

2CH Sunday at 7.30

Talks from the NSW Council of Churches

Good Friday sermon

Presented by Philip Jensen

Which sentence scares you more: “Christianity is false” or “Christianity is true”? Of course truth itself should never scare you. It’s not truth but lies that cause damage. But sometimes the truth is scary because sometimes the truth is about a threat to your way of life. The truth that a tsunami is coming or that you have cancer are the kinds of messages of truth that arouse deep fear. And so they should, for they are speaking of something that will threaten your way of life, or threaten life itself.

Yet it is better to know the truth than go on believing lies even though the truth may be alarming, especially when it is alarming. For in its alarm it warns you of danger and calls upon you to take action. So which sentence alarms you more: “Christianity is false.” or “Christianity is true.”? Which one is a greater threat to your way of life? Which one calls upon you to take action, changing the way you live?

On the first Good Friday, Jesus was crucified. That is what the Bible teaches us. Indeed Jesus’ death is of first importance for Christianity. The apostle wrote *I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures (1 Corinthians 15:3)*.

The death of Jesus is no secondary, unimportant part of Christianity; it is of first importance and central to the claims that Christianity makes upon the world. This is in stark contrast to the Qur’an which says that Jesus did not die. He was not crucified. *“They killed him not, nor crucified him... for of a surety they killed him not” (4:157)*.

This is alarming news for either Christians or Muslims. One of our sacred texts must be wrong so one of our religions must be wrong. The Qur’an being wrong is almost unthinkable for Muslims. But if it is wrong about the fact of Jesus’ death then Islam is wrong for it is wrong about the teaching and the prophecy of Jesus and wrong about the importance of Jesus compared to Mohammed.

But what of Christianity? What if Islam is right and Jesus didn’t die? It is impossible to remove the death of Jesus from the Bible because it is everywhere in the New Testament. If Jesus didn’t die then the whole New Testament is wrong. Christianity is false and Christians need to be liberated from living a lie.

So how can we know which is true? The Qur’an says one thing, the Bible the opposite. Though the Qur’an only says it once while the New Testament says it in passage after passage and the logic of the passages doesn’t make sense without the death of Jesus.

The New Testament was written in the 1st Century, in living memory of the events. The Qur’an was not written down until the 7th Century, 600 years after Jesus lived. Muslims often accuse Christians of not copying the Bible accurately but every copy of the New Testament in antiquity has the death of Jesus. We have thousands of early Christian manuscript parts of the Bible as well as quotations from early Christians which testify to the death of Jesus.

Muslims claim that Jesus was a prophet but he repeatedly prophesied his death. Academics have skeptically scrutinized the Bible for over 150 years. In America one such group called the Jesus Seminar assumed the

Gospels were not historically accurate. They doubted all Jesus' miracles and pretty much everything about New Testament Christianity. They drew up a list of ten things that even in their skepticism they claimed were established as *authentic* events. Even this list included that Jesus died and that he was crucified.

Furthermore the death of Jesus accords with what we know about him from outside the New Testament. We find it in the writings of Josephus the Jewish Historian or Tacitus the Roman Historian who wrote *Christ..., suffered the extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of one of our procurators, Pontius Pilatus,*

Yet some would say today "Don't be alarmed. It doesn't matter if Christianity is true or false. We could still follow Jesus' teaching, his example of life and love all people especially the outcasts. But think again of the verse about the importance of Jesus' death *I delivered to you as of first importance ... that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures.*

It's of first importance not just that Jesus died but that he died for our sins. There is more to Good Friday than that Jesus died. We celebrate his death and call the day he died "good" because he died for us. He died our death in our place on our behalf.

What does it mean to follow Jesus' example of love if we don't believe that because of his love he laid down his life for us? We know love in this that God sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins and that is why and how we love one another.

What will we know of the love of God if we ignore or reject the principle demonstration of his love? *For God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.* For as the New Testament teaches *The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners (Romans 5:8).*

For Jesus death was extraordinary not because he was crucified. Thousands of people were crucified. Not because he died as an innocent martyr. Thousands of martyrs have died. His death was extraordinary, in fact unique, in that he died as the totally innocent man for the sins of the whole world. He died as our representative. He died as our substitute in our place as a sacrifice for our sins. For his death was in accordance with the Scriptures and the Old Testament scriptures explained his death like this *All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all. Isaiah 53:6*

This is why he prophesied to his disciples that he came ... to give his life as a ransom for many (Mark 10:45). For as the apostle Peter wrote *he ... suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God (1 Peter 3:18).*

If Jesus has died for our sins then Satan can no longer accuse us of our guilt. God will no longer condemn us for our rebellion against him and we are free from the power of Satan and Sin and the dominion of death. *For the wage of sin is death but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 6:23).*

If Jesus has not died or if he didn't die for our sins then we are still in our sins confronting death that will lead us inevitably to God's judgement and condemnation. Christians would be alarmed if Jesus didn't **die for our sins** for the whole of our lives here and now as well as our expectation for eternity would be threatened. Not only that but if Jesus didn't **rise from the dead** the whole of Christianity would be threatened.

For if Jesus didn't rise from the dead, if Jesus is still dead somewhere in a grave in Palestine, then we have no forgiveness of sins or deliverance from the judgement of God. And can only live now in meaninglessness or terror.

Meaninglessness for we see there is no life after death and so there is no justice for the oppressed and there is no future to our lives except the long stand in the crematorium queue. So we sing: *Let's eat drink and be merry for tomorrow we die*. Life is as the playwright Samuel Becket put it, nothing but breath, nothing but endlessly and meaninglessly “waiting for Godot”.

On the other hand some people live not with meaninglessness but with terror. They're still sure that we will be brought to judgement somehow and so they live in fear. They are still sure that this world can't be all that there is; that our sense of justice and righteousness can't be just a mistaken twitching of our grey matter; still sure that there is a moral order to the universe and we must pay our dues for the mistakes we have made. This payment, they think, maybe by the law of Karma taking us back relentlessly and without mercy to another life where we pay for all our mistakes or a confrontation with the living God in judgement after death.

For if Jesus didn't rise from the dead then he didn't pay for the sins of the world but must be still paying for his own sins like every other human being. This is the point Paul makes when he wrote *if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain. ... And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. ... If in this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied (1 Corinthians 15)*.

Easter Day is but the completion of Good Friday. It is the assurance that the work of Christ on Good Friday was indeed accomplished. It is the assurance that our sins are forgiven because Jesus has paid the price fully and completely. There is now no charge against my name. There is now no accusation that Satan can bring against me. My file has stamped “Paid in Full”.

While Christians rejoice in Jesus' death, non-Christians should be alarmed by it. For if we reject God's sacrifice for sins then we are not only guilty of our sins but also guilty of rejecting God's one and only Son. And if Jesus rose from the dead then not only can sins be forgiven but the judgement of God has commenced.

So once again we come to Good Friday, a very alarming day.

If it is true that Jesus died for our sins then the whole non-Christian world should be alarmed for Jesus is more than a man and he has risen from the dead. He will return to judge all flesh and all will be called into account, not only for their mistakes and sins but also for their rejection of God's love in sending his one and only Son into the world to pay the sacrifice for sins.

As a Christian I must face the fact that Jesus may not have died for our sins and so my present life is pitifully mistaken. But if you are not a Christian then you should face the fact that Jesus may have died for our sins and risen again.

Good Friday is too scary for non-Christians to face for if Christianity is true there is nothing else to do but give your life to Jesus the one who gave his life for you.