

The Cross of Christ

Imagine a visitor comes up to you after church: 'I noticed this symbol - the cross. Why is the cross so important to you?'

What would you say?

But then you realise he's angry. 'How dare you use the cross!'

He's from a country where crucifixion is still used as a punishment, and he watched his son be executed on a cross.

'Seeing the cross on the pulpit, hearing you sing about the cross - it's a sick joke!'

And isn't he right?

Have we lost sight of how ugly the reality behind the cross is?

Crucifixion - executing someone by nailing them to a wooden cross - is the most brutal form of torture and execution ever invented. It stretches out the pain and agony to the maximum. The Roman empire, who widely used crucifixion as a means of executing people, would leave criminals hanging for days. But even the Roman empire would refuse to use it to punish its own citizens - it was reserved only for the worst criminals.

The cross is a terrible, shameful form of torture. We wouldn't stick up a picture of an electric chair at the front of our church, or a hangman's noose, or a concentration camp. But we have the symbol of the cross on jewellery, on our Bibles, on our church buildings.

Why is something so awful so important to us?

Over summer we'll be spending six weeks looking closely at the cross, using this book 'The Cross of Christ' as a guide. Whether or not you think you understand the importance of the cross to Christians, this series will be like holding up a diamond and turning it round, looking at the different ways it catches the light - we'll see the cross from different angles, and understand more why it's so important - why it has become the central symbol that represents our Christian faith and belief.

So why is something so awful so important to us?

2 reasons briefly:

The cross was important to those who followed Jesus

Paul says it is of 'first importance' in 1 Cor 15:1, and said that when he'd been in the city of Corinth preaching and seeking to persuade people to follow Jesus, he'd been like a broken record with one message - 'Jesus Christ and him crucified'.

The cross was important to those who followed Jesus because...

The cross was important to Jesus

It shaped his life, ministry and purpose on earth (Mark 8:31-32, 9:31)

He knew the specifics and he set his face like flint to accomplish his purpose.
When someone has a vision or a dream, it usually ends in glory and triumph - winning a gold medal, finding the cure for cancer etc.
But for Jesus everything led up to his death on the cross

And this should make us stop and think:
What other leader or hero is remembered because of their death?
Martin Luther King is remembered for his speeches
If we remember their death, it's because it tragically cut short the impact they could have made

This leads us to the big question:

Why?
- Why did Jesus have to die on a cross?

If you can truly answer this question then you can discover the precious treasure of the cross.

The cross is a mirror to humble us

Jesus was put to death because leaders felt threatened by him.
Jesus was put to death because cowards didn't stand by him.
Jesus was put to death because crowds turned against him.

Look through the events leading up to the cross. See it through the eyes of those who were there. See yourself in each of them.

What would you have said in that upper room?

As Jesus ate his last meal with his friends and warned that the time had come for him to be arrested and executed.
Brave Peter, chopsy Peter said he'd rather die than abandon Jesus.
What would you say?
When the pressure was on though, Peter bottled it - denied he even knew Jesus.

Would you have been tempted by the silver?

Judas bargaining with the religious leaders to betray Jesus.
The chance to earn yourself a cash bonus.
He's going to be caught sooner or later.
Would you sell out?

How would you have responded to the fear?

The fear of the religious leaders, walking the tightrope between keeping their Roman overlords happy, and leading the people in following God's law.
How would you respond to this homeless miracle man Jesus?
As his popularity grew, the crowds followed him, as he began to criticise your leadership.
Wouldn't you long for a way to be rid of him?

What would you have done under pressure?

Pilate, the Roman ruler, questioning Jesus, finding him innocent.

Yet the Jews are chanting 'Crucify him!' They want him dead.
If you make the wrong decision, it could mean losing your job, your income, your future.
Would you wash your hands of the whole business?

Would you obey orders?

The soldiers, nailing Jesus' hands and feet to the wooden cross.
Just another prisoner, just another criminal?
Or an innocent man?
To refuse to follow orders would mean dismissal.
Would you do the right thing?

The cross is ugly because it forces us to look deep inside.

Can any of us really say we are any better?

- Ever made a promise then failed to keep it?

That's where Peter was.

- Ever craved something that you can't have?

That's where Judas was.

- Ever held onto a bitter, jealous thought? - 'I wish he/she would just drop dead...'

That's the same heart as those religious leaders.

- Ever kept quiet instead of speaking up? Lied, taken the easy way out?

That's where Pilate, those Roman soldiers started.

The cross is ugly, because inside we're ugly.

'From within out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness.'

We may not have the power of Pilate, or stand to lose as much as the religious leaders thought they did - but we are kidding ourselves if we think we would have acted differently in their shoes.

We default to self-centredness. Which you might think makes sense for survival, except that the God who made us calls us to live God-centred lives. A self-centred world is a rotten world - and we see the evidence of that all around, and, if we're honest, in our own hearts.

Dentist light exposing the rot in our teeth - it's uncomfortable, we know the drill is coming, we want to escape.

The cross is a mirror - it shows us the ugliness of human nature. How should we respond? But we mustn't look away from the ugliness and horror of the cross. Not just yet.

John Stott says this: 'Before we see the cross as something done FOR us (leading us to faith and worship), we have to see it as something done BY us (leading us to repentance).

We must approach humbly - this is not someone else's story, this is my story, your story.

When we approach humbly, with a willingness to see our own guilt, and our need for forgiveness, then there is hope, then there is treasure in the cross.

Because:

The cross is the medicine to heal us

Following a river, it seems to wind around, random, going nowhere.
But when you look on a map, or from a plane, you can follow its route to the sea. It's not always going the easiest route, or the quickest path, but very deliberately it cuts its way through the land to find the sea.

On a human level, Jesus was put to death by wicked men. The events leading up to Jesus' crucifixion may seem random and chaotic.

But the Bible is very clear - Jesus' death was not a tragic accident.
Like that river, there is direction and purpose.
Every detail follows the plan of God - Father, Son and Holy Spirit - to save sinners.

The Father: Rom 8:32 'He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all - how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things'

The Son, Jesus: 'I lay down my life' John 10:18.

The Spirit, 'How much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to serve the living God.' Hebrews 9:14

Story of the convict ship.

The apostles in their earliest messages described Jesus' death as 'hanging him on a tree' - they were referring to the Old Testament law (Deut 21:23).
They could have shied away from the curse of someone crucified - the shame and horror of that undignified, unholy death.

But they realised that Jesus chose to bear the curse - 'He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree' 1 Pet 2:24

1 Peter 3:18 - 'Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God'.

The cross is the medicine to heal us.

We need God.

We need our lives to be God-centred - nothing else works.

The only way that's possible is for us to be healed from our state of sin, to be set free from what constantly holds us back.

We can't heal ourselves - we need the medicine of the cross.

Repentance and faith.

Admitting we're in the wrong before God.

Trusting in what Jesus did on that cross.