

## WHY DID JESUS DIE?

By Revd Prof Dorothy Lee -Easter 2014

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To ask the question of why Jesus died is one of the most difficult yet decisive questions we could ever ask. It is a question that the Church throughout its history has asked, and answered in a variety of ways.

Jesus' death is grounded in creation, the works of God's hands — a creation that is good yet somehow distorted and alienated by sin. The cross implies also the incarnation: God's entering into creation and becoming one of us in Jesus of Nazareth. In this event, the New Testament attests to Jesus' unique identity as divine and human, the Son of God manifest in our flesh and blood (Jn 1:14; Heb 2:14). If he is fully human he must die, for that is what it means to be mortal.

But why did Jesus die the way he did: crucified by the Romans in an excruciating and humiliating death? Why did the *Son of God* die in this way, the one who shared in God's own being?

For the New Testament writers, Jesus' death is not a disaster, despite appearances to the contrary. Along with his incarnation, life and ministry, and resurrection, Jesus' death is God's plan for salvation: definitive for human beings and for creation. The whole Jesus event, for the New Testament, stands at the centre of history, including the cross. Our salvation, and that of the world, is achieved in it and through it.

There are a number of ways to explain the death of Jesus, though no explanation will ever exhaust its mystery. In any account, God is intimately involved in the cross, not as an outsider or distant spectator, but as a direct participant, fully present to Jesus in all he undergoes, even (paradoxically) his experience of abandonment. In a very real sense, in describing Jesus' mortal suffering, we are describing the experience of God. In the truest and deepest sense, what happened on the cross involved the whole Trinity.

In the first place, Jesus' death is God's profound and radical identification with sin and suffering. This is hinted at in Mark's Gospel by Jesus' baptism — why otherwise would Jesus need a 'baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins' (Mk 1:4)? On the cross, Jesus (and for this read 'God') enters into the dark waters of our desolation, torment, sin, suffering and death (Mk 15:34). It is our depths into which Jesus descends, bringing with him — because of who he is — the redeeming light and life of God.

In this act of love, the greatest act of love the world has ever known, God enters the place of lovelessness and abandonment, sin and shame, suffering and violence. God has identified with us, has been there, has suffered, has endured the torment of our sin, our shame, our pain. The cross shows the extraordinary depths of God's love for us and for creation (Jn 3:16-17), a love that is profoundly transforming.

In the second place, the New Testament affirms again and again that through the cross our sins, and those of the whole world, are forgiven (Matt 26:28; Lk 23:24; Acts 10:43; Eph 1:7; Col 1:14; 1 Jn 2:2). On a personal level, it means that through the cross, our failures and inadequacies, our acts of cruelty and destruction (including our self-destruction), are forgiven through the merciful love and grace of God revealed in Jesus.

In the Old Testament, one of the functions of the temple was to atone for sin through animal sacrifices (Lev 5:6-10). On the Day of Atonement, animals were sacrificed for the sins of the people, and the scapegoat was sent into the wilderness bearing those sins (Lev 16:10). For the New Testament writers, these practices point to Jesus, the ultimate and one-and-only sacrifice for sins, whose blood atones for the sins of the world, and is available for all who repent and turn to God (Jn 1:29; Heb 9:22). The cross is the supreme act of atonement, making us one with God in our alienation and sinfulness, setting all things in right relationship to God, and therefore to one another and to creation (Rom 3:21-26; 5:6-10).

In this sense, Jesus' death on the cross effects a 'cleansing' from sin (1 Jn 1:7-9). This is a paradoxical image: blood having the power to cleanse and make clean. It means that forgiveness removes our guilt and shame: the sense that what we have done wrong — how we have harmed another — has polluted us. In Jesus' cleansing death, our guilt and shame are washed away. It is as if God, to change the image, has fallen on the bomb and absorbed the explosion into himself. God has taken on the stain of sin and, in doing so, removed it in the one act of forgiveness on the cross.

In the third place, the death of Jesus is a moment of glory and victory, overcoming 'the ruler of this world' (Jn 16:11; 13:31-32). In Jesus' death, the end of sin and evil is spelled out in an event that in human terms is shameful and degrading but is, in fact, a glorious event revealing God's true nature. The cross is the ladder on which the triumphant Son returns to the Father, drawing 'all people' to himself (Jn 12:32). It is an act of glory because it shows the transforming radiance of God's love. In this terrible event of the cross, ironically, both Father and Son are glorified, revealing definitively God who is (1 Jn 4:16). At a cosmic level, the cross signifies God's final overcoming of evil.

To sum up: the cross in the New Testament represents the transforming power of God's love for us and for creation. It signifies the radical entry of God into our suffering and desolation, cleansing us from sin and liberating us from evil.

As one of the Good Friday prayers says: 'We adore you, O Christ, and we bless you, because by your death you have redeemed the world.'

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