

# PREACHING THE CROSS IN DARK TIMES

BY N.T. WRIGHT



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ONLINE  
RENEWING MINDS THROUGH BIBLICAL TEACHING

# Hope Amid the Broken Signposts

This will be a Lent like no other. Last Lent we plunged into our first lockdown, unimaginable until it was forced upon us. We then supposed, as we struggled through Easter and Pentecost, that it couldn't last much longer. But here we are again – and with horrible statistics of suffering and loss. And we turn, perhaps even more urgently, to the gospel message, the announcement of good news through the horror of Jesus' death, in the dogged hope that it will speak afresh to us at such a time as this. The multiple sorrows and frustrations of this last year – bereavement, prolonged sickness, and a cold, nagging fear – sustain that sense of an urgent context. If we can't preach the cross at a time like this, when can we?

But the meaning of Jesus' death is vast and dark. Preaching about it is never easy. It shouldn't be. If we imagine we can capture the cross in a simple formula, that just shows we haven't caught up with the full biblical picture in which many strands come rushing together. That itself presents an ongoing challenge to the preacher or teacher, on top of the struggle we all now face, that of speaking into a microphone in a room by ourselves – as I'm doing now – rather than making real eye contact with our hearers. After all, the meaning of the cross is about the outflowing, generous love of God; so the act of communicating that message, whether in the pulpit or in pastoral conversation, ought itself to embody that love through direct personal communication, rather than through cameras and screens. But we are where we are. In this dark time, we must pray that the light which shines from the cross will enable us to find our way into what we need to say, and what our congregations need to hear.

I said just now that many strands converge in the biblical picture of the cross. The story of Jesus, focused particularly on his death and resurrection, is like a great, deep river into which many different streams have flowed, carrying the silt and smell of their own particular journeys. The primary texts are the four gospels themselves, and they don't give us a theory, they give us a story. I have argued elsewhere that we have to get

the *story* right if we are to understand what theologians sometimes talk about in terms of ‘models’ of atonement. I have spelt that out in more detail elsewhere.

In this first session I want to bring together two themes which have become very important for me in recent years – important at a personal level as well as in academic work. The first, alluded to in today’s title, is that of ‘Broken Signposts’ which I expound in a recent book with that title. The second is the great, but often unnoticed, biblical theme of ‘the coming of God’. So much western Christianity has been concerned about how we humans find our way to be with God, but the Bible is far more concerned with how the creator God fulfils intends and promises to come and be with us. And these two themes – the broken signposts and the coming of God – converge powerfully in the biblical story of the cross.

## **Broken Signposts and the Cross**

Let me explain what I mean by ‘broken signposts’. There are several features of our human life and experience—common to more or less all people and cultures – which seem to point beyond themselves, to the meaning of life, and perhaps to God himself. One way of preaching through Lent might be to take these one by one and explore what happens if we treat them as signposts and follow where they seem to point – and then watch, in each case, for the dark twist at the end of the story.

I have worked with seven such signposts. No doubt there are many more but these are central.

The seven signposts I’ve worked with are Justice; Love; Spirituality; Beauty; Freedom; Truth; and Power. We all know these matter. Sometimes people try to ignore one or more of them but it usually comes back to bite you. Think of socialist republics building brutalist housing blocks and then wondering why the quality of life plummets; or think of those political leaders who tell lies all the time and thereby chip away at the fragile foundation of trust undergirding their societies.

These things – justice, truth, beauty and so on – are built into our humanness. You don’t have to teach people that Justice matters. Children

in the playground say ‘That’s not fair’, without ever having studied moral philosophy. When it comes to Spirituality, for the last 300 years many in our culture have tried to do without it, culminating in atheist scepticism, but other things creep in to take its place. The Romantic movement sidelined ‘the sacred’ and substituted ‘the sublime’. Civic buildings begin to function as churches. Did you notice how Americans were speaking of the Capitol building in terms of a ‘shrine’, ‘sacred precincts’, ‘hallowed halls’ and so on? We may try to avoid these foundational impulses but they will still be there.

What do we do with these deep instincts? Many people have argued that they actually point us to God. The reason we instinctively love justice, value beauty, long for freedom, and so on is (some will say) that these are implanted in us by the God in whose image we are made. We can therefore argue from these instincts up to God himself.

Now that is fine up to a point . . . but only up to a point. Here’s the strange thing: we all know these things matter *but we all mess them up*. Take Justice. In our personal lives, we all want justice; if there’s a burglary we want police and law enforcement. But when we ourselves slide on to the wrong side of the law we somehow hope we’ll get away with it. In international relations every country believes in Justice – until its own interests are at stake. And so on.

Or take love itself, and relationships more broadly. We all know that they matter enormously. But we all mess them up. We hurt people we love, and we are hurt by them. We suffer what Shakespeare called ‘the pangs of diseased love’. And the very best of relationships end in a graveyard. The day I was drafting this talk was the anniversary of the death of a close friend. I am still in touch with his widow who has now spent six years coming to terms with the best thing in her life, for which she remains deeply grateful to God, coming to an end.

We could go on. Beauty brings meaning and depth and power into our lives. But the sunset fades into darkness. The smile of the child turns slowly into the cynical sneer of the disillusioned adult. The music stops. What about Freedom? As we know, it’s often purchased at the cost of someone else’s slavery. Power is necessary to get things done, but the old cliché about power tending to corrupt and absolute power corrupting

absolutely holds true. And as for Truth – well, we all know it matters, and especially at this time of Pandemic. But we’ve all learnt that truth-claims might just be power-claims in disguise. Phrases like ‘fake news’ and ‘alternative facts’ now threaten everything from public health to democracy itself.

So what are we to say? Are these seven signposts all telling lies? Do we have to conclude, with Jean-Paul Sartre, that life is just a sick joke? That the signposts which looked as if they might point up to God are systematically deceiving us?

In all my years of churchgoing I don’t think I ever heard sermons on justice, spirituality, beauty, or power. Freedom, occasionally; truth; perhaps; love, well, yes, but not in the way I’m coming at it here. But all these seven are picked up in scripture, not least in John’s gospel, and not least in the story of Jesus going to the cross. When Jesus stands before Pontius Pilate in John 18 and 19, they argue about kingdom, truth and power. The trial takes place at Passover, the Freedom-festival, and it’s supposed to showcase the legendary Roman Justice. John’s overall heading for the entire scene, five chapters earlier, highlights yet another of our themes: Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. John is telling us, woven deep into his narrative, that as Jesus goes to the cross these are precisely the issues that are at stake, the issues that we all know really matter in real life – love, justice, freedom, truth, power. And if we think John’s gospel is not also about spirituality and beauty then we have indeed forgotten how to read.

But what happens in this amazing scene? We watch as Jesus goes to the cross, and we see the seven signposts which (to begin with) look as though they might be pointing up to God; and we find that one by one they fail – just as they do in our personal and public lives.

Justice? The Roman empire prided itself on justice, but Pilate’s judgment is pulled and pushed this way and that by political interests and threats: ‘If you let this man go, you are not Caesar’s friend’. That has quite a contemporary ring: unless you call this one right, you may live to regret it.

Love? Jesus washes the disciples’ feet, and calls them his friends; but Judas betrays him, Peter denies him, they all run away. Love, like justice, fails just when we want it to win.

Spirituality? The water of life is a major theme earlier in John, and now, terrifyingly, Jesus declares ‘I’m thirsty’. Back in John 12 we have a Gethsemane-like moment: ‘Now is my soul troubled’: the easy commerce between Father and Son is shaken to the core.

Beauty? The beauty of new creation, shining out in John’s gospel from the early days in Cana of Galilee all the way to the upper room, is snuffed out on Golgotha.

Freedom? Passover is stood on its head as a murderous brigand is released and Jesus dies in his place.

Truth? Pilate just sneers. ‘Truth? What’s that!?’ We are the empire. We make our own truth here.

And power? – well, Pilate boasts that he has the power to have Jesus either released or killed. Jesus comments, remarkably, that God has indeed given Pilate that power, but that it comes with severe responsibility.

So throughout the story we see what’s happened to our seven signposts. As I said, you could quite easily construct a series of sermons looking at each one and following it through the story. I’d be inclined to keep Power for Easter morning, perhaps looking at Love on Palm Sunday, and arranging the other five to lead up to those. These, remember, are the signposts within human culture – the things etched deep into our hearts and imaginations – which should have provided clues to the meaning of life, and perhaps even signposts pointing up to God the creator himself. And we see what’s happened. One by one they are trampled upon, twisted, distorted, snuffed out. It’s almost as though John is inviting us to look at these signposts one by one and to watch as they fail to deliver.

Or do they?

Here is the twist – the extraordinary moment which I think helps to explain the power of the cross, of the message of the cross, from that day to this. *The story of Jesus as he goes to the cross is the story we all know: the story of what happens when our vision of the world and of ourselves come crashing down.* Jesus comes to the place, not where the signposts originally appear to be pointing, but where they have collapsed. The noble dream of justice appears to point up to God; John’s story of justice



perverted points to Jesus on the cross. The powerful dream of love appears to lift us up to God; John's story of the failure of the disciples' allegiance points to Jesus on the cross. And so on. Our post-enlightenment culture is based on the quest for truth, real truth, solid truth you can bet your life on. John's story of Jesus claiming to tell the truth and Pilate sneering and sending him to his death is the archetypal postmodern moment: we're in charge of truth here, thank you very much.

