

Baptist Assembly May 2017

Here are familiar words, so can I encourage you to listen carefully:

The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said... whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

Now, in a short while we will share together in this communion meal, and when we do "we will proclaim the Lord's death". (strong word – *proclaim*)

So there is a direct connection being drawn between this celebration of communion, and the cross upon which Jesus died.

"whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup... you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes."

To put it another way, this table, this bread and wine, connects us to the gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ who died for us.

But what is the nature of that connection?

Polishing your diamonds before you came out this morning?

You'll be familiar with the concept of a diamond that allows light to shine through it revealing different facets. The light breaks up – there are reds and greens, yellows and violets, and at each turn of the diamond the diamond reveals something new. It's a simple concept – one diamond – multiple facets.

In the same way, I want to suggest to you this morning that the cross that stands behind the table that is laid before us operates in the same way.

One Cross with many facets, each revealing something unique and priceless about the event that lies at the heart of the Christian faith. And if we don't present the many facets of the cross, then we short-change those we seek to reach in the name of Christ. If we only present a one-dimensional cross, then we do not do justice to

Let me explore some of these facets this morning

(1) The first is easy – the cross as a Place of Absolute Forgiveness

One of the most powerful films of this last year is 'Manchester by the Sea' starring Casey Affleck. Affleck portrays a father whose carelessness and selfishness leads to the death of his own children, and subsequently the destruction of his marriage.

The film observes his grief, or more precisely his guilt and his inability to find absolution. In the end he has nowhere to go to get forgiveness and even when his ex wife offers him this, he confesses “I cant, I just cant beat this...”

Not everyone has experiences of guilt that are so dramatic, but every one of us knows that we can't get through life unless we confess our own mistakes, and ask for forgiveness, and at the same time stand ready to forgive those who have wronged us.

When John the Baptist saw Jesus walking towards him, he *proclaimed* (there's that word again), he proclaimed...

‘Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world’ (John 1:29)

And when the two disciples walked to Emmaus, and alongside them came the unrecognized Jesus, Jesus explained...

“that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day,⁴⁷ and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be *proclaimed* in his name to all nations...” (Luke 24:46-47)

Here then is the most prominent facet of the cross, the very core of the gospel, the destruction of the very thing which itself destroys us.

Surely a place of forgiveness is a good place but the sad thing is that I've known people who have stayed away from communion because they felt they were not worthy to receive the bread and wine. The irony is that that is the very point, no-one is worthy, and that's precisely why they should come.

And so we *proclaim* that the cross is a place of forgiveness.

You may have even come to this Assembly carrying the guilt of unconfessed, unforgiven sin. You won't be the first and you won't be the last. But you are here today and if you have a moment's hesitation about taking this bread and wine, I say to you, don't miss this moment.

But sadly that's where we sometimes stop – the cross as a place of forgiveness. I want to go further this morning and change the imagery slightly and proclaim...

(2) The cross as a Place of Complete Healing

Francis Spufford, an Anglican author, in his 2012 book 'Unapologetic' makes the point that for many people in society today, it isn't always personal sin that's the presenting problem, its the brokenness we live with in our lives, often a brokenness that isn't always of our doing

In our churches every Sunday, and in our workplaces every Monday, and in our street every other day of the week, we cross paths with people who are broken.

There are those whose dreams from their younger years have not materialised and who live with what they begin to realise may be life-long disappointment.

There are those whose marriages have failed or are failing and they cannot find the way back to the place of their first love. In fact, they're not even sure that's where they want to go any more.

There are in our families, children with special needs and even more special personalities, and they are loved to bits, and our world is so much better at celebrating these truly special lives. But in the quiet hours of the night, many a tear will fall as Mums and Dads confess with honesty that this is not a path of their choosing.

For too many others, debts have piled up, and life has spiralled out of control, and to ease the pain they have turned to the bottle, or bought into the myth that by popping a few pills they'll feel better. And you know something, often they do help, but only for a while till they have to do it all over again, and maybe try something a little stronger and before they know it they are addicted and things are worse.

And I doubt there are many families represented here who are not touched by the reality of caring for people who were once strong and capable, but are now weak and struggling. Old age brings many joys, but for millions it brings hardship, the loss of their mental faculties of those they once saw as soul mates, closest friends, sweethearts and lovers but now the passing years have stolen those identities and robbed us of the people we loved.

