

The Death of Jesus - Matthew 27:45-56

Think for a moment about Christian visual aids and symbols.

Visual aids like water and bread and wine.

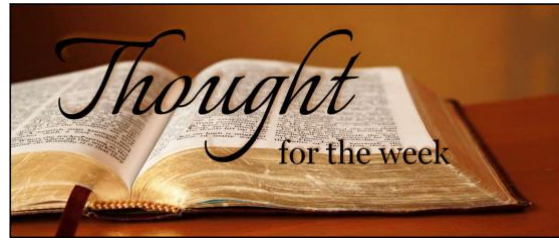
But what is the most appropriate symbol for the Christian faith?

Is it a crucifix – the figure of a man nailed to a cross?

Is it a cross – an empty cross reminding us of the finished work of Christ?

Is it the symbol of an empty tomb?

Symbols can be powerful reminders of the words that speak to us. Words that move our hearts to make a response to the love of God in Jesus Christ.



Matthew 27:45-56 is presented to us as graphic narrative. Its message is simple. It's a powerful drama and deeply symbolic. It's often said that our imagination is better when we listen to a drama on the radio than the pictures we see on TV. These word-pictures convey some powerful images and fundamental truths.



They speak to us and confront us.

They challenge us

They cause us to examine ourselves before God.

That of course is part of the value of the discipline of Lent.

From Ash Wednesday to Good Friday to Easter Day.

And of our self-examination, leading from reflection to response.

We read in v.55 that the women stood at a distance and watched and waited.

We too can stand at a distance and remain as mere spectators observing the scene, unmoved by what was happening. Just like some people who walk around a picture gallery. Looking but not seeing. Gazing but not understanding. Though their eyes may be open they have no appreciation of what they see - the paint on the canvas, the combination of light and shade, of colour and texture and meaning.

Some religious people like to view the cross from a distance.

It's much easier to do so. It's undemanding.

It's far more comfortable. It's much less intrusive.

At a distance there's plenty of room for religious people. But the Christian believer cannot be content to stand at a distance. We need to move closer to the cross so that we can see and hear what is happening. Jesus invites us to '*Come unto me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest*' (Mt 11:28).

Rest. Peace. Forgiveness. New life. New birth. New hope.

Come then with me. And listen. And see. And respond. Open your ears! And hear the word of the Lord! Open your eyes! And see what the Lord has done! Open your heart and respond to the love of the Saviour for the sinner.

Hearing: We have all been in a room full of talkers. Suddenly it goes quiet and we all listen to the last person who speaks. Of course, it's always embarrassing if yours is the last voice! *But listen!* Listen to what we hear as we come near to the cross.

Let your ears hear each sound and pick up what's happening. Here there is little silence. Around the three crosses there is much noise and activity. The brutal executions. The oaths of the soldiers. The insults of the robbers. The painful cries of the crucified. The anguish of the dying. The mocking taunts of the religious leaders. The sobs of the weeping women. The simple confession of the centurion soldier.

We are profoundly moved by what we hear. We are shocked by what we see. What is happening deeply offends our sensitivities. These things deeply move us. But if we are not moved and remain untouched then something is seriously wrong. We have missed the point of the death of Jesus. Why it was that he died on a cross.

And apart from all this noise there is the voice of Jesus. The other discordant sounds fade into the background and all we hear are the words of Jesus. Twice he cries out with a loud voice. His anguish is deep. His pain is unbearable. His cry is a powerful appeal to God. *'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'* Why this terrible separation? Why have you abandoned me like this? Why this break in the fellowship between Father and Son?



In this 'hideous agony' we see the sacrifice of the substitute. The weight of God's judgment is carried by the Lord Jesus. He who was without sin, took our sins upon him. On the cross Jesus has borne our sins and carried our burdens. He died there for you and for me. *'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'*(v.46)

These are the opening words of Psalm 22. Words spoken not in Hebrew or Greek but in Aramaic. Notice that they are words addressed to 'God' and not to the usual Abba, dear Father. The very words express that separation between Father and Son. *Separation but never complete abandonment.*

As you stand with me at the foot of the cross. What do you hear? What message comes across to you? What response do you make to the death of Jesus?