And this I think is why, paradoxically, the story of Jesus' crucifixion carries such power to this day. This is why paintings of the crucifixion continue to draw people in to a reality they can't fully explain. It's why the great Passions of Johann Sebastian Bach are still such life-changing realities in our culture. Even those – perhaps especially those – who have little or no knowledge of the great theories about the atonement can still be swept off their feet by this story, because it is, in this sense, the story we all know, the story of how our best intentions and aspirations let us down, how our dreams are crushed by an unsympathetic reality. In this story, even if we can't really say why, we find that the God who we might have hoped would meet us in the place to which justice, love, freedom and truth had pointed has instead come to meet us in the place where justice, love, freedom and truth were denied and trampled upon. Our place. Our broken place. Our broken world.

You see what's happened? A certain kind of 'natural theology', growing out of eighteenth-century human arrogance, has hoped to be able to find a way to God without any need for God to reveal himself to us. But the gospels, particularly John's gospel, offer us a different kind of 'natural theology': a story, fully 'earthed' in the historical reality of our world, of a God who comes to meet us, not at the top of a ladder we can construct, but at the bottom of the heap, the place of broken hopes, broken dreams, broken signposts. As the hymn puts it, thinking of the foot washing scene in John 13: 'We strain to glimpse your mercy seat, and find you kneeling at our feet'.

So my first point in this first talk can be summed up like this. There are many aspects of human life, across times and cultures, which really do seem to point up to God. But history and experience suggest that these signposts are broken. They remind us, instead, of the chaos and tragedy of our world. But when we come back to the stories of Jesus going to his

death, we find that Jesus comes precisely to the point where the broken signposts had ended up. There, in real human history, we find a God doing what no other God had ever dreamed of doing: coming to the place of human failure and brokenness to meet us right there. And John's story insists that this meeting was the ultimate act of love. Of God's love. I learned long ago that wonderful poem by the first world war poet Edward Shillito, 'Jesus of the Scars'. Contrasting Jesus with the great pagan gods, he writes:

*The other gods were strong; but thou wast weak;  
They rode; but thou didst stumble to a throne.  
But to our wounds, only God's wounds can speak;  
And not a god has wounds, but thou alone.*

That points us to the second half of this talk. But before we get there let me remind you of the well-known illustration of the way in which Jesus' crucifixion can get through to hard hearts without any theological explanation or doctrinal substructure. The late cardinal archbishop of Paris, Jean-Marie Lustiger, used to tell the story of the three boys who played a trick on the local priest, by going into the confessional and 'confessing' all kinds of wild stories. The first two ran away, and the priest wasn't fooled. He gave the third boy – who happened to be Jewish – a penance to perform. He told him to go to the far end of the church, to look up at the large crucifix hanging there, and to say to the figure on the cross, 'You did all that for me – and I don't give a damn.' He told him to do it three times. Off went the boy: this was all still part of the game. 'You did all that for me,' he said, 'and I don't give a damn.' Then he said it the second time. And then . . . he couldn't say it the third time. He broke down, and left the church a changed person. 'And the reason I know that story,' the Archbishop would conclude, 'is that I was that young man.' He spent the rest of his life following, and serving, the Jesus who had come to the place of brokenness, of failure, of lies. The Jesus who had loved him to the end.



## The Coming of God

All this points to a great biblical theme which, like many things in scripture, I suspect we both partly know and partly forget. But it reinforces all that I have just said; and it seems to me to be central to the New Testament, particularly to John's gospel which I've been referring to so far. I would love to think that some of you might be able to weave this into your Lenten and Eastertide preaching, where it belongs at the centre.

The theme is this. Most western forms of Christianity, Catholic and Protestant, liberal and conservative, have assumed that the ultimate aim of being a Christian is, as the phrase goes, 'to go to heaven when you die'. In terms of God and ourselves, God is in his domain and we hope to go and be with him one day forever. But the message of the Bible is that God the creator longs to come and make his home with his people. The final scene in the Bible is not – despite the powerful portrayal in mediaeval mystery plays and so on – a matter of saved souls going up to heaven, but rather of the new Jerusalem coming down from heaven to earth, so that 'the dwelling of God is with humans'. As I look back through churches where I've worshipped and worked over a lifetime, I realise that most of them, no matter what tradition they've stood in, have assumed the going-to-heaven narrative. It's built into many prayers and liturgies and, not least, hymns. Think of all those nineteenth-century Christmas carols: 'and fit us for heaven, to live with thee there', and so on – whereas the point of Christmas is that *he* has come to live with us *here*!

This affects many bits and pieces of what we say. I once had to advise on a cartoon movie about Jesus, which was brilliant in many ways – until it came to the last scene, the Ascension, which had the young heroine looking at Jesus going into heaven and someone saying 'and one day we'll go there and be with him'. Fortunately we were able to get that changed. After all, the angels in Acts 1 don't say 'hang around and do stuff and then you can go to be with him'; they say, 'He'll be back'. And please don't translate that into the unbiblical idea that Jesus is coming back to scoop us up and take us back to heaven! Paul insists in Ephesians 1 that God's plan has always been to sum up in Christ all things in heaven and on earth. He comes back to heal, transform and to reign in a world flooded with justice, peace and love. With God's own presence.

This theme, of God coming to bring all things in heaven and earth to a rich unity, has deep roots in Israel's scriptures. In Genesis God makes a heaven-and-earth world, with the Image of himself at its heart; this, in other words, is a cosmic temple. This is where God himself intends to live, to be present with his human image-bearers. And when things go wrong, God doesn't plan to rescue wicked humans from creation to go and be with him somewhere else. That is, ultimately, the teaching of Plato and other philosophers, and the church has often bought heavily into it, but it's not what the Bible's about. (That is why people in that tradition had to resort to allegory, because the Bible didn't seem to be saying what they thought it ought to be saying, just like the first-century philosophers, who allegorized Homer because they were shocked by his portrayal of how the gods behaved.)

No: when things go wrong, God calls a people, Abraham's family, and once he's rescued them from Egypt he comes to live in their midst, in the Tabernacle. The point, as many scholars have seen but in my experience few clergy have picked up, is that the Tabernacle in the wilderness, and then the Temple in Jerusalem, are designed as small working models of new creation. They are heaven-and-earth structures. They are designed to *anticipate* what the creator God intends to do in the end, which is to remake the world – not to abandon it to chaos or entropy – and to come and live in it himself. God's presence in the Tabernacle and then the Temple – which, by the way, are the high points of the theme of 'beauty' in the Bible – anticipates the time, promised in passages like Isaiah 11 or Psalm 72, when creation will be restored, with justice and peace at last triumphant, and God's glory will fill the whole earth, as the waters cover the sea. St Paul picks this up in several passages; God, he says, will be 'all in all'. John's Prologue invites us to read the whole story and glimpse this indwelling glory all through.

This theme of new creation, and of God himself coming to fill it all with his own presence, was at best muted in the Middle Ages. It wasn't really retrieved by the Reformers. It hasn't been prominent in much western Christianity to this day. But my point to you now is twofold. First, this is the theme at the heart of John's Gospel, and particularly as Jesus goes to his death. Second, therefore, this is the theme we urgently need as we seek to preach wisely about Jesus' crucifixion at this time of darkness and fear in

our national and global life. The gospel story is the story of the God who doesn't stay above the pain and the sorrow of the world. His intention from all eternity to come and live in his own world with his human creatures was gloriously and shockingly fulfilled when he came to the place of pain and sorrow, of justice denied, power corrupted, truth sneered at and love trampled upon. Our place.

You see, John's gospel, echoing both Genesis and Exodus, insists that 'the Word became flesh and tabernacled in our midst, and we gazed upon his glory'. No translation actually says that of course, because it would be incomprehensible ; but the word is *eskenosen*, meaning 'pitched his tent'. Jesus himself is the ultimate Tabernacle, the true Temple. 'He spoke,' says John in chapter 2, 'about the Temple of his body'. The Temple is where God comes to dwell with his people. That theme haunts all four gospels, but in John it is clearest: as we follow the story through Jesus fulfils the Jewish festivals and finally, in his last coming to Jerusalem, speaks plainly to his followers in the language of mutual indwelling – think of the vine and the branches, and so on – whose meaning is found in the theology of the Temple itself. Heaven and earth come together in him. John is saying that we see, in him, the fulfilment of the creator's intention from the very start, and particularly the fulfilment of the promises to Israel of which the Tabernacle and the Temple were great advance signs. The point of the story is that *this is what it looked like when God came to dwell with his people as he had always intended*. And if all the signposts that should have pointed to him were broken, God will come to the place of those broken dreams.

I suspect that One of the reasons why this is not how many western Christians have thought about things is not simply the powerful pull of the going-to-heaven tradition. It is that thinking of things this way round demands that we think very differently about God himself. But this, I suggest, is urgent and vital right now, particularly as we pray and preach the message of the cross. Not only because it's a matter of getting our theology the right way up; also, because this is the word we need right now in our present states of distress.

