

## THEFIELD CHAPEL EVENING SERVICE

14<sup>th</sup> February 2010

Mark 15:21-41 Christ died for our sins

This is without a doubt the most momentous event in the whole of eternity. Its significance and consequences are so profound that learned men and women have spent their lives studying it, and yet still no one fully grasps the depths of this most extra-ordinary of occurrences.

That the very Son of God, who from eternity had enjoyed intimate fellowship with the Father and Spirit, should be cut off completely from their love is surely unthinkable. If our modern scientists were commenting on this prospect, they would surely conclude that the risk that the universe itself imploded would be too great to allow this to happen; it has much more far-reaching consequences than our attempts to smash particles together in the Large Hadron Collider.

Yet on the other hand, even young children can understand that Christ died for us, with a simple and matter-of-fact acceptance that although it is we who did wrong, it is Jesus who took the punishment.

For all its profundity, it is also controversial. Nothing – absolutely no other belief or religious concept – antagonises an atheist like Dawkins so much as the idea that Jesus died for him. He finds the notion repugnant and immoral – principally because he has done nothing worth death; he does not need anyone else's help or approval; and the whole concept of brutal physical punishment for any wrongdoing is the very opposite of the civilised ideas that man has been striving for since the Stone Age.

Even within the church, for which the cross is the universal and defining symbol, opinion is divided as to what really happened there. At the liberal end of the spectrum, Jesus was not so much dying for our sins (sin being a bit of an outdated concept), as dying to show us that it was more important to love others than to fight for our own rights. Somewhere towards the middle, and arguably within the bounds of evangelicalism, there is the view that on the cross:

*"he absorbed all the pain, all the suffering caused by the breakdown in our relationship with God and in doing so demonstrated the lengths to which a God who is love will go to restore it." [Steve Chalke, The Lost Message of Jesus]*

Then at the other extreme there is the fierce and austere view of God as vengeful and almost unforgiving in his insistence that every sin is paid for in full, and so all that wrath was vented on his son in our stead.

It is amazing that the Crucifixion, so central to Christianity and so familiar a story to all of us here tonight, harbours such a variety of ideas. I hope even the pragmatists amongst us will see that this really is a critical issue to understand properly; the consequences of that understanding impact the way we view our salvation itself, and what we understand God's love to be.

Undoubtedly much of the difficulty is bound up with the ideas and world view that flow around us all the time in the media, the workplace, school and everywhere. We probably don't realise just how much we are affected by that. As a quick example, take our idea of sin. A few hundred years ago, there was a great sense of right and wrong, commonly accepted values and standards which were beyond question. Those who trespassed were held to account, punishment could be severe and public.

Talk of sin and punishment resonated with their daily experience so that people immediately saw the value of being forgiven for their sins.

But today, ideas of right and wrong shift with the times, the trend being to get rid of more and more taboos. Standards of behaviour in homes and schools slip, crime often goes unpunished, authority is always questioned. So it is not surprising that the old notions of sin and salvation are looked on with some disdain.

If we are to get anywhere in understanding the Cross, we need to look beyond our own reasoning, coloured as it is by our society; and beyond the reasoning of previous generations, which was also coloured by theirs. The issues we are dealing with in looking at Christ on the Cross are so profound that the only reliable authority on the subject is what God himself says – as ever, Scripture must be our guide.

So keep your Bibles open as we consider a number of statements which I hope will help us to explain the message of the Cross to people in our generation.

## ***God doesn't hate sinners.***

In fact he thinks you and I are lovely.

Romans 5:8:

<sup>8</sup> But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

It is a great travesty that the Church so often portrays God as hating sinners. In doctrinal language we speak of the "total depravity of man", with the implication that there is nothing lovely or attractive in us at all. No wonder people get the idea that God hates them, especially if their own conscience troubles them over things they have done.

Nothing could be further from the truth. If that were the case, then he would simply have destroyed the world in the Flood and left our planet as a watery grave! He loves sinners, even though he hates sin. In a society which doesn't have any idea what is right or what is wrong, this has become a very difficult point to get across. People will think, if God hates homosexuality then he must hate homosexuals. If he hates lying then he hates liars. And pretty soon he hates all of us. So much for the God of Love.