Seeing: Some sights can deeply move us. It could be an autumn sunset or a storm at sea. It could be a mist in a valley. A flurry of snow covering a tree. The birth of a child. The death of a parent. It could be. It could just be – the sight of a man nailed to a cross? **As you stand with me near the cross. What do you see? Open your eyes and look.**

In the foreground, a group of soldiers about their bloody business. Close to the cross are a group of religious teachers dressed in their distinctive clothes, pointing accusing fingers, eyes of hate, words of venom, glad at last that this rabble-rouser and blasphemer would soon be dead. Then they could pursue the real business of being religious. Without Jesus at the centre, religion is so much easier. Less

intrusive. Less costly. Less demanding. But if Jesus is at the centre we see and know that *'love is so amazing, so divine, that it demands my soul, my life, my all'* (Isaac Watts).

In the distance, away from the rest from the rest of the crowd, standing or kneeling away from the cross there are a group of weeping women. The object of their love and devotion was dying before them. They cried. They held each other in their common grief. Through their tears these long-standing supporters were saying their goodbyes. At that moment they had no expectation of future resurrection. But as we know it was these women, who were last at the cross, were the first at the tomb.

They saw him die. They would soon see him risen. The bleeding. The dying. The agony of those impaled on the crosses. We see and hear their anguish and their manner of dying. We look from one cross to the next – and our eyes settle on the naked figure in the middle. But what are we to make of the death of this innocent man? The words of a hymn might give us the words to say:

*There was no other good enough
to pay the price of sin,
he only could unlock the gate
of heaven and let us in.*
(Words of a children's hymn written by Frances Alexander)

Powerful words that confront us and speak to each one of us of the death of Jesus on the Cross. He died for me in my place. He paid the price of my sin and made heaven accessible to all who believe and trust in him. And look again. Open your eyes. Between noon and 3.00pm were the three hours of darkness. During which the inner curtain of the Temple was torn in two. During which there was an earthquake and the rising of the dead saints. The terrified observers asked - *'What does this mean?' 'What will happen next?' 'What will happen after the death of Jesus?'*



For a few short hours the darkness obscured the light of Christ. The glory of God was hidden and concealed until it burst forth from the empty tomb. We know that the suffering of the cross was followed by the glorious resurrection. Christ has died! Christ is risen!

The rending of the Temple curtain and the rising of the saints from the tombs are one of a piece. The Temple had been the symbol of Jewish exclusiveness – now it was open and accessible to both Jews and non-Jews. By his death Christ had broken down the barrier between those who had once been estranged. Now they were reconciled to him and to each other. And death is not the end. Jesus had died – and the saints were raised – anticipating his coming resurrection. Lazarus-like these 'holy people' were full citizens of the 'holy city' (v.53). For them, and for us, death would be followed by resurrection glory.

As you stand with me at the foot of the cross. What do you see? What message comes across to you? What response do you make to the death of Jesus?

Responding: It's always a great joy reading stories to children. 'Read it again', they say. And we read it again and again and again. And if time is short woe betide you if you miss out a few words or a few lines. They will soon tell you! They know the story so well that nothing must be left out. For them the story must be told in full.

And for us – how well do we know the story – or better still, how well do we know the narrative of the crucifixion and the resurrection? Has it become just too familiar? Or is it so significant that nothing must be left out? But far too often we pick and choose, and fail to grasp the whole picture because we want to make a particular theological point. We emphasise one part at the expense of another and distort the true message.



After the cross comes the resurrection. Before the resurrection comes the cross. **How true then is the exclamation - Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again!** The death of Jesus – he died for me in my place. He took upon himself my sin, my guilt and my shame. He took the punishment I justly deserve. His blood was shed for me. But the cross was not the end. God raised Jesus from the dead. The tomb was empty. This was his 'yes' to the death of Jesus.

Those of us who are believers we may look back to your own conversion and echo the words and give thanks and praise for the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus. Those of you who are uncommitted to Christ may I encourage you to re-read the gospel narrative. And to come to the Cross and be freed from your burden of sin and guilt and shame – and then, metaphorically, to leap three leaps for joy!

We have been thinking today about the significance of the death of Christ. We have used our ears and our eyes. But what do we hear? And what do we see? And to what have we heard and seen, what sort of response do we make?

Do we stand at a distance?

Or do we stand near?

Remember:

At the cross Jesus died for you and for me.

He has taken our sin upon himself.