John's gospel states it starkly at the end of the Prologue: Nobody has ever seen God, but the only-begotten God, close by the father's heart, has made him known. That last phrase is literally 'has exegeted him' – has laid

bare the truth of who God really is, has *been* ‘the human face of God’, the living presence of the loving God. So much would-be Christian thought has begun with an idea of who God might be – often culled from the great philosophers rather than scripture – and then has tried to fit Jesus into that frame. John insists that this is the wrong way round. *You only know who the true God is when you look hard at Jesus and revise your initial opinions around that.* Don’t even talk about God incarnate until you’ve done business with the actual incarnate God. The trouble is, of course, that if Jesus really was and is the living embodiment of Israel’s God – as the whole New Testament insists – then we have to face those extraordinary passages like John 12, and the Gethsemane scene in Matthew and Mark, where we find in the Father-Son relationship the struggle for faithful obedience which is part of the cost of love itself. As we watch Jesus walking around in Galilee and Jerusalem in John’s Gospel, and ultimately dying on the cross, the victim of twisted justice, corrupt power, and failed love, we are invited to look with awe at the generous, self-giving love of the living God himself.

However we cope with this theologically, this is where everything should come together both pastorally and in our preaching. Our task is to help people discover that the dark journey they’ve been travelling leads to the foot of the cross, and that there they can meet the God who has come there to meet them. You see, some teachers have tried to make out that the Pandemic, and the chaos that has followed around the world, is a punishment from God because of various sins that various people have committed. That demands a very selective reading of scripture, and Jesus himself in John’s gospel stands out against it. In chapter 9, his followers ask him about the man born blind: was it this man who sinned, or his parents, that this happened? No, says Jesus, that’s the wrong question: this is so that God’s glory might shine out in him. That is the keynote of John’s gospel, and particularly his story of Jesus going to the cross.

Yes; we can develop all sorts of theories. I will come to those in the other two talks. But at the heart of the New Testament picture of Jesus’ crucifixion – and I suggest it should be at the heart of all our preaching of the cross this year in particular – is the story of the God who comes to pitch his tent in our midst and to reveal his glory right there, the glory which is the glory of self-giving love. John’s gospel is not about a distant

god playing puppets with his world and with humans. It is about God coming to the place where the world is in pain, where the personal and political and societal and particularly medical tensions have reached screaming point, and standing there to take the pain of the world into himself, to be with us in the midst of it all, and right there to reveal the glory of his self-giving love. We sang a few weeks ago, ‘The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight’. But in a few weeks from now we ought to be saying, with awe and gratitude, ‘the pains and tears of all the years are met in thee this night’. That is what John’s story is all about.

And that is why, to tie together the two halves of this first talk, I commend to you this way of doing a strange kind of ‘natural theology’, putting Jesus in the middle of the picture and watching how all the broken dreams and broken signposts of human life end up pointing down to him – and, thereby, to the one true God, revealed as the God of utter self-giving love as he gives himself for the life of the world. Our world just now is reeling from so many broken dreams, from the schooling prospects of our children in lockdown to the terrible plight of so many refugees, to the persecution of minorities in many countries . . . and right home to the horrible rising tide of COVID deaths in our homes and down the street. We think of the exhausted and crushed health-care workers struggling to cope. We think of political and scientific leaders desperately trying to find a way forward. This is indeed a dark time.

But the point of the ‘broken signposts’ illustration, and the point of John’s gospel as it retrieves the biblical theme of God coming to dwell with his people, is that this is precisely where God comes to meet us. God doesn’t wait for us to clean up our lives or our world. He comes down to the place where our hopes and aspirations have crashed to the ground. He comes in word and sacrament; yes. He comes in the life of prayer – and also in the weeping that may be part of that. Yes. But he also comes in the gentle care of nurses and doctors, in the kindness of neighbours and strangers, in the extra phone call or email, in the smile behind the mask, in the sympathetic dignity of funeral staff. Because – we haven’t explored this but it is obviously the other part of the same truth – what John says about Jesus he also says about the Spirit. What God did once-for-all, decisively, in Jesus, he applies to the needs of the world by the Spirit. The Word became flesh and tabernacled in our midst; and, through wise, humble

human lives and loves, the Word becomes flesh again by the Spirit. The Spirit calls and equips us to be – perhaps to our own surprise – people of justice, love, spirituality, beauty, freedom, truth and – yes, even in the right sense, power: the power of God’s love, to speak peace and to bring a measure of healing and hope, in our preaching, our praying, our living, doing whatever we can to meet the needs of this horrible time.

How we make more complete sense of all this, putting together the message of the cross, we will discuss in the other two talks. But here we are at the centre of the gospel message. In this dark time, the cross, planted in the midst of this world’s sorrow and fear, shines out with the light of love and hope. Our task, this Lent, is so to enter into that mystery in our own prayer and reflection that in our ministries, and not least in our preaching, we may draw others into that light.

# The Crown of Thorns and the Game of Thrones

Our aim in these talks is to get ready for our preaching and teaching in Lent, and Lent is coming up fast. This last Sunday was Septuagesima, seventy days before Easter. It always creeps up on me unawares, and it's done it again this year. I guess I like living in the glow of Christmas and Epiphany, and I don't want Lent to come too soon. In the old Lectionary the Epistle for Septuagesima is the end of First Corinthians 9; where Paul contrasts the athlete's crown, which will wither and fade, and the apostle's crown, which won't. This is a happy coincidence for me, since I decided some months ago to call this second lecture 'the Crown of Thorns and the Game of Thrones'. Someone pointed out in church last Sunday that it was a few days short of Septuagesima when, on January 30, 1549, Charles I declared on the scaffold that he was passing from a corruptible crown to an incorruptible one. Perhaps he had been looking ahead to the next Sunday's readings. We can easily extrapolate from 'the athlete and the apostle' to the larger contrast in the New Testament between the political games of thrones – the power politics of the day, with as always the undercurrent of violence – and the biblical vocation, shaped by the crown of thorns, to be the Royal Priesthood within God's new creation. Paul seems here to be on the same page as the Book of Revelation, where the crown which ultimately belongs to Jesus is given to his faithful, and often martyred, followers.

The gospel is all about *victory*. Paul assumes this. John assumes this. And if we'd asked them what that victory was or how it was achieved, they would certainly have spoken of Jesus' death on the cross. Colossians 2: 'He disarmed the principalities and powers,' he writes in Colossians 2, 'and made a public example of them, triumphing over them on the cross.' It looked as if the powers of the world were triumphing over Jesus, but actually it was the other way round. That's why Paul says, in 1 Corinthians 2, that 'the rulers of this age didn't understand what was going on; because, if they had, they wouldn't have crucified the Lord of Glory'. Hebrews is equally emphatic, and seems to think it's so obvious that it



doesn't need explaining. Jesus shared in flesh and blood, we read in chapter 2, so that 'through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and set free the people who all their lives long were under the power of slavery because of the fear of death'. And then back to Revelation, where the slaughtered Lamb has won the victory by his blood. All these writers – and the four gospels themselves, as we shall see presently – are only too aware of the violent games of thrones being played out in the world, and of the dark powers that stand behind those human games. They all declare that the Messiah who wore the crown of thorns has won the victory.

Now we live, rather obviously, at a dark time. Death and the fear of death is stalking the world. Political chaos, with its violent edge, has come worryingly close in America, now in Myanmar, and in other ways in many other places, including our own country. The biblical accounts of Jesus' death all presuppose contexts like that, and they all declare that with Jesus' own paradoxical coronation the victory has been won. But despite the fact that this theme is central in the New Testament, I fear it's often ignored or belittled today – not least in our thinking and teaching about the murky world of power and politics. So here is the challenge, as we try to think and speak wisely this particular Lent: what has the crown of thorns to do with the game of thrones?

For many, of course, there has been a complete disjunction. Many see the ongoing game of political thrones as merely surface noise. It's worldly, they think, and irrelevant for Christians. For such people, Jesus' crucifixion has a purely spiritual meaning, the 'victory' over sin which enables sinners to escape hell and find their way to heaven instead. Someone asked about that in the Q and A last week. But the trouble with that antithesis – politics as worldly irrelevance, and 'going to heaven' as the true reality – is that it belongs, not in the world of the Bible, certainly not in the world of St Paul, but in the split-level world of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, whose Epicurean divide between the distant gods and the present world has affected much Christianity, including what thinks of itself as 'conservative' or 'orthodox' Christianity, as well as most of our public life.

There is a further problem here. Ever since Gustav Aulen's book *Christus Victor* nearly a century ago, many have thought that we have to choose between the theme of the cross as victory and the theme of the cross as

substitutionary. Many who want to insist on substitution have therefore felt obliged to reject 'victory'; many who are anxious about 'substitution' have gone for 'victory' instead. But in fact they belong closely together. The two strands interpret each other and can't properly be understood separately. I'll be looking mostly at Victory this week, and we will turn to Jesus as a representative substitute – from this unexpected but biblical angle – in the final lecture next week. In the New Testament, in fact, all the various theories, the so-called 'models' that later theologians have come up with, rush together into a larger, more complex whole. And when we preach or teach about the cross, though you can never lay it all out in a single sermon, we need to be aware of the larger biblical picture whenever we are handling the smaller details and the specific texts.

So much by way of extended introduction. I turn to the vital starting-point: Jesus and Passover.

