

THE MISSION OF CHRIST

The Way of the Cross

Just over a month ago we were celebrating the birth of Christ and at the beginning of the New Year, at least in the Anglican church where I worship back home, we celebrated Epiphany - the revelation of Christ to the Gentiles represented by the Magi, more popularly known as the Wise Men. You'll notice I didn't say three Wise Men because the only place they're mentioned in the Bible - in chapter 2 of the gospel of Matthew - it doesn't say how many there were, although there were certainly at least three firstly because they brought three gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh and secondly because you wouldn't undertake a long journey in those times without a reasonable group of people. The Eastern church, especially the Syriac churches, believe there were at least twelve Magi or Wise Men.

So why is Christ so central to our faith - and he is central, after all it's called Christianity - and why do we still celebrate his birth over 2,000 years later and why did Magi from the East come to worship him? The answer lies in his mission and as we move out of the season of Epiphany and towards the season of Lent and Easter I want to talk about that mission today.

Jesus's mission was to die for the redemption of all mankind, to die to secure the forgiveness of all our sins, my sins and your sins. This mission was always God's plan for the redemption of mankind, a plan made before the Fall and foretold by the prophet Isaiah more than 500 hundred years before Christ's incarnation. Let me just read to you from Isaiah:

“Who has believed our message and to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed? He grew up before him like a tender shoot, and like a root out of dry ground. He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering. Like one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not. Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God,

smitten by him, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed. We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all. He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; he was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth. By oppression and judgment he was taken away. And who can speak of his descendants? For he was cut off from the land of the living; for the transgression of my people he was stricken. He was assigned a grave with the wicked, and with the rich in his death, though he had done no violence, nor was any deceit in his mouth. Yet it was the LORD's will to crush him and cause him to suffer, and though the LORD makes his life a guilt offering, he will see his offspring and prolong his days, and the will of the LORD will prosper in his hand." (Isaiah 53:1-10 NIV)

isn't that a wonderful prophecy of Christ's mission on earth?

Christ's mission was also indicated by many other things. One of the three gifts of the Magi that I just mentioned - myrrh - was traditionally used for anointing the dead and embalming, pointing us towards Christ's death on the cross. John the Baptist must have known of Christ's mission because he described him as God's sacrificial lamb, as John the Gospel writer tells us: "The next day John saw Jesus coming towards him and said, Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29 NIV)

This image of Christ as a sacrificial lamb is especially powerful because at the first Passover each Jewish household sacrificed a lamb to spare them from God's wrath and In Jesus's time lambs were sacrificed for sin each day in the temple as well as at the annual Passover festival. Also Jesus was born in Bethlehem, the main source of sacrificial lambs for the Jewish Temple and often these sacrificial lambs were wrapped in cloths by the shepherds to prevent them from

becoming sick and thus being disqualified as perfect sacrificial lambs. Jesus was wrapped in cloths by his mother as Luke tells us: “and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.” (Lu 2:7 NIV)

and the garment she used for this may well have been her death shroud - as every Jewish woman in those times carried this shroud with her when she went on a journey. I'm going to stop there for reasons of time, but the symbolism surrounding Jesus's birth which points us towards his mission is absolutely wonderful and incredible. The more I study it the more I turn to God in amazement and worship.

But, you know, the question people most frequently ask me is why was Christ's mission necessary? Why did Christ have to die for our sins? Why couldn't God just forgive us?

Well to answer that question I have to start by looking at a subject which isn't at all popular today, especially In Europe where I live, and that's SIN. Most people today, even most Christians, simply do not realise the seriousness of sin. In order to illustrate this, how many of God's Laws, no let's make it simpler, how many of the ten commandments do you think you have to keep to in order to be righteous before God. Lots of Christians will say you have to keep more than half, say six or seven out of ten, (incidentally that's exactly what Islam says about keeping God's laws, but that's a topic for another day). But, that's not what God says to us in the Bible he says you must keep them all. God's pass mark is not 60% or 70% or even 99% - its 100%. That's how seriously God regards sin. It's also why we could never achieve salvation by ourselves; we can't achieve 100%. God hates sin, is angered by it and refuses ever to come to terms with it. As it says in the book of Exodus chapter 20 and verse 5 “.. for I am the Lord your God, punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation ..”.

As I said, the seriousness of sin, even sin itself, are not acceptable topics in contemporary society. Popular authors have remarked on it.

