

Trinity Baptist Church
Sunday 27th June 2021. Andy Banks.
Mark 8:27-33 - Jesus, The Essential Sacrifice

We're continuing our series in Mark's Gospel, taking a second look this week at Mark 8:27-33, and particularly at why Jesus *had* to suffer, be killed and rise again. So, let's read first, from Mark 8:27-33.

[Read Mark 8:27-33]

27 Jesus and his disciples went on to the villages around Caesarea Philippi. On the way he asked them, 'Who do people say I am?'

28 They replied, 'Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.'

29 'But what about you?' he asked. 'Who do you say I am?'

Peter answered, 'You are the Messiah.'

30 Jesus warned them not to tell anyone about him.

31 He then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again.

32 He spoke plainly about this, and Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him.

33 But when Jesus turned and looked at his disciples, he rebuked Peter. 'Get behind me, Satan!' he said. 'You do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns.'

[Pray]

As we saw last week, it was only after the disciples showed that they understood Jesus' identity (as the Messiah) that Jesus began to teach them plainly about his destiny (to die for us). Peter saw that as wrong and sought to rebuke Jesus: "'Never, Lord!' he said. 'This shall never happen to you!'" (Matthew 16:22). But Peter was so seriously misguided in that rebuke that Jesus had to rebuke him in the strongest terms possible: "'Get behind me, Satan!' he said. 'You do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns.'"

But why was this such an important matter? Why was it essential for Jesus to suffer, be killed and rise again? For, Jesus was clear: "the Son of Man *must* suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and ... he *must* be killed and after three days rise again." Why *must* he?

Peter, of course, is far from alone in objecting to such a notion. This has always been a controversial teaching. Paul wrote to the Corinthian Church, "we preach Christ crucified: a *stumbling-block* [or scandal] to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God" (1 Corinthians 1:23-24). Christ crucified was never a popular message with outsiders, and there was always the temptation for the Church to be ashamed of it. And today, this vital doctrine is under attack, not just from outside, but from *within* the Church.

It is attacked in some quarters by what is essentially universalism. "It doesn't matter what you believe. All religions basically lead to the same place in the end; they're just different paths to get there." We might want that to be true, but it is not what Jesus taught. Others have challenged the biblical truth that on the cross Jesus took God's *punishment* for our sin. Perhaps most notably, some years ago Steve Chalke presented this concept as an horrific mistreatment of an innocent victim, even comparing it to "cosmic child abuse." Of course, Penal (or Punishment) Substitution is by no means the only understanding of the cross that the Bible presents, but it is a vitally important understanding, and if we deny it, we lay ourselves open to all sorts of other misinterpretations of Scripture.

These are just a couple of examples. But if these arguments were true, then why did *Jesus* believe his self-sacrifice was *essential*? Why did the first Christians preach it so much and so positively, when it made their message so unpalatable to Jews and Gentiles alike? Why *would* God sacrifice his beloved Son if there was *any* other way for us to be saved? And to specifically answer the charge that God was unjustly punishing an innocent victim, firstly, the Bible is clear that Jesus *chose* the path of the cross, and he had a genuine choice. Secondly, 2 Corinthians 5:19 states that “God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself.” The NIV’s rejigged word order slightly lessens the potency of those words. But I love the emphasis that Nicky Gumbel puts on this verse in the Alpha Course, when he simply pauses after the beginning of the verse “God was *in* Christ.” *Who Jesus is* makes all the difference here. Jesus was not a third party being punished by God. Jesus was *God* being punished by God. “God was *in* Christ reconciling the world to Himself.”

But why was that necessary? You could answer that theologically. Jesus states that it was necessary in order to fulfil what was written in the Old Testament. Mark 9:12, for instance: “Why then is it *written* that the Son of Man *must* suffer much and be rejected?” And we might call to mind numerous Old Testament prophecies, like Isaiah 53:5: “But he was *pierced* for our transgressions, he was *crushed* for our iniquities; the *punishment* that brought us peace was on him, and by his *wounds* we are healed.” Or the graphic description of his crucifixion in Psalm 22: “All my bones are on display; people stare and gloat over me. They divide my clothes among them and cast lots for my garment.” The truth is, for Jesus, if God wrote it in the Bible, then it was a divinely pre-ordained necessity, which he must obey. It is as simple as that.

But why did God write it there in the first place? What were the needs that only *this* course of action could fulfil? For rest assured, God’s love for his Son is such that if there were *any* other way to achieve our salvation, he would have taken that course!

