

2pm Good Friday 3 April 2026 – An hour at the cross

In our Tuesday bible study group a couple of weeks ago, we were debating whether the Romans routinely used crucifixion for executions of the lower classes, or used it more sparingly, only to quell political opposition, or to punish the worst kind of criminality. I'm not sure we found a definitive answer. But perhaps it doesn't matter. Because whatever the number of people crucified by the Roman authorities, it is only Jesus' crucifixion which is remembered as having significance.

Only the death of Jesus that is so consequential that it is called, simply, "the crucifixion".

Jesus had to die, or we could not have the resurrection. But why did Jesus have to die by crucifixion? As a method of execution administered in Judea exclusively by the Romans, Jesus' crucifixion only happened because the people in power, both secular and religious, were willing to manipulate a fickle crowd into thinking this was what they wanted. The crucifixion of Jesus shows us everybody is complicit in Jesus' death. And death by crucifixion is death with the maximum shame and brutality and degradation.

But Jesus' crucifixion was not only a very dramatic and a very brutal death. Those first Christians were never in any doubt that Jesus' crucifixion had changed everything. So what did they think happened on the cross?

For Paul, writing to the church in Rome, Christ died for the ungodly, the death of God's Son proving God's love for us by saving us from the wrath of God and reconciling us to God.

For Peter, the cross means the Jewish exiles have been ***ransomed from [their] futile ways ... with the precious blood of Christ ... a lamb without defect or blemish, ... who bore our sins in his body on the cross so that we might live for righteousness ... free from sins.***

For the writer of the letter to the Hebrews, Jesus is the ***great high priest*** who shared our humanity in every respect save that he was ***without sin***; who notwithstanding that ***he was the Son of God ... learned obedience ... through what he had suffered***; so we can ***approach the throne of grace with boldness, [and] receive the mercy and grace [we] need***; and who is ***the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him.***

Every sacrifice in the tabernacle or the Temple could only be a temporary fix for sin. Left to their own devices people will return to their (our) self-centred attitudes and destructive behaviour; attitudes and behaviour that cause victims to call out for justice and that must be addressed, not appeased, by the God who is holy. And so God chose to offer up his only Son, ***the one in whom he delights***. And God's only Son willingly gave himself up to the cross and was ***wounded for our transgressions, [and] crushed for our iniquities. Upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed [as] the Lord laid on him the iniquity of us all.***

Only Jesus' death on the cross could liberate us from the grip of sin. Paul writes to the Colossians about God himself setting aside and nailing to the cross the penalty for sin, and publicly triumphing over every ruler and authority in opposition to God. The writer to the Hebrews, in chapter 2, says that Jesus' death destroyed the one who had the power of death – the devil – to ***free those who all their lives were held in slavery by the fear of death***. On the cross Jesus, in his humanity, takes us with him into death, and Jesus, in his divinity, takes the love of God into the darkness of death, so that death no longer has the power to separate us from God.

All of these are truthful ways of interpreting the crucifixion and explaining its significance and impact. The fact that each one of them is true doesn't make any one of them less true than any other. An analogy can help us to grasp how all these ways of explaining the cross can all be different, and yet can all be true. If we ask why going for a walk is good for us, somebody will say it offers healthy exercise; somebody else the opportunity to get out into the fresh air; still another the chance to clear our heads from whatever is preoccupying us; and yet another that it does us good to get out into God's good creation, and to spot things we might not notice if we were in a bus or a car or were indoors. All of these are good explanations of why going for a walk is good for us. None of them is invalid, and no one idea obviously better than another. All are true.

In the Bible the cross is a penalty paid in recognition of wrongs and reconciling us to God; an atoning sacrifice for sin; and also the defeat of death and the devil's power.

And there's a variety and creativity of ideas and images helping us to understand the crucifixion: the Passover ***lamb that is led to the slaughter***; the scapegoat bearing the people's sins sent into the wilderness by the high priest; and a ransom paid to free us from slavery to sin. These ideas are not in competition with one another. Instead, they all, together, give us a deeper and richer understanding of what the cross means for us. Each one is equally valid because all of them have been shared with us through the Word of God. If we try to rule out as unacceptable, or as inadmissible, *any* of these ways of understanding the cross, we will lose the full power of the cross, or we lose what the cross tells us about the depth of God's love for us.

With the Nicene creed we agree that the Son is of one being with the Father, and we agree that the Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son and is worshipped and glorified. But regarding the crucifixion, the creed tells us only that Jesus was crucified ***for our sake***. There is no single way in which, as Christians, we are required to articulate what happened on the cross. Being able to describe exactly what happened at the crucifixion is not as important as us knowing, in our hearts, that the crucifixion changed everything: for us, as individuals, and for our world.

Last week I went to Stapleford Granary to see an exhibition of Ladybird books, which were such a big part of my childhood, at home and at school. Of course, when my own children were learning to read, I wanted to introduce them to Peter and Jane. But my oldest son wasn't remotely interested in the lives of Peter and Jane and Pat the dog. In fact, he wasn't interested in reading at all, until we got him into the Biff and Chip and Kipper books. I don't know whether it was the sense of humour or the slightly anarchic sibling relationships, but something in those books kick-started my son's love of reading. But then my daughter came along, and she loved Peter and Jane. Maybe she liked the orderliness of their lives. Whatever it was, for her, Peter and Jane were the key to a love of reading. But it didn't matter whether the children came to love reading because of Biff and Chip and Kipper, or Peter and Jane. What was important was that they began to love to read.

As we come to the cross, it is not how we manage to understand it, but the who and the what and the why of the crucifixion that is important: that God the Father gave his Son, fully

human and fully divine, to die on the cross; that in the cross we see the worst of what we do, to one another and to God; and that the crucifixion happened to defeat death and the devil, to free us from sin, to reconcile us with God, and to offer us eternal salvation.

So that we, like those first believers, can know that it is the crucifixion that has changed everything, for our world and for us, now and for eternity.