But the entire story of the Bible flows contrary to this. God reveals himself there as a God who loves his people, who is constantly seeking their good, and who works an incredible plan of salvation into the whole of human history so that he can save sinners, not so he must punish them.

God doesn't hate sinners, he loves them.

## ***God doesn't think we deserve to die.***

No doubt the heresy meters have just gone into overdrive at this point, so let me explain further, for I know as well as you do that the wages of sin is death (Romans 6:23).

Talk to anyone in the street (if you dare) about what it means to die, and you will universally get the response that it is when we stop breathing, our brain shuts down for ever, and our body quickly grows cold and, well, lifeless.

God warned Adam in Genesis 2:

<sup>17</sup> but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die.

Yet when Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit, they did not die – on the contrary, Adam lived for 930 years – a long life by anyone's reckoning!

Now to modern ears such a sin of disobedience doesn't seem a big deal – but, generally, murder still is. But even Cain, the first murderer, was not struck down dead when he killed Abel – in fact, for the rest of his life on earth he was under God's protection from those who might want him dead (Genesis 4:15):

<sup>15</sup> But the LORD said to him, "Not so; if anyone kills Cain, he will suffer vengeance seven times over." Then the LORD put a mark on Cain so that no-one who found him would kill him.

That would be a good starting point for a debate on capital punishment!

So it is wrong to say that, as soon as we step out of line, God wants to strike us down dead. Our sins do not mean that our earthly life deserves to be cut short. God is not a cosmic sadist, revelling in the misfortune of those who cross him and waiting in the wings to obliterate us.

It is pretty clear, isn't it, that this world is not perfect – and not just because we are not perfect in ourselves. Never mind the wars and injustices which we inflict upon our fellow man, the very planet we live on falls far short of perfection. Barely a year goes by without some dramatic natural cataclysm which is directly responsible for the deaths of thousands or even hundreds of thousands of people – the Haitian earthquake, the boxing day Tsunami, Hurricane Katrina. Even the most arrogant of climate change campaigners do not lay the blame for all of these things at our door.

So perhaps it is not surprising that, despite our sin, God does not wipe us off the face of this earth – for we can hardly be called blots on the landscape. Now we can point to specific times when God does strike individuals down immediately because of their sin, but that is by far and away the exception. In general, God is content to let sinners like us live on this earth until the end of our natural lives.

## ***God isn't out to punish us***

I think it is fair to say that God is not vindictive. Indeed, when he is revealing the core of his nature to Moses, he says in Exodus 33:

<sup>19</sup> And the LORD said, "I will cause all my goodness to pass in front of you, and I will proclaim my name, the LORD, in your presence. I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion.

Even in passages which speak of his punishment for sin, more is said on his compassion, Deuteronomy 5:

<sup>9</sup> for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, <sup>10</sup> but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments.

He doesn't insist on punishment for our sins arbitrarily or for the pleasure of seeing us – let alone his Son – suffer. Like any father, he would much rather be rewarding his children than punishing them. But like a good father, he cares for the development of our character and so must take action when we do wrong.

### ***Sin has consequences that can't be ignored.***

A fundamental truth about sin is that it has bad consequences. Always.

That's not to say that sin is bad *because* of its consequences; sin is bad because it is contrary to God's nature, God's nature is what dictates the reality of our universe, and anything which is contrary that reality will have bad consequences. Jumping out of an aeroplane without a parachute is a good example of that!

Those consequences can't be ignored. The world is different after you have sinned. You are different after you have sinned. It is important.

And it's not surprising either. If our actions didn't have consequences, then our lives would be of no consequence. But because we are significant, what we say and do – and think – is significant too. It matters, because we matter.

If you think about the sort of sins the Bible speaks about [e.g. Galatians 5:19-21], you'll see that by their very nature sins make things worse in the world. Murder quite clearly removes someone forever. Adultery can destroy at least one relationship. Envy, selfishness, hatred all serve to weaken relationships and destroy community. Sin increases the degree of separation and isolation we have to each other. This is all quite apart from any notion of God's disapproval and the impact of sin on our relationship with him, which is the most important consequence of our sin. Isaiah 59:2:

But your iniquities have separated  
you from your God;  
your sins have hidden his face from you,  
so that he will not hear.