Karl Menninger, an American psychiatrist has even written a book entitled *Whatever Became of Sin?* Does this mean, he says, that no sin is involved in our current troubles? He answers "No, indeed not". He concludes that the vast majority of the problems in our world today result from a failure to respect God's laws. Actually, the fact that we downplay the importance of sin is well illustrated by the fact that we have only one word for it. In the Greek of the New Testament, there are no less than five words for sin, both passive and active. The most common is *hamartia* which depicts sin as missing a target. *Adika* is unrighteousness or iniquity and *poneria* is a vicious degenerate kind of evil. Also we have *parabasis* a trespass or transgression and *anomia* which means lawlessness.

As I said, one of the things that non-Christians – and even some Christians – frequently say to me is "we understand that we have been sinful and that we need to be forgiven, but God is merciful and wants to forgive our sins so why couldn't he just forgive us. What was the need for Jesus to die a horrible death?" As the French cynic Heinrich Heine put it "the good God will forgive me, that's his speciality".

I must admit that at first sight the idea of Christ being sacrificed on the cross for our sins sounds like a primitive superstition which should have been discarded long ago. Indeed one famous Christian writer shockingly called it "the first case of cosmic child abuse". However, the more we look at Christ's death on the cross the more it makes sense, the more it becomes absolutely central. As Bishop Stephen Neill says "in the Christian view of history the death of Christ is the central point of history; here all the roads of the past converge; and here all the roads of the future diverge".

Those who express the view that God could simply forgive us are lacking a balanced view of the gravity of sin on the one hand and the majesty and nature of God on the other. God IS completely loving BUT he is also completely just and completely righteous and all these aspects of his nature are unchanging and unchangeable. Let me say that again, God's nature is immutable – unchanging, unchangeable and absolute. As the prophet Malachi says:

“I the LORD do not change.” (Malachi 3:6 NIV)

and as James says:

“Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows.” (James 1:17 NIV)

Yes, God is absolutely loving and wants to forgive us, but he is also absolutely just and couldn't simply forget about our sin. God acts in accordance with ALL of his attributes ALL of the time. The problem of forgiveness was not in the world, it was within God.

Sin is a rebellion against God's laws and a law which has no sanction against breaking it is no law at all. It is inconceivable that God's moral laws could be of that kind. The sanction against breaking these moral laws, in other words the sanction against sin, is death. In the words of Romans 6:23:

“for the wages of sin is death”.

This does not mean that God's laws are mechanical, they are alive in God, a part of his nature, and that unchanging nature makes them unalterable.

If we try to bring God down to our level or try and raise ourselves to his level we see no need of a radical atonement to secure salvation.

We need to hear again the words of Peter in 1 Peter 1:17:

“since you call on a father who judges each man's work impartially, live your lives ... in reverent fear”.

When we tremble before God and acknowledge that we are hell deserving sinners the necessity for the cross becomes clear. Perhaps if we spoke less about God's love and more about his holiness, we might say more with more meaning when we did speak of his love.

Nothing reveals the gravity of our sin like the cross. For what ultimately sent Christ there was neither the greed of Judas, nor the envy of the Jewish priests, nor the vacillating cowardice of Pilate, but our own greed, envy, cowardice and all our other sins. I cannot face

Christ's cross with integrity without feeling ashamed of myself. Indeed, in the words of Canon Peter Green "only the man who is prepared to own his share in the guilt of the cross may claim his share in its grace".

In the words of my earlier reading from Isaiah chapter 53:
"Christ was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed."

In other words Christ died for my sins and yours to bring us forgiveness and healing.

To sum up where we have got to so far then, we see that God couldn't simply forgive our sins. His just and righteous nature precluded that. So, it was necessary either that we should all die as our sins deserved, or that God should somehow arrange for the punishment we deserved to fall on someone else. In his mercy he took the latter course and the punishment we deserved was suffered by Jesus on the cross.

God's love must have been wonderful. He could, quite justly have abandoned us to the fate our sins deserve – to perish in our sin. But he did not. Because he loved us, he pursued us in Christ – as the good shepherd pursues his lost sheep.

Of course Jesus well knew that this was his mission on which his Father had sent him, he predicted it many times to the disciples, for example on the way to Jerusalem before the crucifixion where Mark in chapter 10 and verse 33 tells us that Jesus told them he would be handed over to the gentiles who would flog him and kill him. Indeed if Jesus had not been a willing substitute for us all I do not believe his sacrifice would have been effective. But why did Jesus have to come down to earth and suffer this terrible fate.

