the outsider, spoke very simply, and didn't buy into their petty religious rules. As early as Mark chapter 3: we read: *"The Pharisees went out and began to plot with the Herodians how they might kill Jesus"* (v.6)

Under Roman rule, the religious leaders had no authority to put someone to death, so they had to make him out to be a rebel against the Roman Empire. And so... after plotting for 3 years, the religious leaders together with Pontius Pilate sentenced Jesus to death by crucifixion.

First he was scourged with a Roman whip laced pieces of bone or metal. Roman soldiers beat him mocked this "king" with a crown of thorns and a robe of purple. He was ordered to carry his own cross, but since he was too wounded, someone carried it for him outside the city. And there, at approximately 9:00 am on Good Friday Jesus was crucified between two criminals.

"Though he possessed the highest honour" someone put it, "he now embraced the worst disgrace."

Crucifixion was designed to be the most painful death imaginable, and it could last for days. (No-one who witnessed a real crucifixion, by the way, ever thought of making a piece of jewellery in the shape of a cross.)

Six hours after Jesus was crucified, at around 3:00 pm, Jesus said "It is finished" and committed his spirit into God's hands. His dead body was then taken from the cross and placed in a guarded tomb, where it remained until early Sunday morning, when he rose triumphantly from the dead—we'll reflect on that amazing event next Sunday, God-willing.

This crucifixion, this terrible event, is at the very centre of Christianity! We know that because of the space all four Gospels, Matthew Mark Luke and John, give it: around 20% of the four Gospels, are dedicated to Jesus' death.

When you read the lives of other great men and women of history, their biographers pass over their deaths with just a short sentence or two, “the fatal heart attack came on 6th June.” says the biographer of Carl Jung. “Dirac’s heart failed and stopped beating at five minutes before eleven,” writes the author of Paul Dirac, famous physicist’s death. Authors are almost embarrassed to record the death of their subjects!

But when the biographers of Jesus’ life take up their pens, they write paragraph after paragraph about the suffering and trial and death of Jesus Christ!

And we know that the death of Jesus is at the very centre of Christianity for a second reason: The rest of the New Testament writers tell us that Jesus’ death is, along with his resurrection, the most significant event in his life.

Paul who went around planting new churches, for example, once reminded one of them in a letter *“I resolved (I determined) to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified” (1 Cor 2:2) “When I came to your city to preach the Good News of Jesus, I only preached the cross of Jesus Christ.”*

So why is the cross the centre of Christianity?

(2) The (main) meaning of the cross

Well, it’s very simple: the Bible teaches that through the death of Jesus Christ, you and I can be reconciled with God. That is the main meaning of the cross of Jesus, the main purpose of his death. *We were “reconciled to God through the death of his Son” (Romans 5:10)* Through the suffering and death of Jesus Christ, we were reconciled with God. Are there more meanings behind the cross of Jesus Christ? Yes there are, but this is the main meaning.

Just as a diamond has *one main face* and many lesser faces, so the cross of Jesus Christ has *one main purpose—to reconcile God and man—* but also teaches us many things,- for example *it does* teach us how to deal with injustice by absorbing it, not by retaliating.

The animal sacrifices in the OT help us to understand this main face, this main teaching, of the cross. When an Old Testament believer broke one of God’s commands and felt out of sorts with God, he or she took an animal, perhaps a sheep, to the temple. At the temple they would lay their hand on the head of the sheep, identifying with it, and then the animal would be killed. The meaning was this: “I deserve to be punished for the wrong I have done, but this lamb is being punished in my place so that I can be forgiven and go free.” Those animal sacrifices were signposts to the sacrifice Jesus made for us on the cross: Jesus is *“the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” (John 1:29)* And this is the main meaning of the

cross.

Now I must tell you sadly, that some people are embarrassed by the cross today. There's nothing new about that. In the days of the New Testament, Jews found the message of a crucified messiah weak, and clever boffin Greeks found it unsophisticated. So nothing has changed. A few years ago, I heard about a church gathering where someone had chosen that wonderful new hymn, "In Christ Alone, my hope is found" but the local bishop was offended by the line "*Till on the cross as Jesus died, the wrath of God was satisfied*" and asked for the line to be changed. He was embarrassed by all this "bloody cross religion."

We must say that the mark true churches and authentic leaders is they preach that Jesus death "*is the atoning sacrifice for our sins..*" (1 John 2:2).

Let no true believer be embarrassed by this wonderful line of the creed: *Jesus suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried.*

(3) The Truth Applied

(1) The Cross Tells us what we are like

This isn't easy to hear, but the depths of Jesus' suffering reveals the height of our wickedness, in thought, word and deed. "*There is no-one righteous, no not one...all have turned away.. There is no-one who does good...*" is the verdict of the Bible in Romans chapter 3.

Paul invites us to consider just our sinful words. Should someone record your words or my words over our lifetime—or much less! - this is what the ugly transcript would look like. Are you ready to hear it?

their throats are open graves...

their tongues practise deceit..

their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness... (Romans 3)

And then add to that our evil thoughts, our evil actions. So great is our wrongdoing, that it took the death of the sinless Jesus Christ, God's Son, to pay for them in full.

(2) The cross of Jesus Christ tells us what God is like

The cross of Jesus Christ reveals how **holy and just** God is. God, the supreme Judge over all, cannot overlook or disregard our wrong thoughts or words or deeds. "*Your eyes are too pure to look on evil; you cannot tolerate wrongdoing.*" (Habakkuk 1:13) "*For I, the Lord, love justice,*" (Isiah 51:8)

If God allowed even one human wrongdoing to go unpunished he would like a corrupt earthly judge who just let guilty people go free. God must punish all wrongdoing, for he is holy and Just, and the cross tells us that.

But the cross tells us even more so, that **God is filled with mercy**. After the Judge of the Universe passed the sentence of hell, he stepped down from his Judgement throne, because he loved us, and took the punishment in our place, so that we can be forgiven and set free! *“This is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning Sacrifice for our sins.” (1 John 4:9)*

Jesus was not forced to suffer for us, he died because he loved us: *“I am the Good Shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep” (John 10:14)* “It was not the nails that held Jesus to the cross”, someone has said, “it was his great love for you and for me.”

(3) The Cross of Jesus Christ tells us what it means to follow Jesus Christ

One day Jesus said the most astounding words to his followers: *“Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” (Matthew 16:24)* I don’t have time to unpack this thought today, except to say that if you want to follow Jesus it will cost you everything! But if it costs everything to know and follow Jesus, it’s because he is worth more than anything in the world.

But as I close, this talk, I want to urge all our listeners, whoever you are to be reconciled to God. If you will believe that Jesus Christ is God’s Son, if you will believe that he suffered for your sins, then you will be among those who are reconciled to God through the death of Jesus Christ.

And you will be able to sing with joy the second verse of our closing hymn with great joy:

*And when I think that God, his Son not sparing,
Sent him to die, I scarce can take it in,
That on the cross, my burden gladly bearing,
He bled and died to take away my sin.*