

## **2CH Sunday at 7.30**

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Talks from the NSW Council of Churches

### **Good Friday message**

Presented by David Reay

One day many years ago, I stood in Canterbury Cathedral at the very spot where Thomas Becket, Archbishop of Canterbury was alleged to have been murdered. King Henry was enraged that Becket was causing some difficulties in the ongoing tension between the church and the state. Some of Henry's followers decided to do the king a favour by doing away with Becket. At last, royal power was to be asserted and the church would have its wings clipped.

It didn't turn out that way. Such was the outrage at the crime that Henry had to do penance and submit to the authority of the church. At the time, it looked like the king had won a great victory, but in fact he had a great setback. One man had died and in doing so had furthered that dead man's cause.

Victory can look a bit like defeat. Defeat can look a bit like victory. It is what we call a paradox. Christianity is full of them. Weakness may be like strength, doubt like faith, service like freedom. The greatest and central paradox of the Christian faith is Good Friday. Victory masquerading as defeat. Life in the midst of death. Love in the midst of hatred.

We must not pretty up Good Friday. Crucifixion was an ugly business. It was torture of the worst kind. Jesus hung naked on the cross in front of jeering spectators who waited for him to die slowly of suffocation. The very people he came to rescue and help were cheering his painful death. We can't afford to skip over Good Friday in too much of a hurry in order to shout hallelujahs at Jesus' resurrection. This too is part of the paradox of the Christian faith. It involves praise for new life, but also a deep grasp of the pain that comes with living in a fallen world.

And yet, we need not take the view that Good Friday was the day of defeat and Easter Day the day of victory. It may have looked that way but it wasn't. Good Friday, in all its grim reminder of the wickedness of human beings, was also a victory. It was a day of paradox.

It was daytime when Jesus was crucified, but darkness came over the place. A reminder that this was a dark act of corrupted people. Jesus, the light of the world, was killed by the forces of darkness he had come to enlighten. And let's not forget these forces were highly religious and respectable. Bible scholars and leaders of the religious community did Jesus in. We can almost imagine Satan laughing with delight. Evil pagans didn't nail Jesus to the cross, devout believers did.

The darkness came as Jesus cried out that God had abandoned him. As indeed he had at that very moment. God can't look on sin, and Jesus at that critical time was bearing the sins of all humankind in all human history. He was taking our punishment on himself. He was immersed in spiritual as well as physical darkness. He was absorbing into himself all the darkness of humanity.

But there was something going on in the darkness. The Jerusalem temple had two hanging curtains. A curtain was torn. It is not clear which curtain was torn in two. Whatever curtain is being described, it is clearly a supernatural act.

The temple system was the way in which people were relating to God. Offering ritual worship, offering sacrifices. Priests were the go betweens, the mediators. The temple was the focal point of God's dwelling with his people. When the curtain was torn, it was as if God was saying that the old system of relating to him was now abolished.

If the curtain was the inner one, hiding the holy of holies, then the symbolism is even richer. No longer do we need a human intermediary to give us access to God. No longer is such access limited to times and places and rituals. Jesus' death secured for us access to God because his death took away what kept us away from God. Just as Jesus is being cut off from God, we are being offered access to God. Just as Jesus dies, we get new life. He endured abandonment so we could experience belonging and intimacy. He endured death so we could experience life. He took on our guilt so we could know pardon.

Such is the paradox of Christianity. Darkness and defeat masking light and victory. Not that the pain and darkness are not real on Good Friday. Rather, they are not the full story. For a moment in time, God slammed the door on Jesus his perfect son so as to open the door to those who stood cursing and mocking him. While we may mourn the darkness and the closed door, we do well to be thankful for the light of the open door to the presence of God.

At about 9am on the first Good Friday, Jesus Christ was nailed to a wooden beam which was lifted up and placed in a pre dug hole on a skull shaped hill called Golgotha just outside Jerusalem. At about 3pm that afternoon, he finally died. Hanging on the cross in an already weakened state left him with little energy to utter any memorable speeches. He did however speak a few words which give insight into the sort of person he was and the sort of mission he accomplished, even as he hung on a cross. In those 6 hours on the cross, he spoke seven times according to eye witness accounts.

*Luke 23:34 Then Jesus said, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing."* This is a most surprising word. His tormentors had scourged him, mocked him, stripped him and torn his divided his clothes among themselves. Yet he is prepared to forgive them. Even on the cross, Jesus is true to his mission: he came not to condemn the world but to save it. The theme of his ministry from first to last is grace and forgiveness.

