

1 Corinthians 1:10-18**Matthew 4:12-23**

The most defining and life-changing moment of my life was when, at the age of sixteen I understood that Christ loved me enough to die for me and, having risen from the dead, wanted a part in my life. It is that knowledge of the depth of God's love for me that has transformed and affected my life more than any other thing. When I absorbed the fact that God was personally interested in me and wanted a living, loving relationship with me it changed my attitude to myself totally and it turned my priorities and values on their head.

In our reading from Corinthians Paul says that Christ crucified is both the power of God and the wisdom of God. It is at the cross that we meet God's power at its greatest ~ able to defeat death and to forgive sins; and his wisdom at its deepest ~ able to overturn our values and worldly priorities and return us to a loving relationship with him.

The words from the communion service "He opened wide his arms for us on the cross" draw for me the most powerful and descriptive picture of what Christ actually did for us when he died on the cross at Calvary. The picture that springs to mind is of that old British Rail advert where the man waits at the station for his girlfriend. As she runs towards him he opens wide his arms an expression of sheer delight on his face. Open arms express welcome and greeting. Here is a picture of a journey completed, of longing fulfilled. It speaks of love offered at incredible cost. It reawakens the hope of love received - being held in the embrace of God. This picture is one that can move me to tears of thankfulness and joy. But the deeper

question needs to be asked. What kind of welcome is so longed for, so costly to arrange that it can only be offered by arms stretched wide on the cross?

It seems to me that often, when we are thinking about the meaning of Christ's death on the cross, we start from the wrong end; with our sin and failure and need for forgiveness. That is, of course, a vital element of what Christ was dealing with, but the heart of the message of the cross speaks of God and his very great love for us. "This is love" says John in his first epistle "not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins."

At the heart of all of salvation history is the fact that God loves us, loves us deeply, and created us to live with him and to enjoy him all our lives. There is also the unavoidable fact of our sin and disobedience that separated us from God and caused us to be alienated from our creator and from our fellow creatures.

The cross shows us the depth of that sin, the sheer hopelessness of our case because the only solution to the problem was that the sinless creator should die in our place to carry the consequences and punishment of our wilful disobedience to God; to deal with the fact that we had turned away from God and shut him out of our lives. God was not prepared to be eternally separated from us - he valued us too much! He loved us too deeply! And so he provided a solution to our problem. The cross shows us the depth of God's love for us in that Christ willingly died for each one of us.

As we read the gospels, and especially in Mark's gospel

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we see the purposefulness with which Jesus approached his death. At several points in his ministry Jesus spelt out to his disciples that he was going to suffer and die on the cross, not by mistake but that his death was the reason and purpose behind his ministry. We read that he "set his face towards Jerusalem" and when Peter rebuked him for suggesting that death was his mission Jesus sternly told him off. He called him Satan - because his words tempted Jesus away from his purpose which was to die for each and every single human being: for me and for you.

The fact that Christ died for us on the cross and bore the "punishment" for our sins means that we can be fully forgiven for our sin, our weakness and our failure. There is no sin that cannot now be forgiven, no charge can be laid against us because in God's eyes we are now innocent and much loved children with no barrier between him and us. In Romans chapter eight Paul says: *"Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. Who is he that condemns? Christ Jesus, who died, more than that, who was raised to life - is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?"*

This is a truth that we often struggle with. We are able to accept on a mental level that we are forgiven because Jesus died for us. But it often takes a long time for that truth to penetrate from our brains to our hearts. Many of us feel that we aren't worthy of God's love and forgiveness ~ and of course we aren't. That is the miracle of Christ's death for us. None of us deserve his love and forgiveness. We simply have it. He has

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given it to us as a free gift. There is absolutely nothing we can do to earn our way into God's kingdom. It has been given to us. And that is something that many of us find hard to accept. We would prefer it if God gave us some hugely difficult task to perform so that we could earn his forgiveness and love. The difficult thing he wants from us is to simply accept his love and forgiveness.

Because Jesus' offering on the cross was perfect he removed the barrier between us and God. There is now absolutely nothing that can separate us from God and his love. We have been reconciled to God, we have been brought close to him and all barriers have been removed. The barriers between ourselves and others have been removed as well and we are all part of God's family, his much loved children.

One of the results of Christ's death for us on the cross is that we have to learn to love again: to love with God's own powerful, committed and selfless love. When I first gave my life to Jesus at the age of sixteen I had to learn to love again and the most difficult task was to learn to love myself. It was easy to love God because he loved me and had given his precious Son for me. I felt deeply grateful to him and found it easy to love him in return but loving myself wasn't so easy. Yet God loves me. He loves me so much that he was prepared to suffer and die to be close to me. As God's precious children we need to learn to love and value ourselves in the way that he does. If we don't love and value ourselves we are rejecting God's standards and values - because he thinks that we are extremely important. In God's eyes we are priceless.

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He paid an incredible price for us.

We also have to learn to love others again. To love them with the love of Christ, the love that recognises that they are immensely valuable in God's sight. As God's loved children each and every one of us is very precious to God. So valuable that Jesus suffered and died for you, for you, for you and you. I think that often we forget that truth in the way that we relate to each other and deal with each other.

Everyone here this morning is immensely valuable, extremely special and we need to learn to treat each other as such; with respect and love, acknowledging that God values each of us more than we can begin to understand. It can be so easy to be dismissive of others, to be brusque with each other, impatient of each other's needs or weaknesses. Yet God values us and we need to learn to see each other with God's eyes and with his love.

Another effect of the cross on our lives is to encourage us to give ourselves totally to Jesus in return for what he has done. There is something compelling about Jesus' love for us that demands a response, a response of love and faith and gratitude, a response that gives the new life that Jesus has won for us into his hands for him to shape and use to his glory. A response that trusts him to shape us and our lives in the way that he wants to and allows him to know what is best for us. That isn't easy and there have been many occasions when I have found it hard to trust God with myself and the things that are important to me.

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There have been times when I have tried to take control of my life and shape it the way that I prefer, instead of trusting God to know what is best for me. When we encounter illness for ourselves or of someone we love, when our future becomes uncertain because our jobs are threatened or lost. When our lives take a turn we didn't expect and don't want, it can be hard to trust God and leave our future and ourselves in his hands. Yet he loves us so much that Jesus died for us. He has given us our lives back at great cost to himself. We need to learn to trust him with the rest of our lives.

God in his wisdom knows what we need. He knows what is best for each and every one of us. He has gone to great lengths to bring us close to him. His wisdom is not earthly wisdom and he uses his power very differently to the way we expect him to. But the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength.

As we remember how Jesus Christ gave himself totally for each one of us on the cross let us bring ourselves to him afresh to experience his forgiveness, his love and his power in our lives.

There may be some area of weakness or sin that we find hard to believe that God has forgiven us for. It may be an area where we continue to sin and feel unable to change - bring that to God for cleansing and healing.

You may find it hard to love yourself and acknowledge how very precious you are to God. Ask him to reveal

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afresh today how deeply he loves you and ask him to enable you to love yourself and others as he loves you.

There may be an area of your life where you find it hard to trust God, it might be at work, in your relationships, in your finances or some other area. As you come to him ask him to show you afresh what he has done for you and enable you to give your life back to him.