



Opening Prayer for Ordinary Time

God of adventure and growth,
open our hearts, ready our minds
and fire our imaginations,
so that as we gather together before you,
and ponder the life-giving stories of Jesus,
we might discover more of your goodness,
and be swept up by the Holy Spirit
as she nurtures, disturbs and inspires us
on our journey into fullness of life. **Amen**

'Starter for Ten' Discussion Question

What does it mean to you to picture yourself as the servant or slave of others? Is this a positive or negative image for you?

Prayers of Thanks and Praise

Praise be to you, God our Father and Mother!
You set the heavens in their places,
and fashioned the earth from the dust.
When the time was right,
you made human beings in your image and likeness,
creatures made for prayer and for praise.
Praise be to you, O Lord!

Praise be to you, Lord Jesus Christ!
All there is was made through and for you,
yet for our sake you humbled yourself and became flesh.
In your living and teaching, healing and change-making,
you pointed to the love revealed most fully on the cross,
and held a broken world in your embrace.

Praise be to you, O Lord!

Praise be to you, Holy Spirit of God!
You hovered over the waters of creation,
and breathe your life into our hearts.
Your wind sweeps us off our feet,
your flames fire our imaginations,
your still small voice calls us home.

Praise be to you, O Lord! Amen

Reading Isaiah 53:4 – 9

Prayers of Renewal

God of renewal and fresh hope,
who came to teach us what it means to be the slave of all,
we bring to you those things in our lives and our world
in need of your refreshment and renewal.

When we've been unkind or quick to judge other people,
Christ, forgive us.

When we've been slow to understand what you ask of us,
Christ, challenge us.

When we've been hurt by unjust words or hurtful actions,
Christ, comfort us.

When systems have been used to exclude or harm,
Christ, rebuke us.

When your Church has lost its way and turned inwards,
Christ, renew us.

Silence is kept for a few moments...

God of renewal and fresh hope,
who came to teach us what it means
to be the slave of all,
thank you that you forgive us, renew us,
and set us free to live for you.

Amen

Readings Hebrews 5:1 – 10
Mark 10:35 – 45

Sermon

I wonder if you can imagine walking into a church, and seeing not a cross at the front, but an electric chair, or a guillotine? I suspect that most of us would rather shocked. However, that is perhaps as close as we can get to putting ourselves in the shoes of the earliest people to become followers of Jesus. One might've expected to see a cross on the outskirts of the town, or by the side of the road, signifying the lack of worth the all-powerful Roman Empire placed upon the life of the individual. By contrast, places of worship would've been the last place one would expect to find symbols of suffering, humiliation and disgrace. However, the earliest Christians knew they had no choice but to talk about the cross because they'd discovered that the death of Jesus changed everything, bringing the new creation to birth, and making liberation from injustice, oppression, and sin possible. Thus, despite continuing to experience persecutions by the authorities for another three-hundred years, the Early Church thought of the world-changing events of Good Friday as that which defined them.

By the time we get to the fourth century and hence to the drafting of the Creeds, Christianity had become the state religion of the Roman Empire and that may be why very little detail about the crucifixion is contained within them. What we now usually call the Nicene Creed, agreed in 381, simply states that Jesus was 'crucified under Pontus Pilate, suffered death, and was buried'. There is no explicit theology of the cross and the differences that it makes. However, this doesn't mean that our earliest 'forebears in the faith' were unconcerned with this question, and the New Testament draws upon a variety of ideas and images to attempt to make sense of Jesus' death. Our readings for today pick up upon four particular aspects of what we might wish to call soteriology – the work of Christ – present within the canon of the New Testament, which were developed further in later centuries as the fledgling church grappled with their meaning and importance. They form pieces of a jigsaw which fit together to give us part of the picture of the significance of the cross. However, the mystery of the cross is just that, and so we must be wary of aiming to be too precise about matters, for reasons I hope will become apparent.

Let's begin with the famous passage from Isaiah, taken from one of the 'Servant Songs' composed during Israel's lengthy period in exile in Babylon. As you may know, sections of this text were set to music by Handel in the *Messiah*, and according to Tom Wright, this image was vital not just to the Early Church's understandings of who Jesus was, but how he understood himself. It's not clear in Isaiah's original context who the mysterious figure of the Suffering Servant was, but as Christians reflected on the experience of being liberated from the chains of sin, they came to be associated with Jesus. When we read Mark's account of Jesus's cry of desolation and abandonment upon the cross, it's not hard to see why. For Wright, Jesus took on Israel's identity and role in his very person, and suffered 'in the place' of the people of God, after the model of the Suffering Servant. It's this view which has become known as substitutionary atonement; Jesus took

into himself the destructiveness and violence of human nature at its worst, doing so in order both that we do not have to face the ultimate consequences and because it's only God whose love is free enough to not be destroyed in the process.