He reminds us that we too are to forgive our lesser tormentors. He reminds us that no one is in the too hard basket. If Jesus could forgive those people, he can forgive us. Thinking you are too far gone is a perverse sort of pride: his mercy extends to all who will accept it. And of course we don't know whether his tormentors did accept it. Forgiveness is always in the form of an offer, and for it to do any good, the offer has to be accepted. Jesus wanted them to be forgiven, but did they themselves want to be forgiven? Did they recognise their need of forgiveness?

*Luke 23:43 He replied, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise."* Here is Jesus replying to a request by one of the thieves crucified with him. No time here for theological discussion and debate. As death draws near, the only thing worth talking about is our eternal destiny. Is it to be with God or without him? We choose, and God honours our choice.

Jesus sees the faith of this criminal and assures him that he will be with him forever, starting that very day, no delays, no limbo stage of sleep. This is a picture of how Jesus accepts us. The thief could bring nothing to Jesus, could do no good work, and in fact was probably not a nice piece of work at all. Yet Jesus looked beyond that to his simple dependence on his mercy. That is the way the thief got to heaven, that is the way we and anyone else gets to heaven. Calling out to Jesus for mercy.

We should not leave it till too late though. We don't know which breath we draw will be our last. It has been said that this is the only instance of deathbed conversion in the Bible. It is there so that we realise that it is never too late, but there is only one instance, so that none of us may presume.

*John 19:26-27 When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother, "Woman, here is your son." Then he said to the disciple, "Here is your mother." And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home.*

Even in the midst of terrible pain and weakness Jesus thinks of others. This time, his mother. He tells John, who was Mary's nephew not her son but in a parental type relationship with her, to take Mary home. Jesus' own brothers were probably still unsympathetic to him. Watching her son die so painfully fulfilled an earlier prophecy which said her own heart would be pierced. God's ways are good, but it seems heartbreak can also be part of it all.

*Mark 15:34 At three o'clock Jesus cried out with a loud voice, "Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?" which means, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"*

This cry of Jesus is central to the meaning of the cross. For the first time on record, he doesn't address God as father. Something has happened to the relationship. A transaction was taking place. Jesus was taking on himself all the sins of the human race, past present and future. He was thus enabling all human beings to take on themselves the perfect goodness that was his. He served our death sentence for us. He took our guilt that we might be considered by God to be not guilty.

This was Jesus' terrible descent into hell. The place of utter desolation, the place where God is utterly absent. This was hell on the cross. Jesus was utterly separated from God because at that time he was bearing the weight of the human world's rebellion against God. Not even God could look on Jesus at such a time. He was utterly forsaken.

*John 19:28 After this, when Jesus knew that all was now finished, he said (in order to fulfil the scripture), "I am thirsty."*

This cry is a relatively simple one. But it illustrates the real humanity of Jesus. Christians believe he was both completely divine and completely human all at once. So we believe he had real human needs. This was no unfeeling divine being on the cross; his suffering was genuine. No wonder it is written that he is able to identify with our own weaknesses and pain. The paradox is that this thirsty man on the cross, who was the object of both pity and scorn in his human frailty, was also the Son of God reconciling lost men and women to their maker.

*John 19:30 When Jesus had received the wine, he said, "It is finished." Then he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.*

We need to have been there to fully understand this word from the cross. How we say things can cause them to have different meanings. This could have been a cry of sheer exhaustion..."I've had enough". Or a cry of despair..."I've lost after all." But from the word he actually used, it is more likely to be a cry of victory..."I've done it, mission accomplished!"

He had endured hell, separation from God. Now he had paid that terrible penalty for our sins and now his rescue mission for lost humanity was complete. Never think of Good Friday as being the bad news and Easter being the good news. Victory came on Good Friday, and it was sealed and declared on Easter Day.

*Luke 23:46 Then Jesus, crying with a loud voice, said, "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit." Having said this, he breathed his last.*

His final words are taken from a bedtime prayer said by pious Jews. It is a simple prayer of trust. He is about to die but will die knowing he has been obedient and knowing that he will be in good hands. Death for him and for those who die in personal relationship with him is not a journey into the dark unknown. It is a passage to a new life which lasts forever, a prelude to resurrection.

Good Friday was a day of death that made possible a day of new life, Easter Day. Without Good Friday there would be no Easter Day. Without death, there is no resurrection.

We close with the words of Isaac Watt's hymn. "When I survey the wondrous cross on which the prince of glory died, my richest gain I count but loss and pour contempt on all my pride. Forbid it Lord that I should boast save in the cross of Christ my God, the very things that charm me most I sacrifice them to his blood. See from his head, his hands, his feet, sorrow and love flow mingled down. When did such love and sorrow meet, or thorns compose so rich a crown? Were the whole realm of nature mine that were an offering far too small. Love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all.