

**Sunday 14<sup>th</sup> July**  
**Creed sermon 6**  
**The death of Jesus**

**Isaiah 53:3-10**  
**1 Corinthians 1:18-25**  
**Mark 15:25-39**

We continue our sermon series on the Nicene Creed this morning – over the summer we are looking at aspects of the creed and what it says about our faith. But as we look at what it does say, its also interesting to note that there are plenty of things about the Christian faith about which the creed says nothing at all, or precious little.

For example, the creed says virtually nothing about the life and ministry of Jesus. It tells us he was born, and that he suffered and died but nothing in between. Nothing about his teaching, his miracles, his life of love and compassion. Nothing about the influence he was on his followers, nothing about the way he stood up against the religious authorities, nothing about his character. All of which are vital to the way we live our lives as we seek to follow his example.

The creed also says virtually nothing about what his death achieved – something that Christians down the ages have long debated. It tells us “for us and for our salvation he came down from heaven” and “for our sake he was crucified”, but it doesn’t even begin to explain what salvation is and how it has been obtained through Jesus’s death. Which makes looking at todays section of the creed quite interesting!

Why is this? Why does the creed leave out these vital areas of Christian belief?

The creed, as we have heard earlier in this series, was written and agreed to refute heresies that were beginning to develop. It was written and agreed to settle arguments, such as those around the divinity of Christ and the distinction between the three persons of the trinity and other things central to the nature of God. Either there was little dispute about the things not included, or the early church fathers felt that a difference of views on those things was not material to our faith or the unity of the church.

Over the centuries scholars have debated over what salvation actually is and how it is achieved – basically what the death of Jesus actually accomplishes. There are numerous theories of what is known as the atonement. Atonement is the concept of a person taking action to correct previous wrongdoing on their part or someone else’s part – so in the context of our relationship with God, atonement is about us being put right with God, making amends to restore a relationship that has been fractured by our wrongdoing (and the wrongdoing of the human race). Each of these theories can be argued form scripture. Perhaps that is the issue – the atonement is much bigger and more complex than human words or understanding can handle. Each theory gives us a different perspective as we seek to see the whole meaning.

So, after that rather long preamble, lets have a look at what the creed does actually say.

Before we get on to the atonement question, there are two very down to earth things that we read in the creed.

The first is “He suffered death and was buried”.

He was definitely dead. Maybe there were some who were saying that the resurrection could only have happened if he hadn't been dead in the first place. Maybe there were voices which said he had lost consciousness on the cross; the soldiers thought he was dead. He was placed in a tomb, and while in the cool of the tomb he came round. He didn't die, so the resurrection was mere resuscitation.

But the creed makes it quite clear – Jesus died and was buried. Therefore the resurrection was resurrection

The second thing the creed says about his death is that he was crucified under Pontius Pilate. It tells the manner of his death and the historical setting.

I sometimes feel a bit sorry for Pontius Pilate. Every Sunday across the world millions of people recite his name “he was crucified under Pontius Pilate”. Why do we need his name here? What difference does it make? Why can't the creed just say “he was crucified, dead and buried.”

The only reason I can make any sense of is that it places Jesus' death in history. Pontius Pilate was an historical figure – a Roman Governor written about in secular historical accounts. Jesus lived and died at a time and place in history. He too was an historical figure. The creed leaves us in no doubt of that fact.

Which leads us to the question of what Jesus' death was all about. What did it achieve? What is meant by “for our sake” and “for us and for our salvation”.

Lets has a very quick look at some of the different views that are held.

Some focus on the death of Jesus as being a punishment where the anger, the wrath if you like, of God is appeased. Jesus taking the punishment which is due to all people because of their sin. There are hints at this in Paul's letters to the Galatians and 2 Corinthians – “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us”. The OT reading from Isaiah that we had this morning can be interpreted in this way.

Others take a similar view but look at the justice of God being satisfied, rather than anger appeased. Justice says someone must die because of sin and Jesus takes that sentence on himself for us. Scriptural basis for this can be found in Hebrews “For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are sanctified”. Here Jesus offers himself to the Father; in the previous theory the Father's anger is poured out on him.

Some talk of a ransom payment to the devil to release the souls of sinful humanity; the life of Jesus being the ransom. Colossians we read “He disarmed the rulers and authorities, triumphing over them”

Other focus on the perfect life of Jesus and on the victory over death that his life and sacrifice achieved. A variation is that his life itself was an example and inspiration to others. Humanity has

been condemned because of sin – right from Adam - and the perfect life of Jesus and his offering of himself undoes all this. Both Romans and 1 Corinthians back this up “just as one man’s trespass led to condemnation for all, so one man’s act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all”

Another looks at Jesus’ death in comparison to the scapegoats of the OT, where the sins of the people are laid onto a goat (a scapegoat) who is sent off into the wilderness to die – Jesus here becoming a victim rather than a sacrifice, enduring separation from God as he takes the sin of the world

So theories are many (and not limited to these) and all contain something of the truth which is too vast for us to fully comprehend. Each theory gives us a different perspective on what Jesus has done, but none can explain it in full. Its interesting to see how each can be backed up from scripture, often from the writings of Paul. Maybe those words in our NT reading this morning sum things up quite well. The message might seem like folly to human ears as we cannot grasp its full truth, but it is God’s wisdom as he reconciles us to him.

But whatever we might understand or seek to understand, the words Jesus spoke from the cross ‘it is finished’ show us that he knew that what he had come to achieve was completed. He had seen the task through. He had been faithful to the end and he knew that the end had been reached. That through his death everyone could be put right with God. In a sense we could say that the centurion’s words “truly this man was God’s son” echoed this.

Whereas the Old Testament talks of a covenant between God and humanity based on law and obedience – a law to be lived and followed to earn one’s way to God - by his death Jesus has ushered in a new covenant based on grace. Something he has done can make a difference to us. At no cost to us – we merely have to accept.

So in the creed as we say the words “for our sake” we remember this truth – that through what Jesus did on the cross and the grace of God we have the opportunity to be reconciled to him. The death of Jesus – an historical event – has changed the world.

And next week as we consider the resurrection we will begin to see what difference that change means to our lives. The cross talks about what we are saved from; when we look at the resurrection we will think about what we are saved for.