## **According to the Scriptures: Jesus and Passover**

One of the most important things to remember about the meaning of the cross has to do with Jesus' own choice of timing and of symbol. *Jesus chose Passover* to do what had to be done: to go to Jerusalem, to denounce prophetically the present temple and its leadership and to inaugurate a radically different temple-equivalent. Jesus chose the freedom-moment, the victory-moment, in order to evoke, to recapitulate, God's victory over Pharaoh, over the Red Sea, over the dark forces that had kept Israel captive. Jews had for centuries longed for a 'new Exodus' to get them out of their ongoing enslavement to pagan powers. Jesus is saying: this is the moment! Interestingly, Jesus didn't choose the Day of Atonement. He chose Passover.

And when he wanted to explain to his disciples what his approaching death would mean, for the world and for them personally, he didn't give them a theory, he gave them a meal. Passover – and the radically revised Passover-style meal which Jesus instituted – were thus primarily about victory; a victory over dark, deadly, enslaving forces; and about how Jesus' followers could share in that victory.

Passover was closely linked, in well established Jewish traditions, to creation itself. Think about it: God brought the dry land out of the waters of chaos and established humans as his vice-rulers over it. Now here is Israel being brought out of Egypt, through the threatening water of the Red Sea, to be established as the Royal Priesthood. That ancient symbolic narrative was retrieved again and again through annual Passover celebrations. It became specially relevant during the Exile, when Babylon became the new chaos-monster, the new enslaving Egypt. What was needed was a new Passover; a new Creation; a new royal victor, this time to rule the world for ever. Turn all that into a nightmare vision, and you have Daniel 7, one of Jesus' favourite biblical passages: the chaos-monsters that come up out of the sea do their worst, and the Creator wins the victory over them by exalting his chosen one, the true Human Being, one like a Son of Man, as their lord and judge. That in turn reminds us of Psalm 2, where the nations rant and rage and God exalts his Son. It's no surprise that Psalm 2, along with Psalm 110, was constantly evoked by the early Christians as they explored, excitedly, what had just happened.

This, by the way, is what it means that 'the Messiah died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures': it's this rich, dense, scriptural network of meaning that matters, not just one or two proof-texts. These themes enabled Jesus' first followers to see the events of his death and resurrection as the ultimate Passover, the great victory, the defeat of the dark powers, and the launching of Jesus as the world's rightful lord. If we today are to preach the cross in the particular dark season where we find ourselves, we ought gladly to embrace this central and massive theme. We look for God to put into practice, in our time of darkness, the victory he won in that archetypal dark moment.

But here's another problem. How can we, today, talk wisely about these 'dark powers'? When C. S. Lewis wrote *Screwtape Letters*, he pointed out that some people think of 'the devil' as a nasty little creature with horns and hooves – and because they can't believe in *that* they conclude that the devil doesn't exist; the idea is a silly old superstition we can do without. But the equal and opposite error is the over-enthusiastic demon-hunter who sees devils behind every bush, attributing everything that's wrong in the world to immediate 'satanic' activity. As Lewis saw, things are more complicated than that.

We don't have good or precise language for talking about the dark non-human powers of evil and chaos over which Jesus won the victory on the cross. That failure of language may be partly why some think these powers don't exist – though it takes a peculiarly blinkered mindset to look at the history of the last two centuries and conclude that there is no such thing as a suprahuman force of evil. But actually the ancient world didn't have precise language for the dark powers, either. Within a Jewish or Christian worldview, the reason is clear. *Evil and chaos do not legitimately belong in God's good creation.* They are, in the technical sense, 'absurd'. They are intruders. They are lies: active lies; they distort and deny aspects of God's good world. Like all lies, they can be very powerful; but ultimately they don't make sense. They are sneaky; they hide behind linguistic confusion. This is why Jesus' claim before Pilate, that his kingship consisted in telling the truth, was so important – and why Pilate couldn't understand it. In Jesus' case the truth-claim is indeed a power-claim; but the power in question is the same power that made the world, the power of self-giving love. We'll come back to that.

There is yet another confusion here. In scripture, the 'principalities and powers' sometimes seem to be what we would call 'the political authorities' – Babylon and its rulers, Caesar and his empire, Herod and his court, and so on. But at other times, like in Ephesians 6, we are told that the real dark enemies are not 'flesh and blood' but the 'spiritual' world rulers of 'this present darkness'. Plenty of room for confusion here – especially when we claim that on the cross Jesus, wearing the crown of thorns, his own particular *corona*, won the victory over these 'powers' and their various throne-games. In the modern world, since the Enlightenment, we've divided up 'evil' into three quite separate areas: personal sin and guilt, dark political 'forces' of wickedness, and so-called 'natural evil' like earthquakes and so on. And Christians have by and large supposed that Jesus' death on the cross only relates to the first of these – personal evil; whereas the early Christians, following Jesus himself, lived in the belief and hope that it won the victory over all three.

All this needs teasing out much more than we can do this evening. We today have split up things which in the first century were held together, not without some differentiations but all part of a continuum. And when you think of the waters of chaos out of which God brought creation, or the

waters of the Red Sea through which God brought Israel, or the waters of Babylon by which the exiles sat down and wept, and finally the chaos-waters from which there emerged the four monsters whose arrogance was met by God with the exaltation of ‘one like a son of man’ . . . and when you think of Jesus doing and saying things which evoked all of those traditions at once . . . then you realise that one Lent won’t be enough to explore and expound all the urgent and important themes that emerge. Jesus himself spoke of his death as a ‘baptism’ to which he had to submit; and baptism, particularly Jesus’ own baptism, powerfully evokes all those other emerging-from-the-water scenes. We shouldn’t be surprised that the voice from heaven at Jesus’ baptism echoes Psalm 2 – the wicked nations raging and God laughing at them and installing his Son as lord of the world – and Isaiah 42, with Babylon doing its worst and God answering with ‘behold, my Servant’. And we know – or we should know – where those two themes end up. Part of the preacher’s task, it seems to me, is constantly to be alerting the congregation to the vast reaches of scriptural allusion and echo, so that, in the four gospels above all, we may never simply hear the stories as ‘just another story about Jesus’ but always as the story of how the biblical God came into our midst to win the ultimate victory over all the powers of evil, of whatever sort. This is where tonight’s theme joins up with what we were saying last week. This is what it looks like when God comes to be with us at the heart of the darkness. He comes, already crowned, to win the victory. That is what we should be drawing out, prayerfully, as we come to the foot of the cross in the next weeks.

### The Four Gospels: Victory and Kingdom

The theme of victory, culminating in the victory of the cross, is displayed in all four gospels in different but converging ways. As I said last time, the gospels tell the story of Jesus in terms of the long-awaited narrative of YHWH’s return to Zion. In the key kingdom-text, Isaiah 52.7-12, this ‘return’, and the announcement that ‘Your God Reigns’ – i.e. the announcement that God has at last taken his power and is reigning – is all about the overthrow of Babylon and its gods and the ‘new exodus’ in which the people return in joy to Jerusalem. So when Jesus, right from the start, announces that God is at last becoming king, he does and says

things which evoke that network of expectation. He tells cryptic stories that break open the normal expectations. He does things – celebrations, healings, confronting wickedness – which symbolized and enacted the new day that was dawning.

Once we grasp this, we can re-integrate what many have split apart, namely the kingdom and the cross. When I was Bishop of Durham I had a lot of ‘kingdom’ parishes and a lot of ‘cross’ parishes, the former working hard to make Jesus’ hope for the poor a reality, the latter working hard to explain to people that Jesus died for their sins so that they could go to heaven. It was my job to help both understand how the four gospels tell a story which embraces both. Here’s how it works.

The four gospels recount how, in parallel with Jesus’ announcement and inauguration of God’s kingdom, there seemed to be an upsurge of negative forces doing their best to thwart it. This involves the two kinds of ‘powers’ we mentioned before. There are the wild demons, shrieking at him in the synagogue, howling from the graveyards, threatening to unmask him before the time. Then there are the powerful plotters, from the Herodians angry at any suggestion of an alternative regime, to the Pharisees who had their own kingdom-agenda which looked very different from that of Jesus, and finally the spider in the centre of the web, the High Priest himself and his colleagues. And it all ends up with the Roman soldiers doing what they often did at such moments: turning Jesus into a parody of a king, a scarecrow figure in purple robe and crown of thorns. ‘We run this world; Caesar has won the game of thrones, and this is what we think of other would-be royalty!’

And if we suppose these two types of opposition (the so-called ‘spiritual’ and the ‘political’) are unrelated, we should think again. The gospels make it clear that the shadowy dark powers we might call ‘spiritual’ can sometimes work more directly, but they prefer to do so *through* human beings, particularly those who hold real or *de facto* power. Like I said, they’re sneaky. They hide. So: spiritual *and* political? If the cross is a victory, it is a victory, however paradoxically, over both.

Matthew and Mark both tell the story of Jesus in this way, in terms of a build-up of opposition – political, demonic, call it what you will, but mostly it’s both. It becomes explicit in Luke at various points, notably when the

soldiers seize Jesus in Gethsemane: ‘This is your hour,’ he responds, ‘and the power of darkness’ (22.53). Evil at every level is doing its worst. Even the disciples are in danger of being sucked into its vortex.

John draws this out further in chapter 12. It’s an odd but vital little scene. Some Greeks have come to the feast and want to see Jesus. But instead of agreeing to meet them, Jesus muses about a grain of wheat falling into the earth and dying – a clear reference to his forthcoming death. This precipitates a Gethsemane-like moment: ‘Now is my heart troubled’, with its resolution, ‘Father, glorify your name’. A thunderclap from heaven answers him. But what’s all this got to do with the Greeks? Read on: ‘Now comes the judgment of this world!’ declares Jesus. ‘*Now this world’s ruler is going to be thrown out!* And when I’ve been lifted up from the earth, I will draw all people to myself.’ This little passage, John 12.31 and 32, is one of John’s most important pointers to the meaning of Jesus’ death as victory. We need to spell this out a little more.