Really there is only one simple reason for this – that was the only way the mission could be fulfilled. God's just and righteous punishment could not have been visited on any ordinary man. Our sins already justified our punishment by death – each and every one of us, so we

could not act as a sacrifice for anyone else by suffering a punishment we already deserved. On the other hand God could not suffer a punishment as God, because the guilty sinning party was mankind. Only someone who was both wholly God and wholly man – and that was uniquely Jesus – would do.

Just as the cross has two arms, so it has two aspects. Firstly what we did to Christ – convicting him through our sin – and secondly what he did for us – securing our forgiveness and salvation. So far we have focussed on the first aspect – what we did to Christ through our sin. However, we do need to see the cross as something done by us, to lead us to repentance, before we can see it as something done for us, which leads us to faith and worship.

We need a balance between awareness of sin and awareness of forgiveness in our Christian lives. If we concentrate on the former we shall be sorrowful and guilt ridden (one author called Christianity the “guilt edged religion”), but if we focus too much on the latter, on forgiveness, we are likely to carry on sinning as if it didn’t matter.

So, let’s now look at what Christ did for us. Christ took upon himself all the sins of the world past present and future. As he said on the cross:

"..... Jesus said, "It is finished." With that, he bowed his head and gave up his spirit." (John 19:30 NIV)

What Jesus said is actually one word *tetelstai* which in the Greek means a perfect, completed and finished work. Here Jesus spoke in the perfect tense, speaking of a completed action with ongoing effect, and so really Jesus was saying: “it has been and will for ever remain finished”. This word *tetelstai* was written on all receipts in New Testament times to show that a bill had been completely and fully paid. Jesus has paid the price for our sins in full. Because he has paid the price for our sins "once and for all, once for all" we are able to stand before God clothed in Christ’s righteousness, to escape any condemnation for our sins and enter into salvation or eternal life.

Lets pause again for a moment for another summing up of what we've covered so far. We have seen that God couldn't simply forgive our sins, but in his great love and mercy he sent his son Jesus to bear the punishment that was rightly ours and Jesus's death on the cross has dealt with the past present and future sins of each and every one of us.

This forgiveness is a free gift from God. Although it was purchased at great price by Christ's life blood all we have to do is to receive it. We cannot earn it or even contribute the smallest element to it. In the words of Saint Paul in Ephesians Chapter 2 and verses 8 and 9: "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— not by works, so that no-one can boast." (Ephesians 2:8-9 NIV)

Also, it's only true, we can only receive salvation, because Jesus willingly died and shed his blood on the cross to pay for my sins and yours. Yes it was by God's will. In the words of our reading from Isaiah:

".. it was the Lord's will to crush him and cause him to suffer, and the Lord makes of his life a guilt offering ..."

But it was with the consent of Jesus who subordinated his will to the Father in the olive grove at Gethsemane.

However, we do have to receive this grace, this forgiveness. The world was not automatically put right because Christ died for us, nor have we automatically been forgiven. We need to appropriate his death to ourselves in order for it to be effective. Let me just tell you a little story - which is a completely true story - to illustrate that.

[George Wilson story]

I often speak about how simple it is to be saved – that we just need to turn to Jesus, truly believe in his death and resurrection in our hearts and confess him as our Lord with our mouths. And that's perfectly true, it is exactly that easy and precisely that straightforward. If you have any doubts look at the words of Saint Paul in Romans Chapter 10 verses 9 and 10 after the service. But, you do need to do that and if there is anyone here today who has never done these things I urge

you to do them right here right now today. Don't wait. Your salvation, your eternal life, is too important to put off to another day.

As we close then let's have a final summing up of what we've covered this morning. We see that God couldn't simply forget about our sin. Sin is too serious in God's eyes and His nature would not have permitted that. But – "It is finished" - because he loved us so much that he sent Jesus Christ to die for us on the cross, which secured the forgiveness of sin. Christ was the innocent lamb slaughtered to pay for all our sins past present and future – and we should be eternally grateful for what he has done for us. May that gratefulness be reflected in the lives of us all, indeed in the lives of each and every Christian. In the words of the well known hymn:

Were the whole realm of nature mine
That were an offering far too small
Love so amazing, so divine
Demands my soul, my life, my all

Lets bow our heads for a word of prayer: Heavenly Father, thank you that in your amazing love you pursued us in Christ and that he willingly died for us and that his sacrifice has secured the forgiveness of ALL our sins for ALL time. Help us to turn to you in faith at the beginning of this New Year to accept that sacrifice and make it effective in our lives. AMEN