

Sermon for Holy Cross Day at St Nicholas, Islip

14th September 2025

Here are the hearts of our two readings:

From John ‘God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world but in order that the world might be saved through him.’

And from Paul ‘let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus...he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross.’

Welcome to Holy Cross Day. Almost midway between Easters we’re invited to remind ourselves of the centrality of the sacrifice of Christ. Our faith, our very being, and our power to address complex human experience is embedded in this central Christian narrative. The hinge on which everything turns is the crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth.

Yet back in Holy Week we tend to skirt past Good Friday as swiftly as we possibly can, finding the donkeys of Palm Sunday and the empty tomb and eggs of Easter Day much more comfortable times to take us to Church. Instruments of execution are just too gruesome.

And understanding the cross of Christ also causes us discomfort. Let me illustrate that statement by means of a contemporary hymn. Stuart Townend writes some splendid modern hymns, and we should sing some of them in the benefice because they’re strong both in tunes and in theology. However, one of his most popular hymns – ‘In Christ Alone’ causes many people difficulties. The second half of the second verse reads like this:

“til on that cross as Jesus died, the wrath of God was satisfied, for every sin on Him was laid, here in the death of Christ I live.’

Few of us would want to sing of the cross of Christ as part of a system of wrath, retribution, punishment, neutralizing a vengeful God. And indeed, that is not what the New Testament offers us – as our two readings give evidence – but let’s just set a bit of context.

There are two powerful elements of cultural context which have long informed our understanding of the cross of Christ but which to our 21st Century minds feel weird, superstitious, even repulsive.

One predates the birth of Christianity and is an integral part of virtually all ancient religions: the symbolic, ritual action of animal sacrifice. The slaughter of animals as symbols. We need symbols to survive; they carry the soul of our nation. Just think of the appearance of flags across the country this summer. Flags carrying messages and being tokens of identity. Symbols, such as flags or animal sacrifice, aren’t open to rational analysis. They operate in both our corporate imagination and the individual unconscious. They have a power, a potency to form, hold and control both our minds and the shared cultural beliefs of our society.

When Jesus sacrificed himself to a public and humiliating death his followers, and generations of Christians beyond, turned to the treasury of traditions around animal sacrifice as they tried to comprehend this expression of God’s sacrificial love. Here’s just three aspects from that store:

- ❖ They held on to the idea of the value of the sacrifice as costly. Christ the Son emptied himself and was obedient to death.
- ❖ They recognized how the sacrifice was touching deep, often unconscious forces: the potency of blood, of danger, and the mystery of death itself. Our desire to avert God’s anger.

- ❖ There was the universal need to cleanse human guilt, and more positively the need to establish a cosmic harmony leading to blessing, fertility and prosperity.

Animal sacrifice offered a whole world of meaning which we don't share but which we might recognize as still relevant in its psychological and spiritual effects. It's why we believe that Christ's death has universal impact as a cosmic act of God.

As well as asking ourselves 'What does it mean?' there's also the explanation of 'How does it work?' Christ died for us is the simplest formula but how do we understand 'for'?

The New Testament offers us diverse meanings; there's no one dominant mechanism to this cosmic act.

- Christ died for the forgiveness of sins
- Christ died to conquer evil
- Christ died to make atonement, to expiate human guilt, to propitiate God's just anger
- Christ died as a substitute for us, to pay the penalty incurred
- Christ died as an example of how we should live
- Christ died as a ransom, with our sin weighed against Christ's blood

Just one of those phrases I've used – 'paying the price of sin' became a dominant explanation of Christ's death when Anselm translated it into the system of feudal life in Western Europe. In the case of crime or offence in feudal law there was an honour system with retribution and a tariff of penalties. Just so Anselm promoted Jesus' death as a similar way of keeping the divine system's integrity. Once feudal overlords disappeared that perspective of Christ's death lost its coherence, but parts of the Church steadfastly hung on to it.

All the biblical images of the mechanics of Christ's suffering feel flawed to our contemporary minds but let me return to our two readings to assert with confidence what we do know about the cross of Christ.

In his gospel John, and Paul in his letter to the Church in Philippi, offer us contrasting interpretations of what was occurring at the crucifixion.

John says that far from judging or condemning the world the cross was God's agency to save us from ruining ourselves: 'the world might be saved through him'. God did not abandon us to our fate.

Paul tells us that the cross is the best example of how to live. Jesus in his living and dying gave us a role model. As we sacrifice ourselves to living in love, so we'll discover a more abundant and eternal life for ourselves.

Both these insights about the cross are built on God's passionate care for his sick and suffering creation, and how he longs for it to be healed.

But the very complexity of that healing and redeeming work, its spiritual profundity and moral beauty at every level of human experience will require us to go on meditating at the foot of the cross: working out our own salvation with fear and trembling; but, as Paul says, ever reminding ourselves that it is God who is at work in us, enabling us both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

+June Osborne