Jesus saw the world as being under the power of ‘the ruler of this world’ – which in John, it seems, is both the political authority, as in 14.30 where ‘the ruler of this world’ is coming in the shape of a squad of soldiers, and the dark power that stands behind them. Remember how in chapter 13 the satan enters Judas, so that he becomes the accuser, the one who turns Jesus in. And the point is that Jesus’ death on the cross will defeat the ruler of this world – in both senses – so that then the world that had been under that dark authority will be free to turn to the true God in faith, hailing the risen Jesus as Lord.

John 12 thus stands in relation to John’s story of Jesus’ trial and execution rather like his Prologue stands in relation to the whole book. In the Beginning was the Word, and the Word became flesh – but that theme is not repeated thereafter. We are expected to hold it in our minds throughout. So here: John wants us to read his Passion narrative as the story of Jesus’ victory over the ruler of the world.

Thus each of the gospels, in its own way, tells the story of Jesus as the story not only of Israel’s God coming back to be king, but of this necessarily drawing out from its hiding places the various forces of evil, all trying to mess things up, to offer different (and often violent) kingdom-visions, to stop Jesus in his tracks, to divert him into other pathways, to



prevent him winning the ultimate victory. There is a paradox here which matches the peculiarity of the powers of evil themselves. The powers conspire to put Jesus on the cross, but that very death becomes their death-warrant. Back to Paul: the rulers didn't understand, because, if they had, they wouldn't have crucified the Lord of Glory. This comes out in Acts 4, when the apostles, threatened by the authorities, pray Psalm 2, seeing Herod and Pilate as representing the raging nations, and seeing God laughing at the rulers and establishing his kingdom precisely through the Messiah's death and resurrection.

Just to be clear on this: Jesus' resurrection shows that his death was victorious. The resurrection is a kind of victory, of course, as well; but, as Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15, what the resurrection does, as well as launching the new creation, but the reason it can do this is because *the cross did indeed win the victory over death itself, and that this must mean that it had dealt fully with sin, which is the cause of death*. That is vital, and we shall explore it further next week. Without the resurrection, the cross means that the chaos-monsters have won again. Jesus becomes just another failed Messiah. But with the resurrection the entire scripturally-based kingdom-agenda which Jesus was putting into action, and which the gospels all display, is retrospectively validated. The crucifixion is seen to be what Jesus said it would be: the victory over all the powers of darkness.

Thus, at the end of Matthew, the risen Jesus declares that now 'All authority in heaven and on earth' has been given to him. This echoes Daniel 7, and it goes with those great Psalms, 2 and 110, and the relevant Isaiah passages. Luke obviously shares this view, especially in Acts; John agrees, though again from a different angle. It's happened! The victory is won! But this then highlights the question: what does this actually *mean* – especially when the world still seems to this day full of corrupt power, of lies and fraud, and of sickness, plague, impending ecological doom and death itself?

## Victory: Now and Not Yet?

This dilemma is already there in the New Testament. Some of the writers almost seem to relish the paradox. On the one hand, they claim, dramatically, that Jesus has *already* overcome all enemies and is already installed as Lord of the World. You get that in Matthew, in Colossians, in Revelation – all over the place. Yet the same books indicate that the apostles who are celebrating Jesus' lordship are in prison, in exile, being beaten up, facing persecution, hardship and even death. So what is all this talk of victory? What does it say to us in our dilemmas?

The fatal move here is to collapse the whole thing into Platonism. Never mind, some will say: we are on our way to heaven, that's the victory: this world can go to hell and it doesn't matter—we're out of here. Now of course, as Paul says, 'If for this life only have we hoped in the Messiah,' wrote Paul, 'we are of all people most to be pitied'. But the ultimate future – the full result of the victory of the cross – is not 'heaven'. It is the new heavens and new earth *which were already inaugurated when Jesus came out of the tomb on Easter morning*. To let God's creation be lost while we escape somewhere else would be a victory for the power of evil, not for the Creator. And if that new creation has begun, embodying already the victory over the dark powers, then the Holy Spirit is given specifically so that Jesus' followers can be new-creation people here and now, working and praying to implement Jesus' victory in real, concrete anticipations of that new world.

Think of Paul in 2 Corinthians. We are under pressure, he says, but not crushed; at a loss, but not at our wits' end; persecuted but not abandoned; cast down but not destroyed. This was of course retrospective. As we know from the start of the letter, at the time it *did* feel as though he was crushed, hopeless, abandoned and destroyed. But, as he goes on, we are treated as unknown, and yet well known; as dying, and look, we are alive; as punished but not killed; as sad, yet always celebrating; poor, yet bringing riches to many; as having nothing, yet possessing everything. That is the characteristic early Christian position. It's called 'living between the times' or 'finding yourself caught in the now-and-not yet'. We will then be tempted either to overplay the Now and become naïve triumphalists; or to overplay the Not Yet and become

gloomy dualists. In A.A. Milne language, we can become either shallow Tiggers or gloomy Eeyores. Perhaps the annual discipline of Lent, Holy Week, Good Friday and then Easter and Pentecost is designed to help us keep that balance. We are an Easter people, and Alleluia is our song – even in the COVID ward, even at the graveside, even when under ecological threat or dazed by the massive lies with which powerful politicians deceive millions.

How do we maintain the balance, and genuinely experience the victory even in the midst of the struggle? The obvious ways are prayer, scripture and the sacraments, particularly the Eucharist. ‘As often as you eat the bread and drink the cup,’ declares Paul, ‘you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes’. Doing it says it: breaking the bread declares to the principalities and powers that Jesus is Lord and they are not. That’s why eucharistic unity is so important: the cross has abolished the enmity, and when Jesus’ people gather around his table, ideally representing every kindred, tribe and tongue so far as possible, that shows – as with Jesus’ message to the Greeks! – that ‘the ruler of this world’, that would maintain its dark rule over a divided world, has been overthrown. Many Christians have been suspicious of any sacramental emphasis, as though it’s too material, too much like magic. But magic is the attempt to get to new creation without following Jesus through his cross and resurrection. Once those are in place, the sacraments are a real announcement, creating a new space within which real victory can happen.

That combination of prayer, shared worship and bold witness can lead to dramatic signs of victory. One Good Friday in Stockton on Tees I joined the local vicar and a small team of ‘street pastors’, walking around the crowded and murky clubs and pubs, as a friendly and supportive presence for young people often at considerable risk. Before we went out, after the opening prayer meeting, we visited the local police chief. He was blunt: he was an atheist, no time for church and all that stuff. ‘But,’ he said, ‘since your lot have been out at the weekends, the crime rate in Stockton has gone through the floor. So whatever you’re doing, keep it up.’ That counts as a victory in my book. Things like that could be multiplied a thousand times. Prayer; scripture; worship; witness – the witness often being practical more than verbal.

You see, the paradox we noted when we were thinking about evil (that it's *both* the rulers *and* the shadowy forces that lurk behind them) turns out to be a parody of the truth of how God wants to work *through his people* in the world. We are called to a freedom, to a life of truth, of renewed genuine humanness, in which God the creator will work with us and through us by his Spirit to implement the victory of Jesus, the victory of the cross, through our own creative, prayerful, and probably painful, work and words. Part of being people of the victory is that we are called to be people of the truth – the truth of God's original beautiful creation, the truth of the victory of the cross, the truth of God's new creation, restoring the original project and getting it back on track. That will usually involve suffering of some sort. The Spirit is given so that we can confront the powers of the world, as Jesus did, and call them to account. And the powers don't like it. But victory is assured. In all this, the Spirit is totally at work and we are totally at work. 'I worked harder than them all,' says Paul, 'but it wasn't me, it was God's grace within me'.

The victory of the cross thus generates the multiple vocations in which that victory is made known in the world. When the risen Jesus says 'as the Father sent me, so I send you', and breathes his Spirit on his followers, he is commissioning them to be people of celebration; people of healing; people of confrontation with the powers. In each case the victory of the cross enables us to break through barriers that would otherwise stay impenetrable. Joint celebration across cultural divides – that seems like an ideal of modern secular morality, but actually it was the original Christian vision, and I suspect that it can only fully be achieved through following Jesus. Healing – well, in the ancient world you had to be rich to get proper medical help, but from the start the Christians looked after the poor and the sick, and the great hospitals of earlier times were inspired by that vision – while many continued, also, the ongoing work of praying for God to heal when the medical profession can't help. It isn't an either/or. Again, human work and God's work now flow together. It is all a matter of applying Jesus' victory.

When it comes to confrontation, Jesus' challenge to Pilate is the model. Sometimes that brings dramatic victory, as with Desmond Tutu's cheerful and prayerful challenge to the rulers of white South Africa. Sometimes it

brings martyrdom, and sometimes that itself leads on to victory. Again, the cross is the sign of victory.