The situation is even worse though. It is not just that God cannot bear us in his presence; it is that when sin takes hold in our hearts we won't want to be in his presence anyway.

As soon as Adam and Eve sinned, they hid from God [Genesis 3:8]. They did not want to meet him, because they were ashamed and afraid. That's what sin does in our hearts: it stops us from enjoying fellowship with God.

The barrier that sin creates has two insurmountable sides: to God it is an intolerable affront to his holiness, and to us it brings fear and shame so we flee from God. That can't be ignored – even if God's love meant he could ignore our sin, it would be to no avail as we would not come to him.

## ***We need to be cured of sin before entering heaven.***

More than that, we need to be cured of sin before coming close to God, even on earth.

We have seen that this world is not perfect - but heaven is an altogether different matter. By definition, it is God's home - a place where his will is unchallenged, where everything is done consistently with his character. It is a place of perfection - of absolute perfection.

Nothing imperfect can enter, or it won't be perfect any more.

This is more than an arbitrary rule; it is not that God is being selfish or overly house-proud by not letting dirty us into his beautifully clean palace. It is not the beauty and perfection of the place, of heaven, which prevents us from entering - but the holiness and perfection of the God who dwells there which is the barrier. As Habakkuk says (1:13):

Your eyes are too pure to look on evil;  
you cannot tolerate wrong.

That's the essence of the problem of sin - it separates us from God. It is a real and impenetrable barrier between us. It is the "natural" consequence of us choosing to disobey him and think we know best.

That separation is what God was really referring to when he warned Adam that when he sinned he would die - and of course that is exactly what happened, the close relationship he had enjoyed with his creator was immediately destroyed.

Something needs to be done to put US right before we can enjoy that close relationship with God again. He may be prepared to put up with our sin on earth, but not so in heaven.

## ***God can't "just forgive" our sins***

This gets towards the nub of the debate that has been going on in evangelical circles since Steve Chalke published his book "The lost message of Christ" in 2003 (and at a lower key long before that).

We say, "to err is human, to forgive divine". It's not something found in the bible - I think it was Alexander Pope who coined the phrase in the early 18<sup>th</sup> Century - but it has a ring of truth about it.

Let's take a fairly dramatic example, that of adultery. Not because it is only or even chiefly sexual sin which God is concerned about, but because its effect on relationships is so apparent.

Suppose a husband has an affair, and his wife finds out. He bitterly regrets what he has done and wants to stay with his wife.

Is she displaying more godlike character if she asserts her right to divorce because he has broken their sacred bond, or if she finds it in her heart to forgive him and take him back?

You can argue long and hard about this one. There is no doubt that a wrong has been done. The wife has been wronged, she has been humiliated.

There is no doubt that the relationship has been broken, and without the trust which was betrayed there will always be doubt that it could be broken again.

But on the other hand, the husband may have learned his lesson. He may forever realise that the grass is not greener on the other side, and learn to value what he has with his wife much more than he would have done if he had not lost it. If the wife insists on her right to divorce to punish him for his sin, does that really put things to rights? Whereas if she is able to swallow her pride, see her husband's repentance and accept him back, does that reconciliation not restore something good from something that was broken?

While this does not mean that all wives who have been cheated on should take their husbands back, I think we can all see more echoes of God's character in the wife who does forgive than the wife who does not.

Here, we can see forgiveness without real punishment.

So why can't God do the same for us? That is Steve Chalke's point, and to modern human logic it is quite a point.

Only it doesn't stand up to what the Bible says, and as we noted in this complicated matter we have to depend on revelation from God, and not our own human logic – modern or otherwise. For example, just a few months ago we read in Mark 10:45:

For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.

The technical name for this is "penal substitutionary atonement" – that Christ became our substitute in taking the penalty for our sins.

To understand a little of why this should be, let's add more drama to our previous example and say that the husband caught AIDS from his mistress. How does that change the matter?

