

A Cross in the Heart of God

Session 2:

Usual Suspects: The Cast of Characters and the Usual Stories

Based on: Samuel Wells: *A Cross in the Heart of God* (Norwich, Canterbury Press 2020) – Chapters 1 and 2, pp 3-14



The Cast of Characters

Towards the end of their stories, the Gospels assemble on stage the key actors in the drama. Here are the Romans, the ones with the ability to force the issue through military power. Here are the Jerusalem authorities, the Jewish leaders who'd decided collaboration with Rome was the only way to survive a period of foreign occupation. Here are the rebels, Barabbas and the two prisoners with whom Jesus is crucified and who have set their hearts on clearing out the Romans and don't have much time for the Jerusalem authorities either.



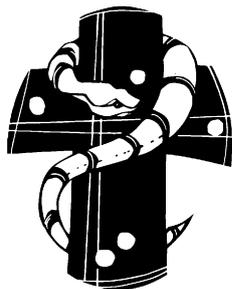
Any Christian who has lived through 9/11, the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, the 7/7 bombings and the tyranny of Islamic state could have come to the conclusion that the story that mattered was really all about governments, religious leaders and terrorists. But the Gospels don't concentrate on these in the Passiontide story. The real story is elsewhere.

The other two groups are the disciples and the crowd. Neither groups comes out of the story particularly well, but each represents an aspect of what Jesus is doing in his ministry.

The Crowd: Jesus dies for a whole bunch of people, some acknowledge him, some don't, some love him, some don't; some misunderstand him, despise or hate him. The crowd, that is, represents Jesus dying for the whole world. The world doesn't put him to death, but still shows the same kinds of jealousy, mob spirit, cynicism, fear and sheer perversity that did put him to death.

The Disciples: Jesus' death indeed transforms the whole world. But it's in the context of intense intimacy and betrayal, the intimacy of the last supper, the bread dipped in the bowl, the kiss in the garden. The Passiontide story then shows us God's relentless, enduring love for the whole world, and intense, intimate love for us, the disciples, Christ's intimate friends – a love that endures misunderstanding, hatred, and even betrayal.

As we look at the meaning of the Cross, we begin to move from politics and power to the pressing issues of our own lives.



3 questions:

1. Do I assume politics is all about the government, religion all about religious professionals, and power all about the terrorists? Or can I look where Jesus looked to the endlessly diverse crowd and the depth of intimate friendship?
2. Do I realise Jesus' passion is about the whole world, showing at the same time the full horror of what humans can do to one another but also the full possibility of the redemption of all things?
3. Do I realise Jesus' passion is also about me?

To examine the cross is to step out of our assumptions about power – that power lies in the hand of the government, or the hearts of religious leaders, or the minds of terrorists. It's to gather around the true power in the universe, mad present in the fragile form of Jesus Christ – a power that transforms the whole world, and can even transform me.



How does Jesus Save us? What's wrong with the standard Story?

3 main approaches:

1. Focus on Christmas and Jesus' birth – Jesus saves us by re-enacting every aspect of our human existence setting right what is 'out of joint.' Jesus is the 'second Adam,' in whom our human nature is joined to God and thus changed.
2. Focus on Jesus' life - humans are the 'audience' for Jesus – who offers himself as the one who transforms our hearts to the way of sacrificial love.
3. Focus on Jesus' suffering – sometimes called 'penal substitutionary atonement,' the idea is that humanity has accumulated an unpayable level of debt before God. But through grace, God sent Jesus to face this punishment in our place. Rests on a very particular, quite narrow, interpretation of the 'suffering servant' songs of Isaiah 53.
4. Focus on Jesus' death – again a focus on debt, to God's honour – only God can pay the debt but only humanity must pay the debt. In St Anselm's version of this theory, the debt is owed to Satan not God – you can hear this version in several hymns we still sing. This is known as the 'ransom theory' of the atonement.

Wells:

I'm sure many will have been encouraged at some stage in their life to regard only one of them as the whole story and distrust all the rest....equally, some would like to take the best bits of all of them! And there are indeed scriptural texts that can be read as supporting all five, so there is plenty of scope for 'proof-texting' if that's what people want!

But Wells –

- there's a real danger with all these theories – which is that they are theories! That is, they are disembodied, abstract and pay no attention to the story of Jesus' life....

When you hear all these theories together, you get a picture of an agitated God, worried about a code of honour or searching around for

some booty to pay off Satan, subject to some eternal law that says what God can and can't do. You see a picture of the Holy Trinity either subject to some rules of engagement that aren't of their own making, or gathered together in the board room scratching their heads over Adam's fall as if it were a hole in the budget. And this has nothing to do with the Jesus of the Gospels.

Instead, Wells suggests, Jesus re-enacts the story of Israel:

- he goes down into Egypt like Joseph
- he begins his ministry as Israel did, facing the wilderness for 40 days as they did for 40 years.
- He calls twelve disciples as Israel had twelve tribes
- He assembled around him and transformed those facing internal exile in Israel – the leper, the prostitute, the tax-collector, the social outcast.
- He was the second Adam;
- He was the righteous man like Noah;
- He formed a new people like Abraham
- He was a new Israel like Jacob
- He went to despair and rose up to save his people like Joseph
- He led his people to freedom like Moses
- He was a healer and troublemaker like Elijah
- He spoke truth to power like Daniel
- He put his life on the line to save his people like Esther.

Wells argues that by facing the way of the Cross, Jesus took the story of Israel into himself and went into internal exile among his own people. Exile is that strange place in which God brings freedom through suffering. But, in exile, Israel saw a new face of God – the God who was not just for them but with them – with them in their sorrows.

The Cross makes visible what was first seen in exile – that God is made known, that God is with us, in disadvantage, suffering and despair like never before.

God meets us in the Cross through this story – through God’s everlasting love for Israel and for all nations and peoples, and through the discovery of a God who is with us no matter the cost.

The church is that body of people who declare in baptism that this story is their story too, who know themselves to be in exile and see Jesus as the one who is in exile with them – it is not a collection of individuals who make up their mind which theory of salvation they fancy – it is those who believe they are called to be the context of Jesus’s story. That means we should seek to embody in our church life faithfulness, patience, endurance, forgiveness, truthfulness – knowing that these are possible because Jesus is with us whatever, forever, however. We are a context that demands a living explanation, a living mystery that invites scrutiny and curiosity. And the explanation is Jesus.

Perhaps in reality we’re a mixture inside of the disciples, the crowd, the rebels and the authorities. But it’s up to us to ensure salvation in Christ isn’t just a theory – it’s a reality with a context – and the context is – us!

Questions

1. Have you at some point in your Christian life been offered one of the theories of the atonement as the only correct one? How do you feel about that now?
2. Do you identify particularly with one of the groups in the story? Disciples, crowd, authorities or rebels? Is there a time in your life where you’ve particularly inhabited one of those roles?
3. What do you understand by ‘a context requiring an explanation’?
4. What do you understand by exile? Are there times in your life when you’ve experience exile?
5. Are there times in your life when you have particularly experience Jesus as with you?
6. Is there anything in this material that surprises you or causes you to look at your faith anew?

