

## A Stranger in St Paul's

- Imagine a stranger from a far distant land visiting this country - he knows next to nothing about Christianity - but interested, wants to learn
- *(image: St Paul's)*
- Walking round central London, up Fleet Street - impressed by grandeur of St Paul's Cathedral - can't help noticing the golden cross which dominates the dome
- Enters, and drifts into the central point, under the dome - trying to take in the scale, the layout of the place. Realises that the ground-plan is cruciform
- Each side chapel contains what looks like a table, on which there is a prominently displayed cross. Downstairs, the tombs of the famous all have a cross engraved or embossed on them
- Decides to remain for a service which is about to begin:
  - man next to him is wearing a cross on his lapel, lady on other side has one round her neck;
  - catches sight of colourful, stained glass east window - contains a cross;
  - (Anglican setting) start of service marked by procession of choir and clergy, led by someone carrying a cross;
  - words of opening hymn: "We sing the praise of him who died, of him who died upon the cross; the sinner's hope let men deride, for this we count the world but loss;
  - its a communion service - focus on death of Jesus on cross;
  - service ends with another hymn: "When I survey the wondrous cross on which the prince of glory died,..."
- Stranger struck by central place given in both word and symbol to the cross
- This evening - a reminder and a refresher in that centrality
- No mere accident of history, or a misplaced focus
- Reflection of the truth that Paul affirmed - "we preach Christ crucified" (1 Cor 1:23) - the essence of the gospel
- Always useful to remind ourselves of that - of the core of our faith, and the fact that it is the core. To re-orient ourselves around the Cross
- That's what I hope we'll manage tonight and perhaps over another Sunday evening or two:
  - huge task - books and sermons galore!
- Never manage more than a whistle stop tour - but clear summaries, reminders of the whole context in which we are operating, can serve us well
- Book: John Stott, "The Cross of Christ" - one of his best books, and gives depth and detail you just can't get to in even a series of sermons...!

## The Centrality of the Cross

- Despite all that I've already said, might wonder whether we rightly place the Cross at the centre of our faith - have we rightly interpreted the Scriptural evidence? Or is it some kind of sentimental construction centred round sympathy for Jesus' pain?
- No - it does lie at the heart of our faith - smattering of the evidence:

### Central for Christ

- We call ourselves "Christians", apparently an early nickname for those who followed the way of Jesus - wonderfully suggestive of "Christ's-yins", in a Billy Connolly accent!
- So, what place did he give to the Cross while he was on earth. Does our understanding of the cross as central to the Christian faith match up with his? After all, we'd look very silly if it didn't!
- Jesus own understanding of his ministry, his reason for being here on the earth, placed the cross at its centre. Indeed, we wouldn't be going too far in saying that it was the focus and climax of his life:

- from the earliest parts of his ministry, right from his baptism and temptation, Jesus sets himself to go the way of obedience, the way of suffering, the way of death. He refuses Satan's offer of an easy way
  - Peter - "you are the Messiah", - Jesus immediately "began to teach that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again" (Mark 8:29-31). And again, "Setting his face towards Jerusalem."
  - note the vehemence of Jesus' reaction when Peter rebukes him for speaking of his death thus - get behind me Satan!! - denying the necessity of the Cross
  - in many other places Jesus talks explicitly about his coming death. For example, Mark 9:31 "The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into the hands of men. They will kill him and after three days he will rise."
  - again at Mark 10:32-34 - solemnity of three-fold prediction in Mark's gospel
  - Jesus' preparation of disciples - teaching them so they would comprehend significance, pastorally preparing them for the trauma in the days and hours before his arrest
  - in John's gospel we don't have explicit predictions of his death - but 7 references to Jesus' "hour", a time - "not yet" at the wedding at Cana, or when the crowd tried to seize him in Temple courts (John 7:30), and **having come** - twice in the upper room, when the Greeks came to him during the week before his death ("The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified")
- All of these point to more than Jesus certainty that he was going to face a violent and premature death - more than a reading of the coming storm
  - Point to his determination to choose that way - that is was central to his mission - it was the way he chose as Messiah
  - As he explained from the Scriptures after his death to the two on the road to Emmaus, it was necessary for the Messiah, the Christ, to suffer
  - John Stott sums up Jesus attitude when he says: "Despite the great importance of his teaching, his example and his works of compassion and power, none of these was central to his mission. What dominated his mind was not the living but the giving of his life. This final self-sacrifice was his 'hour', for which he had come into the world."

### Central for the apostles

- This central place that Jesus gave to the cross was also accorded it by the apostles.... sample sermons in Acts are Cross centred
- Even more marked in epistles, especially Paul: defines "his" gospel as "the message of the Cross", and his ministry as "we preach Christ crucified."
- Note too **proportion of gospel records** which concern the events of the final week of Jesus life:
  - he had as much as a three year ministry, and yet a quarter to a third of each account is devoted to the last week of his life, focusing on the Cross
  - for John, its almost half and half!!!
- The Cross is indisputably at the heart of the Christian faith - **towering over the wrecks of time** as the hymn writer put it!
- The crux of history - **but why?**
  - turn to sketching something of that in now..