And what about the deeply personal challenges? Paul's account in Romans 8 of God's victory through Jesus begins with the personal moral challenge. The victory of the cross must be won, again and again, in what he calls 'putting to death the deeds of the body'. Sadly, many Christians have thought *only* of that personal morality and have avoided the challenge of implementing Jesus' victory in the wider world. Equally, many have used the pursuit of wider social or political goals as an excuse to avoid the challenges of personal morality. I am reminded of a former colleague who said to me, after a difficult College meeting: 'I know our Lord told us to be wise as serpents *and* innocent as doves, but, being busy people, some of us find it advisable to *specialize*.' But of course there is no place for selective victories. That allows the lie to creep back in. As the Psalmist says, 'You desire truth in the inward parts; you will make me understand wisdom secretly.'

How then do our victories of whatever sort relate to the ultimate victory over death itself, namely resurrection? Every small victory in the present is borrowed from that future and points towards it. Like the fruit which the spies brought back in Numbers 14, it is a genuine part of God's future coming forwards to meet us right now. So, as Lent approaches, and as the Pandemic attacks us in different waves, and as we hear of wars and rumours of wars, of coups and rumours of coups, of political upheavals and threats at home and abroad, we find the cross planted at the heart of the life of the church. We find our victorious Lord crowned with many crowns, but first and foremost with the crown of thorns, the *corona* which is the sign that he has come to be with us at the heart of the darkness. We cling to him in faith and hope. Only there do we have assurance of victory.

We live in the middle of his time. Behind us is the victory Jesus himself achieved, once and for all, against all the dark powers. When they threaten us, we remind ourselves, and them, that they are a beaten rabble, albeit still noisy. In prayer, baptism and Eucharist we announce Jesus' victory. We shelter under its protection, and then we implement it, as best we can, in personal, pastoral, medical and political life. Ahead of us is the final victory when – as in 1 Corinthians 15 – the last enemy, death, will be

abolished for ever. We implement the first victory and thereby anticipate the second.

In all this we are drawn by love. The reason the crown of thorns wins out over the game of thrones is the power of love. 'The son of God loved me and gave himself for me'. Victory through representative substitution. That is the heart of it all. And that's where we'll get to next time.

# A Far, Far Better Thing: With his Stripes We are Healed?

I was introduced to Charles Dickens at an early age, and not in a good way. One Saturday in the late 1950s, the one and only television channel showed the final episode of *A Tale of Two Cities*. It was gripping, harrowing, and totally unsuitable for an impressionable ten year old. I had never heard of a guillotine. I knew little about the French and precisely nothing about their Revolution. But suddenly there was this huge, nightmarish machine, and cartloads of people being brought for decapitation. How that got through the 1950s censors I have no idea.

In the climax of the book, as you know, the wastrel Sydney Carton, who has messed up his own life and other people's, suddenly glimpses a chance to do something heroic. He himself is smitten with love for Lucie Manette, but she hopes to marry Charles Darnay; and Darnay is going to the guillotine. It is a far, far better thing that I do now, ponders Sydney Carton, than I have ever done. He changes places with Darnay. Down comes the horrid blade, and Sydney Carton dies a hero.

Dickens was playing to a Victorian gallery well used to Jesus dying in the place of the sinner. Substitution, however troubling, cannot be got rid of in Western Christianity at least without leaving a gap. The late great Henry Chadwick, lecturing in Christ Church fifty years ago, concluded that, however difficult substitution may be, until something like this has been said we haven't got to the heart of the matter.

Of course, Jesus was sinless, dying for sinners – unlike the messed-up Sydney Carton dying in the place of a good man. But Dickens knew he was on to a good thing. Substitution – one life for another – still catches our breath. Maximilian Kolbe, now memorialized on the west front of Westminster Abbey, stepped forward in Auschwitz to take the place of a stranger. And so on.

So how does the powerful story of Jesus dying in the place of sinners – Jesus dying in *my* place, in *your* place – fit with all the other things we've said so far in these talks? And how can we approach the task of



presenting this truth, at once so familiar and so strange, in our preaching and teaching?

Whether you preach for half an hour or only seven minutes, it's vital that when you focus on a particular passage you keep the larger story in mind. As I've said before, we often get tangled up because we have the wrong story in our heads – or, if not wholly the wrong story, a distorted, unbalanced version of the biblical story. The biblical notion of substitution, of Jesus dying in the place of sinners, means what it means within the biblical story. Let's have a look.

## According to the Scriptures

'The Messiah died for our sins according to the scriptures', Paul in 1 Corinthians 15 was invoking a dense web of scriptural themes, not just individual proof texts. But most people at this point will go straight for Isaiah 53. Rightly so. 'Wounded for our transgressions'; 'bruised for our iniquities'; 'with his stripes we are healed'. However well we know Isaiah, the passage remains strange and dark. But Jesus himself, the four evangelists, Paul and First Peter all use it to make sense of the crucifixion. And when people think of Isaiah 53 they often think of a story-line like this: we sinners deserve hell; Jesus took our punishment; therefore we won't go to hell, we'll go to heaven instead. That way of telling the story has loomed large in sermons and hymns over the years. But does it do justice to Isaiah 53? I believe not.

The so called fourth servant song follows immediately the promise, in ch 52, that YHWH is coming back in royal triumph to Zion, having overcome pagan Babylon. He has bared his holy Arm in the sight of the nations. So how has he done this? The 'servant song' declares: *this is how*. The Servant will be exalted, silencing pagan monarchs, despite his being despised and rejected. 'Who would have believed' asks the poet in 53.1, 'that *he* was the Arm of the Lord?' (53.1). *The work of the Servant, wounded for our transgressions, is the means by which YHWH is establishing his kingdom over the nations*. It isn't about people being saved from hell and going to heaven. With his stripes we are healed – and thereby God's kingdom is being established on earth as in heaven. At the

end of the chapter, the deed is done, and Isaiah 54 celebrates *covenant renewal*: Israel, cast away like a divorced wife, is now welcomed back. Then, in Isaiah 55, new covenant leads to new creation. God's word will go out like rain or snow and make the barren land fruitful. Instead of the thorn shall come up the cypress, instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle. The curse is lifted. New creation can begin.

This is different from the traditional picture. The suffering servant, Israel-in-person, takes upon himself the result of Israel's idolatry and sin, so that a way through may be found for the covenant to be renewed and for the wider world therefore to be blessed. 'Everyone who is thirsty' can now come to the water. Worldwide welcome, open invitation. The dark power is broken. Prisoners are now to be freed. This is a straightforward reading of Isaiah 52 to 55, though you wouldn't know it from most discussions of atonement theology.

Ah but, someone might say, that was the Old Testament, so of course it's about covenant and creation; but haven't we moved on now? Don't we now look for a more otherworldly hope? Doesn't it really mean that we avoid hell and go to heaven instead? Well, let's have a look.

Begin at the end, with Revelation. In Revelation 5 it looks as though the scroll containing the divine plan for creation cannot be unrolled and put into effect, because God intends to work *through obedient humans* – and there are none to be found. But then the Lion of Judah appears – in the form of the Lamb who was slain. He, the obedient human, can unroll the scroll and take forwards the Creator's purpose. His saving death has broken the power of evil. And the humans who celebrate his victory do not say, He has saved us so we can go to heaven. They say that the Lamb's victory has now ransomed people from every tribe and language and people and nation, to make them 'a kingdom and priests to serve our God, *and they will reign on earth*'. This destiny – to be genuine image-bearers at last, reflecting God into the world and the praises of the world back to God – is the result of the Lamb's work of redemption. The end of the rescuing story is not 'heaven' but the long-promised new heavens and new earth.

So what about Paul, regularly appealed to in this context? Does he not insist on substitutionary atonement? Yes, he does; but again – surprisingly to many – his larger story, like those of Isaiah or Revelation, is not the

narrative that has become familiar in western theology. (I wrote a book on all this a few years ago called *The Day the Revolution Began*; though I'm coming from a different angle tonight.)

People regularly quote Paul's line in 2 Corinthians 5.21: 'God made him to be sin who knew no sin'. Paul is summing up the previous few verses: God was in the Messiah reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them'. Yes indeed. But what's the result? The second half of verse 21 is usually translated something like 'so that we might become the righteousness of God'. This looks like the sixteenth-century notion of God's 'righteousness' somehow being 'reckoned' or 'imputed' to believers. But that's not Paul's point. Throughout chapters 3 to 6 he is discussing *the nature of apostleship*. The Corinthians have doubted whether they can really respect him, suffering jailbird as he is. So in chapter 3 Paul explains that his apostleship is all about the *new covenant* promised in Jeremiah and Ezekiel. And then in chapter 5 verse 17, just before our passage, he declares climactically: If anyone is in the Messiah, *NEW CREATION!* There you have it: new covenant, new creation, and the apostolic ministry of Paul being God's instrument in bringing them about. And guess what? He immediately (in 6.2) quotes from one of the Servant Songs in Isaiah. The second half of verse 21, declaring the result of the sinless Jesus' 'being made sin for us' has to do with *the apostolic ministry as embodying God's faithfulness to the covenant and to creation itself*. Jesus' substitutionary death is not just to rescue sinners *from* something; it is to rescue them *for* something. God rescues and renews humans – through the death of Jesus in their place – so that they may be his partners in the rescue and renewal of the world.

That is a very different message to what has usually been taught. The normal story, the one some people swear *by* and other people – perhaps under their breath – sometimes swear *at*, is about God needing to get his vengeful anger off his chest, to be in that sense 'satisfied'. That's not what Paul is talking about here.

