

The Death of Jesus

The Why, When, How, Who and What of Salvation – in under 15 minutes (we hope)

Isaiah 53:3-10

1 Cor 1:18-25

Mark 15:25-39

In the love of the Creator
In the light of Christ
In the leading of the Spirit
We place ourselves now.
Amen.

For us and for our salvation he came down from heaven...
For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate;
he suffered death and was buried.

Why?

In the beginning God created... – and I guess we all know the story of the garden of Eden, where God placed the man and woman he had made to live and work with him in perfect harmony. And they lived in the power of God's love.

Yet, God, being God, knew that love is only really love if it's mutual. If it's freely given. So God gave Adam and Eve the power of choice – to do what God said, and avoid the fruit of a certain tree. Or to choose to go against what God said, and to exercise their power to do what they wanted.

And of course, we know what they chose – the love of their own power, over the power of God's love. And, as we also know, from multiple metaphors involving cats and bags or toothpaste and tubes – once innocence is lost, there is no going back. In *seeking* power for themselves, Adam & Eve became powerless to go back to the state where they were living in trusting harmony with God. Instead, evil gained a foothold, and shame and sin and death entered the world. And the relationship with God was shattered into pieces.

Yet wonderfully, amazingly, God didn't give up on his creation. He found Abraham and Sarah, and blessed them, and made a covenant – a sacred promise – that they would have a family who would become a great nation who would be God's own people. And then came Moses and the escape from slavery in Egypt; the 10 commandments – and another covenant, that the people of Israelites would live in God's way in the Promised Land.

But time after time the people didn't live in God's way, and despite the warnings of the prophets, they persisted in making bad choices. Until eventually they were defeated, and taken into exile.

And there – where everything had come crashing down and they realised how much they really needed God – the prophets began to speak of a new covenant – a new sacred promise - between God and humanity. One where things would be fully set right. Someone who would come from God to make things right again. A Messiah.

So that's the why. Humanity screwed up and couldn't restore the relationship between us and God. Only God himself could do that.

And he chooses to do it in the person of Jesus – the Son, the 'the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being'¹, the Messiah, the Christ.

“for us and for our salvation he came down from heaven”

Which leads us to the

When?

The Creed makes it super-clear that Jesus is very much part of human history. “He suffered under Pontius Pilate” – Governor of the Roman Province of Judaea from 26-36AD.

And in the immediacy of the story, the death of Jesus happened *when* the religious elite felt threatened by him, Judas chose (for whatever reason) to betray him, and the ordinary people turned against him.

Oppression. Fear. Greed. Manipulation. Rabble-rousing. Injustice. “Looking out for Number One.” Extreme brutality and violence. Humanity at its worst.

When all these came together Jesus “suffered death and was buried.”

But how does this change things?

How?

So – this is a very big question. And we're definitely not going to get to the bottom of it in one sermon. Or even this side of eternity.

This morning's Gospel reading reminds us that the overall effect of Jesus death was the restoration of the relationship between God and all that he has made

¹ Hebrews 1:3

... that's what tearing of the Temple curtain was all about – this curtain separated the part of the Temple which humans could enter, and the part where God lived. When it was torn in two there was no longer any barrier between God and us...

So God and his creation are once more “at one”. (And you may have heard Jesus' death being referred to as the atonement...)

But quite how that happened – even the Creed doesn't tell us.

So let me invite you to consider a cut diamond. The hardest substance we know of, and yet a thing of great beauty, as the light catches the different facets of the stone and reflects and shines and sparkles.

Each of those facets is complete in itself – yet all are needed to produce the whole.

Our human understanding of the Cross is a bit like that.

The death of Jesus on the cross is so complex and multi-faceted, that we have many different 'theories' – each complete in itself – and yet part of the whole. All found in the Bible, and many referred to in our worship, in our hymns and songs.

So there's a whole set of theories based around a suffering and sacrifice type of theme, particularly on the flowing of the life-blood of Jesus

You probably know that Israelite worship was based on animal sacrifice – for forgiveness of sins, amongst other things.

The Passover featured the sacrifice of a lamb – as a sign of being set free from slavery and oppression in Egypt. So we can see the death of Jesus in similar terms – setting us free from the oppression of sin and death.

Covenants – sacred promises – were marked by the shedding of blood. Jesus is seen as being the seal of the New Covenant between God and all that he has made.

And we see many of these understandings being enacted at the Last Supper, and in the Eucharist service.

There's another set of theories based around the idea of a courtroom.

Humanity has sinned / broken God's law / been disobedient, and so we owe something to God to make up for it. But we have nothing to offer as we've messed it all up. So Jesus makes the repayment for us.

Or in another version of this – we deserve to be punished, but Jesus steps forward and takes the punishment in our place.

“There was no other good enough to pay the price of sin” as we sing in “There is a green hill far away.” “He was crushed for our iniquities” as we heard in the OT reading.

And another set of theories about the battle between good and evil.

The idea that Jesus’ death paid a ransom to evil to buy us back.

The theory that, on the cross, Jesus absorbed all the hatred and violence and destruction that evil could throw at him, and the love of power was defeated by the power of love.

And the concept that though humanity was powerless to set right the bad choice in the Garden of Eden – the choice to go our way rather than God’s way - God, in Jesus - fully divine and fully human - came and did it on our behalf. That in the Garden of Gethsemane Jesus made the choice to do what was right in God’s eyes, rather than what he wanted to do.

“Yet not what I want, but what you want,” he said².

Many different theories – yet all part of the whole

Jesus fulfils the requirements of the Law

Evil is defeated

God demonstrates the unimaginable extent of his love for us

The death of Jesus puts us right with God

And whilst we might think it would be lovely to have one simple answer, in practice, the multi-faceted nature of all this can be really helpful.

For our lives are not simple. Our needs and our failures are wide-ranging. And at different times in our lives, and in different circumstances we face, the different aspects of Jesus’ death can bring us reassurance and hope whatever we are facing.

That’s lots of “how” – let’s move on to the....

Who?

We’re getting to the end now, and if you’ve got lost in all those theories – don’t worry, because this is the most important bit.

This restoration of the relationship between God and humanity (and indeed all of creation) is all about God. We absolutely cannot earn it. No amount of ‘good works’ that

² Matthew 26:39

human beings might do can deal with the brokenness of our relationship with God. It all comes from God's goodness. God's generosity. God's overflowing love for all that he has made.

In Christian words we call it "grace".

As St Paul writes "by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God..."³

It is God's overwhelming gift to us – to all of us - if only we will accept it.

Once again – we are offered a choice...

What next?

Well, what next is up to us. Do we accept this gift?

Some of us will have accepted it many years ago. Others maybe have heard of it for the first time. Some maybe are still pondering. If you have questions – please ask. We love to talk!

But please don't push it to the back of your mind until later, or put it into the "too hard box", or go away and forget about it.

For it is the most beautiful gift we can ever receive. Diamonds, after all, are forever.

³ Ephesians 2:8