

Talk for Evening Prayer, All Saints' Cottenham with Rampton on Zoom,
26 July 2020, Alison Wedgbury

I remember when Easter suddenly made sense to me. It was about 15 years ago and it was actually at Christmas. In the middle of all the usual celebrations I suddenly saw where Christmas was leading. Lent and Holy Week now made sense. The divine and the human coming together in Jesus joined up the dots. It was clearly part of the long story of God's relationship with humanity.

We know that Jesus's death on the Cross was not the end of the story. But this week we'll look at the lines of the Creed that link us to Good Friday and Holy Saturday: *I believe in Jesus Christ... (who)...was crucified, died and was buried; he descended to the dead.* At the time, Jesus's followers saw a real human being actually die. Some women and men took down the body from the cross and buried it. That extra word *descended* has over the centuries meant going *down* into Hades or Hell, a place either of nothingness or of torment. In the Middle Ages especially, there was a tradition of Jesus going *down* to *harrow* i.e. to break down the gates of Hell and rescue souls imprisoned there. That became known as the Harrowing of Hell.

In the New Testament, Christian writers started to interpret the death of Jesus. Today, we have inherited four main approaches to talking about the Cross.

One: **Sacrifice**. Christ was the perfect sacrifice of the sort that happened in the Old Testament. Jesus' death made everything clean so that we can all draw close to God.

Two: **Victory**. Christ has won a universal battle against all sin, death and Satan. Believers can now be free from their influence.

Three: **Atonement or Satisfaction**. Christ paid a penalty or ransom for all sin. Forgiveness of all human sin is now morally possible.

Four: **At-One-Ment as Love**. The death of Jesus Christ show God's love for humanity, as in John 3:16 *For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.*

When Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15:3 *'Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures'* he meant the Hebrew Scriptures. We've heard about **Sacrifice** in two passages tonight, Psalm 22:1-5, 29-31 and Isaiah 53:4-8. In the early years of Christianity, the idea of **Christ as Victor** gave new Christians confidence to keep building the church on earth. That concept of victory is a powerful one today when we want to conquer our own fears about life or death. The Cross as **Satisfaction** focusses our minds on our own destructive behaviour through pride, envy, anger, greed, lust etc. Because of the Cross, we can now find forgiveness.

Finally, the Cross as **Love** may seem an enormous contradiction. Crucifixion was a terrible physical way for Jesus to die and we may sanitise it now by making it into jewellery or accessories. But the **Cross as Love** does bind us to God through Jesus. The great writer, scholar and preacher, NT Wright states: *"When Jesus was going to his own death, he indicated pretty clearly that he saw all the lines of scriptural narrative converging at this point; and, to help his disciples get the full meaning and benefit of what was about to happen, he didn't give them a theory, he gave them a meal".* And every time we share communion, we share a meal, not a theory.

Jesus passed right through death and came out the other side. Next week we'll look at *I believe in Jesus Christ...On the third day he rose again; he ascended into heaven, he is seated at the right hand of the Father, and he will come to judge the living and the dead.* That's the story of Easter Day and beyond. It gives us all hope for the present and the future.