Is there good news for these broken people? Have we more to say than that the cross is a place of forgiveness, because frankly to me these carers are more often saints than sinners, and telling someone who's down that they're sinners isn't always going to get you a hearing! Even those who have been lured into debt and sought comfort in the bottle are themselves often victims of a society that has cast aside self-restraint and deceived people by making debt so available.

Here is where the scriptures cry out to be heard:

Psalm 38:18

The Lord is close to the broken-hearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit.

Psalm 147:3

He heals the broken-hearted and binds up their wounds.

Matthew 11:28 – Jesus says...

“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.

There are times when we offer Jesus to those who need to know forgiveness, but we can sometimes beat this drum all on its own.

There are other times when people need to be told they are wounded and there is a place of healing.

Do we routinely offer to the world an invitation to come to the Christ who binds up the broken-hearted, who knows our pain, who can hold us in those moments when it's all getting too much, and our disappointments threaten to crush us?

The cross is a place of forgiveness, The Gospel is a message of forgiveness... but the good news we proclaim is that the **Cross is also a place where broken people can be restored and healed**. And today's world desperately needs to know that.

But let me go one more step, the last step for this morning, and *proclaim* that the cross is a place for Inclusion.

(3) The cross as a place for Radical Inclusion

The verses we read earlier express something that is a precious facet of our faith that is too rarely heard but is urgently needed in today's world.

The Bible charts our course from estrangement to family membership...

Deut 10:19 You shall also love the **stranger, for you were strangers** in the land of Egypt...

Eph 2:19 So then you are no longer **strangers** and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God...

Something has happened to bring about this transition – from estrangement to belonging and of course, to the Christians in Ephesus for whom it was written, what had changed is that they had come to faith.

But if that dimension of being included, that sense of belonging is part of the gospel message then we need to find every opportunity to model it.

- Just as we will always be a people ready to speak of, and extend the forgiveness of Christ to others, because part of the gospel is to forgive...
- just as we will always be a compassionate people offering the healing and comfort of Christ to those who are hurting, because part of the gospel is that God heals the broken-hearted...
- so too we will be a welcoming people whose default position is to welcome those who are left out, and speak on behalf of those whose exclusion is somehow enforced by unjust structures within society. And we'll do so because part of the gospel is to transform strangers into family members!

In today's interconnected world, we are affected as much by events on the other side of the world, every bit as much as we are by decisions closer to home.

So we will be acutely sensitive to cases of unfair exclusion, whether victimised groups are Muslims travelling to the US, or a whole nation (in this case Mexicans) labelled as “drug dealers, criminals and rapists.”

And whilst our country has taken a decision to leave the European Union, we will recognise in some of the rhetoric the propensity to inflame animosity and even hatred against those in our community who have made their homes here over the years. And even more so those who long to find sanctuary here from lands that are ravaged by wars that, in some cases, we ourselves have inflamed.

And because that dynamic of gathering people in and including them is part of the gospel, **we will speak out and act against such things.**

Deut 10:19 You shall (also) love the **stranger**, for you were **strangers** in the land of Egypt...

Even in our society, and irrespective of our political views, we will surely be concerned that in the 5th largest economy in the world, we seem unable to fund our schools and our NHS, whilst wealth of almost unspeakable proportions is generated daily here in our own country.

We need that wealth and we need those who create it, but we cannot allow it to create a wall between those who have and those who do not have.

And yes, these are political factors, but they are not *party* political and therein is the difference. You can vote red or blue, or yellow or green and see in each the possibility of creating a just world, a world in which people belong regardless of their ethnicity, their faith, their sexuality, their economic status, their postcode or their education – all are welcome in God’s eyes.

But of course the gospel is political because Jesus taught us to pray “**thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven**”. The gospel *is* political.

§§§§§§§§

So now let us share this meal together, and in so doing we proclaim the Lord’s death:

- let that proclamation speak of **absolute forgiveness** for sinful people
- let that proclamation speak of **complete healing** for broken people
- let that proclamation speak of **radical inclusion** for isolated people

Ultimately people need to be forgiven, need to be healed and in the process they will be adopted into the family of God. But each can be a pathway to grace, each a facet allowing us to glimpse something of the unsearchable riches of Christ.

/DK