

Sunday 24th January 2010

This Sunday the Service was led by Alf Curtis.

THE CROSS OF CHRIST

Reading: Ps.24 & Luke 23: 26 – 49

The beginning of the year is a good time to remember what is at the centre of our faith, Christian walk and experience – the Cross of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The Eternal Cross

The Cross has been central to our faith from eternity to eternity. We read in Scripture that God planned the Cross from before the beginning of the world (1 Peter 1: 19, 20). First, there was the rebellion of Lucifer and his angels (Isaiah 14: 12 ff) then there was the fall of man (Genesis 3: 1 ff). God looked down the ages and saw that the Cross was needed.

It was always God's plan to raise from mankind a family for Himself, but sinful human beings cannot enter the presence of a Holy God. To enable God and man to be reconciled, the price to pardon sin had to be paid. God did this by sending His Son to die on the Cross in our place.

Both Revelation 13: 8 and 1 Peter 1: 20 show that God's plan for the redemption of mankind was established before the foundation of the world, and Christ became as the slain Lamb of God from the moment that Adam and Eve sinned in Genesis 3. It was as if God had taken out a mortgage for sinful man that enabled Him to pardon the sins of all people incl. Abraham, Moses and David, who lived before Christ came into the world. When Jesus died on the Cross, that mortgage was fully paid.

The Lamb of God Who Takes Away the Sin of the World

The New Testament has 31 references to Jesus as "the Lamb". These appear in John 1: 29 & 36; Acts 8: 32 (which is itself a quote from Isaiah 53: 7, 8) and 1 Peter 1: 20. All the other references are in the Book of Revelation. This book describes the judgement and suffering coming to the world – the time of God's vengeance on the wicked, yet continually through this time, are references to the Lamb of God.

John describes the scene in heaven in Revelation chapters 4 & 5. God sits enthroned before a multitude of worshiping beings. In His hand is a scroll and nobody in heaven, on earth or under the earth is found worthy to open the scroll. This causes John to weep, but one of the elders said, "Do not weep! See, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has triumphed. He is able to open the scroll ..." (Revelation 5: 5). When John looked, he didn't see a lion, but a "Lamb, looking as if it had been slain" (vs 6). In Rev.14-1 we see the Lamb on Mt. Zion; in ch.19-7 the marriage of the Lamb has come; ch.21-22/23 the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are the Temple in the New Jerusalem, and Revelation 22: 1 ff says that the river of the water of life flows from the throne of God and the Lamb. All through eternity we will gaze with joy on the Lamb of Calvary, who accomplished redemption for us.

At the start of Jesus ministry, John the Baptist said of Him, “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1: 29). More than three years later, the time would come when Jesus would die on the Cross and the debt owed for the world’s sin would be paid. His disciples had been with Him for this period. They’d seen His miracles and healings and heard His teaching. They saw Him as a great Redeemer and King who would deliver the people of Israel from their Roman oppressors.

When Jesus told the disciples at the Last Supper that He would be crucified and rise again after three days they could not take it in. This didn’t fit their preconceived ideas. When the soldiers came to arrest Jesus, Peter drew his sword and slashed off the ear of the High Priest’s servant. Jesus calmed the situation and healed the man saying, “Do you think I cannot call on My Father and He will put at My disposal more than twelve legions of angels? But then how would the Scriptures be fulfilled ...?” (Matthew 26:53/54). [In Isaiah 37:36, one angel of the Lord killed 185,000 Assyrians). Imagine the power of 12 legions of angels! No Roman or any other army could have withstood them.

The Disciples at the Cross

The disciples all fled as Jesus was led away for His trial, but they returned later. John went to Herod’s Palace to watch proceedings. Peter came with the servants “to see the end”. He had previously said he’d never desert Jesus, but did not keep this promise. Another disciple (maybe Mark, as he is the only one to mention it) came clothed in a linen garment. He was seized and fled naked. This is a lesson to us – if we flee from the Cross of Christ, we will end up naked, with nothing. Without the Cross, there is no salvation, no eternal life, only hell fire. Never flee from the Cross, as all our blessings come from it. We Protestants don’t revere the Cross like we should. It may be a reaction to Roman Catholicism. Wearing a cross is a witness and the time may soon come when we are forbidden to do so, as our liberties are being taken away from us.

The world is turning against the Cross. Like the priests and Sadducees who said to Jesus, “Come down from the Cross and we’ll believe” (Matthew 27: 42), many today say they would believe if the Cross was taken out of Christianity. It is prophesied that this would happen in the last days.

The Second Coming of Christ will come with an awful time of trouble – wars, pestilence, famines and earthquakes. Many of these are judgments from God, but not all, as they affect both the righteous and unrighteous. Evil spirits sent by the devil are at work in the world today. They are vry prevalent in Haiti, where Voodoo keeps the people in bondage to Satan. Likewise there is a turning away in our land from the Christian faith towards a “political correctness” that demands we do nothing that could offend people of other faiths. Let us never be ashamed of the Cross of Christ.