Come now to Galatians. Chapter 3 verse 13: The Messiah became a curse for us. Here's how it goes: The law-observant people are under the law's curse because they don't keep it; Deuteronomy says that anyone hanged on a tree is accursed; therefore Jesus, on the cross, became a curse for us. Q.E.D. But what is the result? For many preachers, you'd think Paul

would conclude, So that we might be freed from the guilt, penalty and power of sin, and go to heaven rather than hell. But what he actually says is that the Messiah became a curse for us ‘so that the blessing of Abraham might come upon the Gentiles, and that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith’.

What sort of ‘atonement theology’ is that? Throughout Galatians 3 he is expounding God’s covenant promise, to give Abraham a multi-ethnic family. The Law looked as if it would block that, since Abraham’s own family were under the curse. But the Messiah has come to that very point and has taken it upon himself. Now the covenant renewal can proceed unchecked. And, exactly as in Isaiah 53, this leads to the great promise of ‘new creation’, symbolized first in Gentile inclusion: as in 6.15, neither circumcision nor uncircumcision matters; what matters is new creation. Galatians isn’t about how sinners go to heaven. It is about how God, through the Messiah, creates a single Jew-plus-Gentile family, and how that new united humanity forms the signpost pointing to God’s creation-renewing purpose.

This too is the main point in the famous passage where Paul declares in chapter 2 verse 20 that ‘the son of God loved me and gave himself for me’. This recalls the opening statement in 1.4, where ‘the Messiah gave himself for our sins’, not ‘so that we could escape hell and go to heaven’, but ‘in order to rescue us from the present evil age’. Jesus’ death in the sinner’s place means that sinners, Jewish and Gentile alike, can now be full, free members of the one people of God. Again, Paul’s vision of the Messiah ‘giving himself for our sins’ is aimed at the ultimate new creation, for which the Jew-plus-Gentile church is a kind of pilot project. (As an aside, it’s perhaps no surprise that a church that has forgotten its essentially multiethnic character has also forgotten its creational responsibilities.)

‘So What about Romans? Surely that’s where Paul spells out substitutionary atonement?’ Well, yes he does; but again the overall context, the full argument of Romans itself, is what matters. No time for more than a quick glance, and a footnote to my longer writings; but let me say three things.

First, the great climaxes in Romans are all about new creation. In chapter 8 the ultimate promise is not that we will leave this world and go to heaven, but that God will rescue creation itself from its slavery to decay in a great act of new creation – and that redeemed image-bearing humans, just like in the book of Revelation, will play a crucial role in that. In chapter 11, God's purpose for Jew and Gentile alike leads to the praise of God the wise creator. The final climax in 15.7-13 focuses on Isaiah 11, the promise of creation renewed and restored. And for this, the corporate worship of the multi-ethnic people of God – which depends on the mutual welcome Paul insists upon in chapters 14 and 15 – is the advance sign of that ultimate new creation. The atonement theology of Romans is, like Isaiah, aimed at the renewal first of the covenant and thence of the creation. So, first: look to the climactic conclusions to see what the letter is all about.

Second, Romans 1-4 does indeed sketch a law court scene: all humankind are convicted of sin, and God then deals with it. But this all about the unveiling of 'God's righteousness', which refers, not to the righteous status which people have through God's justifying action, but to God's own righteousness, his covenant faithfulness. The crucial passage 3.24-26, so often read in terms of 'propitiation', of the death of Jesus pacifying or satisfying God's anger, is in fact evoking the Temple. The *hilasterion*, often translated the 'propitiation', refers to the 'mercy-seat', the lid of the Ark of the Covenant, the place where God promised to meet with his people. Within the Tabernacle or Temple, the sacrificial blood was the purifying agent, cleansing the shrine from all human pollution so that God could come and dwell with his people. Yes, the passage is dense and tightly written. But when you read it within the larger context of chapters 1 to 4 as a whole it, too, is about the death of Jesus as the means by which the covenant could be fulfilled after all, so that the blessing of Abraham might come upon the whole world. Thus, second, as in Isaiah – no surprises that Paul alludes to Isaiah here – the servant's death means new covenant and therefore new creation.

The clearest substitutionary passage in Romans, third, is chapter 8 verses 1 to 4. 'There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Messiah Jesus', Paul writes, because – cutting to verse 3 – God has sent his own son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and as a sin-offering; and, right there in the flesh, he condemned sin'. for the avoidance of all doubt, this is

definitely *penal*: there is no condemnation . . . because God condemned sin. And it is definitely *substitutionary*: sin has been condemned in the death of the representative Messiah, so that there is ‘no condemnation’ for those who are ‘in him’. But notice two things. First, he doesn’t say that God condemned Jesus. He says that God condemned *sin* in the *flesh* of Jesus. That may not seem much, but actually it’s huge. And, second, here as in Galatians 3 the result is not ‘so we can be forgiven and go to heaven’ – heaven isn’t mentioned in Romans 8 – but so that humans can be remade by the Spirit, ahead of their ultimate remaking in the resurrection, and, as in Revelation, can play their parts in God’s new creation.

## **A new narrative framework?**

All this has been quite dense. I don’t apologise for that; if we’re going to think and preach wisely about the cross we need to take time to give the Bible the careful, prayerful close reading it demands. What seems to have happened through western theology over the last few hundred years is that a particular interpretation of the cross – a narrative about humans heading for hell and God punishing Jesus instead of them – has taken over and systematically pulled the early Christian preaching out of shape. And – to come at last to the four gospels – this has meant that when people have read the gospel accounts of Jesus’ death they have seen them through the lens of this controlling story. This is hard, since the gospels themselves don’t put it like that. But before we turn to the gospels let me say a word about this shift of perspective; about discerning the story which the early Christians were actually telling about the cross.

This is the more vital as our world lurches this way and that, with political as well as medical crises. I have argued in the previous two lectures that the early Christians saw the death of Jesus, first, in terms of God coming to dwell in our midst, to meet us at the point where our hopes and dreams have all collapsed. Then, second, they saw it in terms of God winning the victory against all the dark forces that have attacked his good creation. God’s aim throughout was to create a people, in whose midst he would come to dwell, who would be agents of purposes of new creation.

So how does the story work – the true story which the Bible is actually telling? First, it speaks of new creation rather than of leaving this world and going to somewhere called ‘heaven’. Our mistake has been to let Plato dominate our thinking, imagining that we somehow have to get to God whereas God has promised to come and be with us; imagining that the present world is a shabby old place which God is going to do away with rather than a beautiful but flawed place ruled by a dark, usurping power which God is going to defeat.

Second, and crucially, the Bible speaks of the human vocation, not to go to heaven and live with God, but to reflect God’s image into the world: to be the ‘royal priesthood’, who, by worshipping the creator, are thereby able to take forward his world-rescuing purposes. The dark usurping powers – about which I spoke last time – have maintained their grip *through human sin*. This is the vital point. *We have told the story in terms of human sin needing to be punished.. The Bible tells the story in terms of human sin being used by the powers to keep the world in their deadly grip.* You see, in order to keep up with our platonized eschatology, we have moralized our anthropology. We have imagined the human pair facing, and failing, a moral examination in the Garden of Eden, whereas they were in fact facing, and failing, a vocational challenge. So the Bible speaks about the substitutionary death of Jesus as the means by which the Creator in his love is rescuing humans from their sin *so that they can then be part of his purposes of new creation*. The human drama throughout scripture is not about the fact that we’re all sinful and so unlikely to ‘go to heaven’. It’s about the fact that we’re all sinful, all idolaters, *so that the powers of corruption and decay can thwart the Creator’s plans to run his world through obedient humans*. Jesus, the unique human – the ultimate Image of God – dies in our place to rescue us from our sins in order to rob the dark powers of their grip which prevents us being fruitful in the Creator’s new-creation purposes.

So: we have platonized our eschatology, ignoring the biblical teaching about new heavens and new earth. We have therefore moralized our anthropology, focusing on sin and forgiveness which, while important, are not the whole story, forgetting that the ultimate problem with idolatry and sin is that it stops us from being the royal priesthood, the image-bearers, working in the present time to bring about signs of new creation. But



therefore – the third wrong move – many have therefore slid towards an essentially pagan soteriology, in which a malevolent god takes out his wrath on an innocent victim. Of course, no serious preacher or teacher would ever say it like that. But that's what many people, including many young people, have heard when being taught substitutionary atonement; and many have reacted against it. I am arguing that the Bible does indeed teach a penal substitutionary atonement, rooted in the application of Isaiah 53 and other passages to the death of Jesus; but that *the meaning of this atonement changes dramatically* when you put it back in the biblical story as opposed to the non-biblical ones we've become accustomed to.

Think, after all, how idolatry works. Not a subject we look at too much today, but we should: the idols haven't gone away and they are as sneaky and seductive as ever. And when we humans worship idols – money, sex, power, whatever they may be – we make over to those idols the real power which we as image-bearers ought to be using to further God's purposes. The problem with sin is not just that it's doing something wrong; it is failing to do something right. Our sin then enables the powers to tighten their grip on us and on the world. When Jesus dies in our place, that grip is broken, and we are free: free to choose to leave the power of the idols and live for God's kingdom.