Even the forgiving wife would not want to sleep with him again, and risk contracting it herself. There is a real barrier to a full restoration of their relationship that cannot be ignored. The husband is not being punished by his wife's hardness of heart, but by the consequences of his own deeds.

So with us, what we need is not "just" forgiveness for our past sins, or even "just" being cured of sin so we won't sin any more. The consequences of our past sins need to be dealt with, for they infect our souls like AIDS infects a body.

If it were possible, our fictitious wife would like to eradicate the AIDS virus from her husband's body, to drive it out completely from him because, quite rightly, she does not want that deadly virus in her presence.

So it is with God and the legacy of our sin. He wants to eradicate it, to drive it out, to destroy it. Not because he might become infected by it, but because it destroys the beauty of his creation and, quite simply, is against his will. And that arouses his wrath.

## ***God's wrath drives out sin***

What is wrath? What do you want to do when you are angry? You want to destroy the object of your anger, to get it out of your sight, to drive it away so it is no more. Unfortunately our anger can easily result in violence against the people who have provoked us, because we cannot separate them from their actions.

Our imaginary wife would not be alone if she were to take all her cheating husband's clothes and possessions and chuck them out the house, then change the locks so he could not come in. Her wrath drives her to drive him out. But if it were possible to take the adulterous part of him, to separate that part, the desire the intention and the act – and the consequences if indeed he caught AIDS – and drive that out of him, then perhaps this would be the real intent of her wrath.

That is the meaning of God's wrath. It is not that he wants to hurt us. It is not that he is violent and abusive. It is not that he cannot control himself. But he must drive sin and the consequences of sin from his presence. So unless that sin is somehow removed from our lives and souls, that means we will be driven out with it.

## ***Christ died for our sin***

Thankfully, this is where the whole principle of substitution comes in – that someone or something else can bear our sin, and be driven from God instead of us. It is in many ways a difficult principle to grasp – and so God spent hundreds of years with the nation of Israel drumming it into them through the sacrificial system which he established amongst them.

Probably the most clear picture is in Leviticus 16:

<sup>8</sup> He is to cast lots for the two goats—one lot for the LORD and the other for the scapegoat. <sup>9</sup> Aaron shall bring the goat whose lot falls to the LORD and sacrifice it for a sin offering. <sup>10</sup> But the goat chosen by lot as the scapegoat shall be presented alive before the LORD to be used for making atonement by sending it into the desert as a scapegoat.

<sup>21</sup> He is to lay both hands on the head of the live goat and confess over it all the wickedness and rebellion of the Israelites—all their sins—and put them on the goat's head. He shall send the goat away into the desert in the care of a man appointed for the task. <sup>22</sup> The goat will carry on itself all their sins to a solitary place; and the man shall release it in the desert.

Here one goat demonstrates the idea that our sins can be taken away from us and from God's presence; while the other goat is killed to show that it is through death, and in particular the giving up of life-blood, that this can happen.

This is the work that Christ accomplished on the cross. Jesus lament, "My God, why have you forsaken me?", shows the truth of this quite unthinkable fact – that somehow God the Father was able to cut off his own son.

2 Corinthians 5:21:

God made him who had no sin to be sin for us,

Amazingly, Christ was able to bear our sin away from us, and carry it outside of the camp, outside of the Father's presence, so that it would no longer be a barrier between us and God. So momentous was this event that, unlike the rest of the sacrificial system which had to be repeated day by day, week by week, and year by year, this once-for-all sacrifice dealt with all sins – those committed before, during and after the Cross [Hebrews 10:12-14].

Unfortunately, many people are not prepared to give up their sin; they either stubbornly refuse to see it as sin in the first place; or they are unwilling to take the uncomfortable step of confessing their sin to God and placing that sin on Christ, our scape-goat. So God will have no choice but to drive them from his presence, into the place we know as Hell.

That is the real scandal of the cross – that people still despise and reject the One who died to save them.

We've covered a lot of ground this evening, and I hope that has been useful. But when all is said and done, the simple children's statement that "Christ died for us" is actually a pretty good summary of the cross!