Others at the Cross

Not only were the disciples at the Cross, but the soldiers who crucified Jesus were present. They saw Him as just another criminal until after His death, when one was overcome with awe and said “Surely, this Man was the Son of God” (Mark 15: 38). Women Jesus knew stood at a distance and watched. The priests and the Sadducees mocked, but there was one person in all that assembly who recognised something that no-one else seems to have seen and this was the dying thief (Luke 23: 39 ff). This is a strange incident that shows the wisdom of God, He is no respecter of persons, and has chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise, 1 Cor. 1-27.

The thief was condemned to die as a result of his criminal activities. He can see another Man on the next Cross. This Man is bloodied and dying, His face contorted with pain, yet the thief recognises in Him a righteous Man. The sign above this Man’s Cross says, “The King of the Jews”. How can He be a King? Somehow, God revealed to the thief that Jesus was indeed a King and coming into His Kingdom. He said, “Jesus, remember me when You come into Your Kingdom” (vs 42). This dying man knew his limited time and spoke with urgency. He wished to come into Jesus’ Kingdom in even the humblest capacity and received Jesus’ wonderful response, “Today, (not tomorrow or in 1000 years) you will be with me in Paradise” (vs 43). Today, what promptitude! With Christ in Paradise – what glorious company!

When Jesus died, He went to Paradise. At that time it was the part of Hades referred to as “Abraham’s Bosom” (Luke 16: 19 – 26), where the righteous dead from Old Testament times waited until Christ died in their stead. Jesus preached to the spirits of the righteous dead imprisoned there; He fought a battle with Satan, bruising his head, as promised in Genesis 3: 15. This was when He took the keys of death and Hades (Revelation 1: 18).

When Jesus rose on the third day, He opened the gate of Abraham’s Bosom and led those held captive there to the gates of Heaven. The scene is like that foretold by David in Psalm 24: 7 – 10 with the cry going up for the ancient gates of the heavenly city to be thrown open so the King of Glory, mighty in battle, may enter. “The Lord mighty in battle” (Psalm 24: 8) has defeated Satan, but He has done far more than that, He has opened for us the gates of glory.

A second challenge rings out at the gates of the heavenly city and the reply to the question, “Who is the King of Glory?” is that He is the Lord of Hosts, the leader of a great army, Jesus entering Heaven with the spirits of all the righteous dead, from Abel to the dying thief, and that is why today when we die, we don’t go down to Hades, but straight to Heaven to be with the Lord. God chose to reveal this to the dying thief.

Jesus achieved our salvation at enormous cost to Himself. He was pure and holy, yet He bore the burden of our sin – the sins of the whole world – in fact, He became sin for us (2 Corinthians 5: 21). This was a horrible experience for Him and it was this, not death, that He shrank from in the Garden of Gethsemane when He prayed, “Let this cup pass from Me” (Matthew 26: 39).

After Jesus died, the disciples gathered together fearful, with faith and expectations dashed. Then Jesus rose from the tomb and appeared to the women, but their report was not believed. Jesus met two dejected disciples on the road to Emmaus and they walked with Him for miles and shared a meal before they recognised Him (Luke 24: 13 ff). These men hurried back to Jerusalem to tell the other disciples their story, but they did not believe them. Then Jesus appeared in their midst, yet still they had difficulty believing He had risen from the dead, even thinking He was a ghost (Luke 24: 37).

If we go through periods of doubt, we should not punish ourselves. The disciples had had all of Jesus' teaching, yet didn't believe, nor would they believe the women or the disciples from the Emmaus road until Jesus Himself stood among them. We can trust Him to deal with our doubts and fears as He did theirs.

The greatest time of trouble ever to come is still in front of us. We don't want to experience such things, but whatever we have to face, we must take courage, stand firmly on God's faithful promises and patiently bear our own cross, trials and temptations and remember all that Jesus suffered for us. Never be ashamed of the Cross. Rejoice in it, for through it we have been brought into a relationship with God. Hold fast to your faith in God and the Cross. Glory is coming. Paul gloried in the Cross (Galatians 6: 14). It is the only thing we can glory in.

Finally never compare yourself with others – it either leads to depression or pride. Each of us is unique and special in God's eyes. God sent His Son to die on the Cross so that our sin could be paid for and that we might become children of God. He is a wonderful Saviour.

After we sing this final hymn, "In the Cross of Christ I glory". let us at the beginning of this year 2010, reaffirm our faith in the Living God in proclaiming the words of the Nicene Creed, found on the back cover of our hymn book.

Notes of a sermon preached by Alfred Curtis in Jan.2010, very applicable in 2020 !!!