## **The Story of the Cross**

Now at last – not before time, you may suppose – we can move to the four gospels. Generations who have been taught 'the gospel' in the form of 'Jesus died in my place to save me from hell' have searched the four 'gospels', and have been puzzled that there doesn't seem much overlap. Well, no: in the four gospels Jesus dies *so that God's kingdom may be inaugurated on earth as in heaven*. That's the story the four gospels are telling. And *Jesus, dying to bring that about, is himself the ultimate signpost to God the Creator, set up within his broken world*. Remember our first lecture? Thus *Jesus is dying to do for Israel and the world what the Temple was set up to do*: to be the living – and dying – presence of the creator God in the darkest part of his world, to overcome the power of evil, corruption and death and to emerge, like Israel from the Red Sea, like

creation itself from the waters of chaos, embodying – and I mean *embodying* -- the new creation, the joining of heaven and earth.

The four gospels make these points not of course through systematic analysis but through the story itself. When we do find hints of what we later think of as ‘atonement-theology’ they are firmly embedded, like Isaiah 53, within the flow of the narrative. In Mark 10, James and John want the best seats in the kingdom, do they? You’re thinking like pagans, replies Jesus; the Son of Man didn’t come to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many. That evocation of Isaiah is embedded, not in a theology of how sinners go to heaven, but in a discussion about the coming kingdom and its pagan caricatures. Isaiah 53 is woven into the various gospel accounts. Luke’s Jesus reminds the disciples that the scriptures said ‘he was numbered with the transgressors’. John insists that the whole of Jesus’ career has been an unveiling of Isaiah 53.

So, as I said last time, the four gospels tell the story of Jesus launching God’s kingdom, with the dark powers striking back in various ways. That messianic battle continues until it reaches a climax as Jesus confronts first Caiaphas and then Pilate: the kingdom of God ranged against the caricature of that kingdom in the present temple-establishment and the larger caricature of Caesar’s brutal rule. All the powers of the world conspire to put Jesus on the cross. Not just the apparent evil, either; the greatest religion the world had known, the greatest example of imperial justice the world had seen, got together to put Jesus on the cross. The world did its best and its worst; and Jesus drew it all on to himself and exhausted its power. Thus, as in Paul, *the kingdom is won through the cross*. He gave himself for our sins *to set us free from the present evil age*. Victory *through* substitution is the name of the game.

And the victory emerges on the other side: first in the resurrection itself, and then in the outpouring of the Spirit so that Jesus’ ransomed followers can act on his behalf to bring about genuine signs of God’s kingdom, communities of unlikely people worshipping together and establishing centres of new creation. Ransomed to be the royal priesthood – in the ultimate future, and even in the present time.

Once we see this pattern we can read our way, this Lent, to the foot of the cross, step by painful step, preaching whichever of the images comes to

the fore at the right moment. Jesus announces God's judgment on the nation and its leaders – and its central institution, the Temple – for their failure to be the light of the world. That judgment will mean violent destruction by Rome. But Jesus goes ahead to take that judgment on to himself, like the hen gathering the chickens under her wings so that the fox may attack her but spare the chicks. My teacher George Caird expressed this memorably: 'Thus in literal historic truth, as well as in theological interpretation, the one bore the sins of the many.'

That is the overarching theme of substitution: the Messiah taking Israel's fate upon himself, to enable others to escape if they would do so and thereby to launch the new, decisive phase of God's plan. But this is then played out in numerous smaller scenes, and that's again and again where our own pastoral application can come in. The woman with the issue of blood touches Jesus; he therefore becomes technically unclean – but somehow it works the other way, and the woman is healed, cleansed. He touches the leper, or the young man's corpse at Nain. Same problem; same result. Likewise, he shares celebratory meals with the outcasts and the unclean: 'he has gone in to eat,' they say, 'with a sinner'; but Jesus comes out and declares that 'today salvation has come to this house'. Once we see what's going on we can preach any and all of these and many like them. We must encourage people to live in the story, to see and feel for themselves the ways the whole narrative is saying 'he bore our infirmities; he was wounded for our transgressions'! 'With his stripes we are healed': the ultimate healing on the cross is anticipated, as Matthew particularly sees, throughout the gospel account.

The end of that long narrative road is when the brigand Barabbas is set free, and Jesus dies quite literally in his place. The earlier sneer, 'he's gone in to eat with a sinner' turns into a curse: 'he's gone out to die with the brigands'. But that's the point. Jesus, like the serpent on the pole in Numbers, is embodying in himself the failure of Israel to be the light of the world. He is numbered with the transgressors. The theme of 'the innocent in place of the guilty' is there all through the story, not superimposed onto it. Jesus is accused at the start of Luke 23 of crimes of which Luke's readers know he's innocent while others are guilty; by the end of Luke 23 the brigand on the cross has said exactly that. The centurion in Luke

declares that he's innocent; in Mark, that he really is God's son (a Caesar-title, of course).

So, too, the Temple theme which is prominent in all four gospels comes out strongly: you who would destroy the Temple and build it again in three days, save yourself and come down from the cross! But by now the reader should know – and our congregations need to be taught – that it is because he is indeed the Temple-builder he must stay on the cross and not save himself. He is taking upon himself the weight of the world's wickedness to exhaust it, to let evil do its worst and give back nothing but forgiveness, to hang there as the incarnate presence of the loving God in the waste of our wraths and sorrows.

Victory, then, comes *through* substitution. It isn't an either/or. That is the teaching of the New Testament, stitched tightly into the fabric of the four gospels, offering numerous vignettes, personal stories, moments to which in our preaching we can latch on and hold tight as the narrative lurches towards its terrible end. Jesus dies, embodying God's justice crushed by injustice, incarnating God's love rejected by human hatred, God's freedom dying the death of the slave, God's beauty defaced, marred beyond imagining, God's truth in the world of lies, God's power in human weakness, God's presence in the paradox of apparent God-forsakenness. Jesus thus establishes what the scriptures had promised: the living God coming back at last to dwell in the midst of his people, and to reveal his innermost character as the God of utter self-giving love.

Our task, then, may be to walk with our congregations through the Last Supper, particularly the foot washing scene; to help them to inhabit the darkness of Gethsemane. We need to teach them to read the Gospels as what they really are, not simply a collocation of fragments of 'what happened next', but the story of how the world's evil – our evil – came rushing together to put Jesus on the cross. Of how the powers of evil that still try to enslave *us* and make us serve their destructive purposes were defeated that day, though they still like to pretend otherwise and we are often taken in.

We need, all of us, to grasp more fully how it all works. Congregations will need time to ponder, step by step, how they themselves can come to the foot of the cross and say, in wonder and gratitude, 'He was wounded for

our transgressions'. And to hear the words of Paul, to which Dickens' words on the lips of Sydney Carton are a distant echo: God commends his love for us in that while we were yet sinners the Messiah died for us. It was a far, far better thing to do than God had ever done.

And the result – which we so need right now – is not that we look at the cross and simply say, 'Phew! That's all right then! My sins are forgiven and I'm going to heaven to be with God'. No. That isn't where the gospels place the emphasis. The message of the cross – victory through substitution – means that we are now set free to be genuine humans. This is what we should then be celebrating through the forty days of Easter; perhaps it's because we've had a truncated or wrongly focused view of the cross that Easter is often felt as simply a 'happy ending' to the story of Good Friday. No: the cross sets us free, as image-bearing humans, as God's royal priesthood, to be people of worship and witness; to be people of celebration and service. We who have seen all our dreams of justice, freedom and the rest land up in a heap at the foot of the cross are now told to stand up and re-erect those signposts: to be people of justice in a world of injustice, of truth in a world of lies, of beauty in a world of ugliness, of genuine spirituality – bringing heaven and earth together – in a world of Gnosticism and other counterfeits; of freedom in a world of slavery; of the right sort of power, the power of healing love, in a world of brute force. And, ultimately, of love itself in a world of suspicion and hatred: the cross is about the outpoured love of God, and the longer we look at it the more our own love should be kindled in return.

That is how the cross – victory through substitution – enables us to be Easter people. It isn't about being saved so we can go to heaven; it's about being saved, from our sin and its entail, so that we can be heaven-on-earth people already, here and now. Of course there are ultimate goals. We wait for the new heavens and new earth. If for this life only we have hoped in the Messiah, we are of all people the most pitiable. But the New Testament doesn't want us to stand around gazing up into heaven, or even lounging around waiting for the new earth. Jesus takes our sins, as our representative substitute, so that, with victory assured, we can be signpost-makers for the kingdom here and now. Our world urgently needs that. And whenever we think – as we certainly will – that it's impossible, that the forces ranged against us are too great, or that we ourselves are so

messed up that we will never manage to do anything, we need – and every member of our congregations needs – the message of the cross: that the victory *has* been won, that Jesus *did* die for our sins and rise again to put the world and ourselves right, and that by his Spirit new things, creative, healing things, can now be done, as genuine advance signs of the kingdom.

When I was very young I used to sing, and sometimes I still do: Wounded for me, wounded for me; there on the cross he was wounded for me; Gone my transgressions, and now I am free; all because Jesus was wounded for me. But that freedom has a purpose. We are ransomed to be the royal priesthood. We now have a debt of love, and only love can repay it. There are tasks waiting to be done. Jesus has set us free so that, by the Spirit, we can begin them. Tasks of healing, and justice, and hope. Tasks of love and joy and peace. We learn the true story through which we are set free for those tasks; tasks that may perhaps include far, far better things to do than we have ever done.

## About the Author

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