

SERMON: 10 February 2019 – Rev Alistair Cowper

“Why did Jesus die?”

(Luke 5:1-11 and 1 Corinthians 15:1-11)

**[SLIDE] ‘Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!’
(Luke 5:8)**

Clearly there is a need to have our ‘sins’ dealt with.

**[SLIDE] Christ died for (on behalf of) our sins
(1 Corinthians 15:3)**

But look at how Jesus responds to Simon Peter’s self declaration of his sinfulness?

He doesn’t say, “you’re right, you need to do something about that sin of yours. It’s dragging you down. I can’t come near you because of it. You’re not able to be part of my kingdom because of your sin. You can’t be in the group until that’s dealt with”.

He doesn’t say any of that. Here’s what he says.

[SLIDE] Then Jesus said to Simon, ‘Don’t be afraid; from now on you will fish for people.’ So they pulled their boats up on shore, left everything and followed him.

I think we need to think about this seriously and take on board Jesus’ way of being with ‘sinners’ and telling them not to be afraid but to come and join this new movement of grace and love that Jesus is now leading.

**[SLIDE] Why did Jesus die?
(Alpha Week 3)**

Here are some of the things we thought about this week in answer to this huge question.

[SLIDE] Jesus died because

- **of his refusal to be violent**
- **he was anti religious establishment (and empire)**
- **It wasn’t just because he loved me he was dramatising what love and nonviolence look like.**
- **To show what it means to be fully human.**
- **To show us life after death.**

[SLIDE] Jesus died because

- It was the greatest love he could give for his friends

Jesus died...

- (as humanity's representative) To break humanity's addiction to self (and wrong)
- So as to set humanity free to love

However, there has been one dominating theory of why Jesus died which has been around since the Middle Ages.

Penal substitutionary atonement - based on concept of 'original sin' - has led to a limited and punitive understanding of Christ and the cross.

Are only the last three hours of Jesus life all this is needed for salvation?

It wrongly assumes some degree of violent retribution is necessary to bring justice and so gives us the wrong impression of God.

It makes the cross a [SLIDE] "*one-time transactional* affair between Jesus and his Father, instead of an ongoing *transformational lesson* for the human soul and for all of history" (Richard Rohr).

We can see the problem even in some modern worship hymns:

[SLIDE] In Christ alone?

[SLIDE] How deep the Father's love for us?

And in some of our translations of the Scriptures:

[SLIDE] Romans 3:25 For God sent Jesus to take the punishment for our sins (NLT 1996)

For God presented Jesus as the sacrifice for sin (NLT 2015)

Leviticus 16:16 - *kipper* - to make atonement for, to cover, to pacify

[SLIDE] "(The death of Christ) is not the remission of a penalty: it is the restoration of a relationship".

J.S.Stewart *A Faith to Proclaim*

We can see here an understanding of atonement as being at-one-ment. In other words, Jesus death is true atonement, which is the bringing together of God and humanity.

Again, it's not about punishment. The God figure in William Young's book, *The Shack* puts it like this:

[SLIDE] "I don't need to punish people for sin. Sin is its own punishment, devouring you from the inside. It's not my purpose to punish it; it's my joy to cure it".

William Paul Young *The Shack*

The right understanding of the cross is to see Jesus' death as a revelation of infinite love of God not payment that is demanded by God in order to make things right.

Words like retribution, punishment, ransom, sacrifice, and paying the price are not that helpful in our understanding of why Jesus died.

But its hard to read that Christ died for our sins and not resort to words like ransom or payment or punishment.

Yet its possible. We CAN have a more healthy biblical understanding of why Jesus died when we prefer words like restoration, rehabilitation, and healing.

[SLIDE] "The cross is not the price that Jesus had to pay to convince God to love us. It is simply where love will lead us.

Jesus names the agenda: If we love, if we give ourselves to feel the pain of the world, it will crucify us. (This understanding of the crucifixion is much better than thinking of Jesus as paying some debt to an alienated God who needs to be appeased into loving us."

Richard Rohr *The Third Way*

And it's this preparedness to lay down ones life which has marked out the lives of those who have sought to follow the way of Jesus these last two thousand years. From the martyrdom of Stephen to the present day.