This view of the atonement has come to take centre stage within an evangelical worldview that's often insistent on substitution as being the 'orthodox' Christian understanding of the cross. However, taking this view alone risks negating the much more complex picture found within the New Testament. Moving on to our passage from Hebrews takes us into a world that is not easy for us to grasp because it's so far removed from our own in many ways, but which we need to grab at least a basic hold on. When we think of sacrifices and high priests these days, we often miss the richness (and depth) of the underlying Jewish worldview, which isn't surprising, as the Temple system was complex and multi-faceted. However, it did form a vital lens, through which some of the New Testament authors attempted to understand the cross, and there are three key points to note.

Firstly, the New Testament casts Jesus' death upon the cross as a rescue operation, breaking the chains between evil actions and evil consequences. Secondly, Jesus's sacrifice sets not just individuals, but the whole community, free; indeed, as Paul argues, this extends out beyond humanity to the entirety of creation as it groans in labour pains and longs to become all God intended to bring to birth. Thirdly, his sacrifice seals the covenant – the “peace treaty” – between God and humanity. Thus, in reflecting the love of God the Father back to the source and freely choosing the path of self-emptying love, Jesus has cleared the ground for a new relationship with God, in which sin doesn't get to have the defining word in the conversation. The writer of Hebrews isn't alone in wrestling with this stuff, and the sense that God has acted in a decisive manner that isn't dependent on our own deserving or even our asking. This is something God's done 'for us', objectively and independently of us as individuals or communities.

However, even all of this is not the end of the story of the cross. The Gospel reading for today points to two more understandings. Faced with the disciples effectually continuing the argument started earlier in the story about who was the greatest among them, Jesus reminds his friends that he's come to be the servant of all (Mark 10:45). He's embodying the kind of love that identifies with the powerless, which cannot be put off by the worst that we can throw at God, and which's profoundly present both in the silenced places and with the silenced people of the world. So, there's a sense in which the cross forms an example – perhaps the ultimate example – of love in action. Finally, when Jesus talks in Mark 10:45 of giving up his life as a 'ransom for many', he was pointing us toward what would become known as the '*Christus Victor*' view of the cross. John's Gospel makes this picture most obvious when it talks about the Son of God being 'glorified' on the cross – it represents the decisive victory over sin, evil and death, and thus makes the ultimate defeat into the greatest of triumphs.

So, what we see when we take these three readings together is part of the picture of the significance of the cross for the New Testament. This isn't the whole story and indeed there are other ways of making sense of Calvary and critiques of some of the traditional approaches I have outlined here. I'm wary of plumping for one of these 'theories', as some call them, because the biblical witness is multi-layered and complex, and because it seems to me that there is no substitute for experiencing the love of our crucified God in our own lives. When it comes to the crunch, the cross matters to me because when I really needed to know that I was loved, it was only the cross which helped. Some of you may recognise the part of the Communion liturgy that's often called the *Agnus Dei*: 'Lamb of God, you take away the sin of the world; have mercy upon us'. This became really important to me when, as a student, I had a breakdown following the break-up of an abusive relationship. In Communion, I met the broken Christ, whose own experience of bodily violation upon the cross helped me to see

that God hadn't abandoned me, and that there was hope for a future not dominated by trauma and shame. The sense of this prayer as a promise, that the consequences of the sin of others will no more get to speak the last word on who I am than my own human frailties will, wasn't made explicit within the liturgy but it is in there and it probably saved my life. God was present in the silences of those dark days.

Whatever the cross may mean for me, the reverse question of 'What do I mean in the light of the cross?' surely involves nothing less than a recognition of an ultimate worth in the eyes of God, despite all the muddle and complication which comes with being human, and thus being both a sinner and one sinned against. The full extent of God's love for all creation, not just humanity, is revealed when the arms of our Saviour are opened wide, embracing a broken world. This is the love stronger than even death, which means God will indeed get the last word upon who I am, and it will be a word of blessing. Whatever comes next in my journey through life, my identity lies in Christ, and so cannot be destroyed or co-opted for the ends of others any more than the cross of Christ can. Hence, whilst I cannot pin down exactly all that was accomplished at Calvary, I can say 'thanks be to God!'

Prayers of Intercession

Lord's Prayer

Blessing

God of all our journeys,
as we go forward into the rest of the week,
may you be the light to our path and the breath we breathe,
and may the blessing of the Father, the Son and the Spirit
be with us and those whom we love and pray for,
now and forevermore. **Amen**