### Problem of Forgiveness

- Jesus' own understanding of his mission and ministry lies against the background of the OT Messiah prophecies
  - he said "The Son of Man **MUST** suffer...."
  - why **must?** Because that was God's path, announced by the prophets
- Jesus quoted or alluded to various OT Messianic prophecies at various times (eg "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit" - Ps.31:5), but he seems to have derived his clearest forecast of both suffering & glory from Isaiah 53:
  - (2) *He grew up before him like a tender shoot, and like a root out of dry ground.*

*He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him. (3) He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering. Like one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not. (4) Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted. (5) But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed. (6) We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all. ... (10) Yet it was the LORD's will to crush him and cause him to suffer, and though the LORD makes his life a guilt offering, he will see his offspring and prolong his days, and the will of the LORD will prosper in his hand*

- He alludes to it in various places, and quotes from it once (Luke 22:37) in the records that we have in the gospels
- His death is interpreted as "taking up our infirmities, bearing our sorrows, pierced for our iniquities - the punishment that brought us peace was upon him and by his wounds we are healed."
- His death sorts out the problem of sin
- Don't have time to develop all of this in detail, but essential thrust of Scriptures case is:
  - sin, rebellion against God, is deadly serious;
  - we are disobeying, flaunting God our maker;
  - we are claiming we know best, and that our way is right;
  - moreover, we are responsible for our actions - not automatons!
  - God, on the other hand, is absolutely holy, pure, to the extent that he cannot look on sin;
  - his purity is so bright its incandescent - burns up sin - like a spacecraft getting too close to the sun...
  - that's God's wrath - unlike the sun, though, its not merely an impersonal force, but personal, flowing from God's holy character - his personal hostility to evil;
  - a hostility that results in judgement, punishment, separation;
  - yet at same time God loves us, desires to be reunited with us;
- **Problem - how can a holy God reconcile that with his love, without being inconsistent?**
  - only by taking the punishment himself - providing a substitute for the sinner to satisfy his justice
  - judge on the bench pronouncing sentence - then coming down to the dock and paying the fine himself...
- But takes humility to accept that offer of forgiveness - we want to pay our own way, not be beholden to anyone

## **Major Barbara**

- George Bernard Shaw had considerable insight into the subtleties of human pride, dramatised this in his comedy about the Salvation Army "Major Barbara"
- Bill Walker - a rough customer of about 25 - turns up at SA HQ drunk & infuriated because his girl-friend Mog has not only been converted, but has another bloke
  - the other bloke is Todger Fairmile, a champion music hall wrestler who has also been converted
  - Bill first accuses a Salvation Army lass of turning Mog against him, he strikes her - until the derision of the onlookers for his cowardice makes him go in search of Todger...
  - He says (I won't try the Cockney!) "I'm going to spit in Todger Fairmile's eye. I bashed Jenny Hill's face, and now I'll get my own face bashed - he'll hit me harder than I hit her. That'll make us square."
  - but Todger refuses to retaliate
  - Bill is shamefaced: "I did what I said I'd do. I spat in his eye. He looks up at the

sky and says 'O that I should be found worthy to be spat upon for the gospel's sake!'... and Mog said, 'Glory, Hallelujah!'"

- Jenny Hill says she is sorry and that Bill did not really hurt her, which makes him angrier still:  
"I don't want to be forgiven by you, or by anybody else. What I did I'll pay for. I tried to get me own jaw broken to satisfy you..."
- And so it goes on - so often we are the same
  - we won't bow before God, admitting our sin, asking him to forgive us through Jesus Christ
- If you have never realised the gravity of your sin, and the need for forgiveness, and the availability of that forgiveness only in Jesus - then do so tonight
- **1 John 1:8-10: "If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. If we claim we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar and his word has no place in our lives."**
- **Just** - because his righteousness is satisfied in Jesus' substitution
- **Faithful** - for he will answer as we call

## The Glory of the Cross!

- Only begun to dip our toe into all that the Cross has achieved for us - the glory of Jesus' sacrifice
- Response:
  - repentance and acceptance of forgiveness;
  - rejoicing, worship, thankfulness;
  - a desire to live our lives in light of the Cross - self-sacrifice, that consciousness that we cannot achieve anything of eternal value ourselves...
- Finish with words from Augustus Toplady's famous hymn:
 

Nothing in my hand I bring,  
Simply to your Cross I cling;  
Naked, come to you for dress;  
Helpless, look to you for grace;  
Foul, I to the fountain fly;  
Wash me, Saviour, or I die
- Sing: *I will offer up my life* (SHF 851)