[SLIDE] Imitatio Christi - Janani Luwum couldn't stand by whilst the brutal regime of Idi Amin terrorised Uganda in the 1970's. He gathered together Christians and Muslims to condemn the regime and was beaten, tortured and killed by it. "They are going to kill me. I am not afraid" he told his friends. He is remembered in a statue at Westminster Abbey unveiled in 1998.

[SLIDE] Maximillian Kolbe who volunteered to die in place of a stranger and at Auschwitz in 1941. He and 9 others spent two weeks confined in a hole in the ground where Kolbe led them all in prayer every day. At the end of the two weeks only he was still alive and so he was given a lethal injection because the Nazis needed the bunker for the next lot of prisoners.

What is it that causes followers of Jesus to live and die like Jesus?

What is it that causes people to be prepared to take the place of another when the other is suffering? Think of the parent of a sick child. In normal cases, the parent would willingly take the place of their child if it meant they could take the pain away.

The same would happen in a marriage. If a husband learns his wife has cancer he would willingly take her place and go through it for her.

Those who are prepared to do that could be seen as a substitute, because they take another's place, like Jesus is seen as the substitute or the representative, who did it for you and me.

So we might agree that there is a substitutionary element to the death of Jesus.

We may never have to literally lay down our lives for our friends in the way Jesus has, or other martyrs have. But on a spiritual level, death and resurrection are part and parcel of what it means to follow the Way of Christ, in the new creation.

Death and resurrection is what Jesus meant when he said you must take up your cross and follow me. They are what marks out the Way of Jesus.

So, we might say that another reason Jesus died was to demonstrate, to reveal, and to bring into effect, that death and resurrection is at work in us.

That's what it means when the New Testament says, it's Christ at work in us (Colossians 1:29).

Life, in all its fullness, is constant death and resurrection at every moment. We are learning to die to our false self in order to be raised up to our true self. That's the evolving, expanding, ongoing work of the Spirit of Christ inside us.

It's "self on the cross and Christ upon the throne".

**[SLIDE] Lord for ourselves; in living power remake us -
self on the cross and Christ upon the throne,
past put behind us, for the future take us:
Lord of our lives, to live for Christ alone
(Timothy Dudley-Smith)**

Another way to say that is, we put to death the passions and desires lurking within, we crucify them (Galatians 5:24-5).

Our readings today tell us that sin is a problem which needs to be dealt with and that Christ on the cross has dealt with it.

Because if sin is not dealt, then people living with sin 'miss the mark' (*hamartia*) of what it means to be human. We miss the mark of what it means to reflect God's image in the world. Because sin stains the image of God, it needs to be dealt with. It can't be ignored.

The death of Jesus releases the grip that sin has on humanity. Human beings play their part by being led by the Risen Jesus, the Spirit of Christ - who leads us in cycles of death and resurrection - who helps us to say no to the things we know to be wrong - and who guides us to better ways of living.

As Paul puts it in Romans 3, we're made right by believing that Jesus Christ has taken away our sins by his death on the cross, just like the scapegoat was sent out into the wilderness carrying the sin's of the people of Israel after the exodus (Leviticus 16).

Jesus takes away our addiction to sinning and points our love in a new direction.

[Video clip - Darrell Tunnigley's Story]

We'll finish by thinking of one last reason Jesus died. Jesus died because self-surrendering and self-emptying love, is who God is. And if we're made in God's image, it's who we are too.

There's a verse in [SLIDE] Revelation 3:18 which talks of Jesus as being the lamb that was slain from the foundation of the earth.

(SLIDE) C S Lewis called it the Deeper Magic from Before the Dawn of Time, which cracked the Stone Table of Death and raised Aslan to life, so that he could work death backwards and breathe creation into life.

Love is the deeper magic. And it was because of his love for people like you and me that Jesus died.

The cross and empty tomb show us that evil will not have the last word. Evil has been defeated and transfigured by the love of Christ, who, in the fullness of time, will unite all things together.

[SLIDE] *My paraphrase of Ephesians 1:10* - God's plan for the fullness of time is to bring all things together in Christ

Until then, may we, on a daily basis, take up our cross and follow the way of Jesus.