

God's rescue plan (IV) – How big is your cross?

No, I'm not asking about the size of the wooden structure that you might have somewhere in your church, but rather how big is your view of what the cross signifies, of what the cross achieves. Certainly, since I started reading my Bible and understanding it in terms of relationships, the cross has grown and grown in importance for me. It's truly awesome, what God did there!

Unfortunately, I was brought up in a Christian culture that offered 'the gospel', which was 'how the cross saves you': Jesus died in my place, took the punishment I deserve, so I don't have to die – I can now be forgiven, and I can get to heaven. The cross was basically the means of personal salvation, and a 'cross-centred church' was one in which we 'preach the gospel' on a regular basis: we tell the congregation repeatedly about how they can be saved, and all our activities have to be 'gospel-centred', to tell non-church people how they can be saved.

But if the cross is simply and solely about Jesus dying in my place, why such a ghastly death? Surely, it would have been just as effective if Jesus had been hanged on a gallows or given a lethal injection – a nice clean, quick death – and Jesus would still be 'paying the penalty' for me.

Or did God provide the gruesomeness of a Roman cross (plus all the scourging and taunting and public humiliation) so that preachers could say, 'See just how much Jesus had to suffer for your sins and mine! Repent! Turn to Christ and be saved!' No, that's almost as much a misuse of scripture as quoting 'the wages of sin is death' out of context (article 52).

How have we managed to emaciate the cross into just being about personal salvation?! We're back to what I keep banging on about: (a) the whole of the Christian faith is about **relationship** (not about a mechanism of salvation) and (b) the gospel is the **narrative** of the saving purposes of God, from end to end (not a mechanism of salvation).

So does the new enlightened Paul Beverley now understand the true meaning of the cross and is he about to reveal it to you? No way! All I'm saying is that the cross is **so much more** than I could ever have imagined, and I want to share one aspect of it here (I've already shared other wonderful facets in earlier articles).

So, what is it about the nature of Jesus' death that increases its significance way beyond being just a means of personal salvation?

The awfulness of the cross is plain to see: the one perfect human that has ever existed (since the first Adam went off the rails) suffered a gross miscarriage of justice, was betrayed by one of his closest friends while others abandoned him and denied even knowing him, was horrendously physically tortured, publically stripped naked and humiliated, 'cursed' in the eyes of any believing Jew, and killed.

(By the way, don't be misled; when Jesus cried, 'My God, my God why have you abandoned me?!', although that was how he **felt** – and with good reason – I don't believe that God the Father **ever** abandoned him. How could he?! 'Can a mother forget the children she bore?' We can discuss scriptures, if you like, but I think it's not without reason that Paul says, 'God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself.')

Where were we? Yes, OK, so God, in Jesus, received all the worst that any human could do to any other human. And on the cross God transformed that miserable defeat into the greatest triumph ever. God triumphed there over sin and death and, as Jesus rose from the death, opened the kingdom to anyone and everyone who is willing to accept Him.

On the cross, we see the cosmic Christ crowned in triumph! This is God's upside-down kingdom; God is in the business of taking the worst and transforming it into the very best.

So, if you're suffering in any way – pain, rejection, betrayal, anything – then (a) know that you're not alone – God has suffered worse, (b) God is also suffering as you suffer – God feels all of your pain, just as any loving mother would do, (c) have complete confidence that God is in the business of bringing good out of evil, and (d) try to find fellow believers who will welcome you unconditionally (as representatives of the God who has already accepted you unconditionally) – I can certainly put you in touch with a few such believers if you live in Norwich! :-)

God is perfectly capable of instantaneously taking away that suffering, but God wants the very best for you and the very best for all the people around you, and God knows what that very best is. So yes, do pray, tell God how you feel (as Jesus did) and ask for release from suffering for yourself and for others, but please don't ever give the impression to a fellow believer that if God doesn't answer their prayers in terms of taking their suffering away that they are somehow 'not doing it right', e.g. not praying with enough faith.

Sorry, but this is a bit of a hobbyhorse for me: I think a person's faith is just as strong, if not stronger, if they are willing to just pray and trust God for the outcome, whether it be miraculous release, or strength and joy in perseverance. (And you have good precedence: 'Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done.')

Sorry, I got a bit distracted at the end there, but today's message is really that reading your Bible in terms of relationship, and looking at the narrative of the gospel and putting that alongside our day-to-day experience is life-changing – well, it certainly has been for me, and I hope and pray that you will find it a blessing too.

Lord, let it be so!

Paul Bev. 21.3.19

(The above was inspired by chapter 9 of Derek Flood's 'Healing the Gospel'.)