1) The problem of sin

But he couldn’t, firstly because of the problem of sin itself. Sin is humanity’s decision to ignore God or to rebel against him, and so to make our own rules for life instead of obeying his. And God is too holy to overlook sin and act as though it hasn’t happened. God’s justice demands that he must judge and punish sin. We know this from our own cries for justice in this world. When we see an horrific crime on the TV, our hearts cry out that the perpetrator must not be allowed to get away with it. Justice must be served. And for those who do get away with it in this world, at least we know they will have to face *God’s* justice one day. We do the same with far less important issues too. Watch a group of siblings complain if someone’s portion of cake is bigger than someone else’s and you’ll see ample evidence that innate within all of us is a cry for justice. And that cry is an echo of *God’s* justice.

Were God to merely forgive sin at *no* cost, it would be like him saying that sin doesn’t matter. The just punishment for pushing the Author of life out of our lives is death – the absence of life. The just punishment for saying to God throughout our lives, “I don’t want to know you,” is that we should be eternally separated from him, which the Bible calls “the second death.” These punishments cannot simply be declared null and void. And that is why the Bible says that “without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness” (Hebrews 9:22).

Throughout the Old Testament, God patiently overlooked the people’s sin, giving them the system of animal sacrifices to make that possible – though, even then, the cost was all his, since the animals were truly his. But the worth of an animal could never truly match the worth of a human in God’s eyes, since humans alone are made in his image. So, only a human could truly pay humanity’s debt to God for their refusal to live as he commanded. The animal sacrifices could only ever be a stop gap, and a sign pointing forwards to the true sacrifice to come – Jesus Christ’s self-sacrifice.

2) The problem of sinfulness

However, there was an even bigger problem. For sin invades us like cancer and corrupts our nature and character! None of us, therefore, could ever live a life that was perfect enough to pay humanity's debt to God. As Romans 3:10 says, "There is no one righteous, not even one." The moment any human sins they disqualify themselves from being able to offer their life for the sin of others, and instead themselves become in need of a sacrifice to save them. Only a human sacrifice *could* pay the necessary price for salvation, but no human was *capable* of being that sacrifice. Plus, only God could ever renew his image within us back to the purity in which he first bestowed it upon us.

So, *God* did what we *could* not do for ourselves. He became human, so that a human would be sacrificed on behalf of humanity. He lived a sinless life so that he could be our sacrifice. And he became obedient to death on the cross to stand in our place, to take God's punishment on sin upon himself, and so set us free from having to face that punishment. And because *God's* life is of infinitely more value than the sum of *all* human lives, so his sacrifice is sufficient for all humans who ever lived before or after Jesus.

It is only as we gaze in amazement at the wondrous love displayed in this act, and as we are brought to understand its significance by the work of the Holy Spirit, that we are filled with a power that is strong enough even to overcome the power of sinfulness within us. The moment we put our trust in Jesus, God declares us to be "good." And that is not a pretended reality, but rather a declaration of what *will be* by the power of his Spirit within us. We *will* be made good, like Jesus, and so when we trust in his love, he declares us to *be* good, like Jesus. For, what God speaks into being, comes into being.

3) The problem of the wages of sin – death

So, Jesus' death was necessary to deal with the problems of sin and sinfulness. But it was also necessary to deal with the problem of the *wages* of sin, which is death. The amazing Fourth Century theologian, Athanasius, rightly observed, "It would ... have been unthinkable that God should go back upon His word and that man, having transgressed, should not die; but it was equally monstrous that beings which had once shared the nature of the Word should perish and turn back again into non-existence through corruption." So, how could God solve the problem of death and the separation it caused between his people and himself, without negating his word? The only way was to die himself, and then to rise again to conquer death. And so, Paul again wrote, quoting once more from Scripture: "'Death has been swallowed up in victory.' 'Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?' The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Corinthians 15:54-57). If Jesus had not died, then death would not have been conquered. But, because he suffered and died, he could overcome death through his resurrection.

4) The problem of sin's effects

And there is one more problem that required Jesus' death to solve. For, we discover in Genesis 3, that humanity's sin led to a curse being placed on the ground, symbolic of creation itself. For, humanity were meant to be the guardians and protectors of the world God created for them. So, when we disobeyed him, the whole world was damaged and corrupted. To have merely forgiven sin would have left the *world* in its "bondage to decay" (Romans 8:21). But, by dying to remove that sin from his *people*, God made possible a renewing of the *world* too. We haven't seen the fulfilment of that, yet. It awaits Jesus' return and the end of time. But Jesus' sacrificial death is what made it possible. For, by that sacrifice, our sin is not merely overlooked but removed from us as far as the East is from the West. So God recreated the potential for a world peopled only by sinless people who would care for God's world as he originally intended.

Why *must* the Son of Man suffer many things, be killed and rise again? Because, without the cross, sin could not be justly forgiven. Without the cross, sinfulness could not be overpowered. Without the cross and resurrection, death must still have the final say. And, without the cross and resurrection, the curse placed upon the ground because of sin could not be reversed. So, how should we respond to this sacrificial love? There is only one appropriate response: to bow down and worship Jesus, who offered his life to make all this possible, and so to live out our worship day by day by offering our bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God. Amen?