

## **1 Journeying to the Cross 5: Passover People** **Colin Symes CCE, Palm Sunday April 9 2017**

*Red figures relate to the slides in the power point presentation*

**2 Readings;** Romans 3.21-26, 1 Peter 2.4-10

### **Recap**

So we have reached Palm Sunday, the last Sunday of Lent, and through Lent we have been journeying with Jesus to the cross. I just want to refresh our memories first about some of the highlights of what has been shared in this series, and then draw them together to point us to the encounter with Jesus we move toward in this week.

**3** Rupert began the series, highlighting to us the humiliation which crucifixion represented; the terrible degradation of this death, which Jesus takes on as God in man. He also led us to see that this was not happening because the Father's hate has to be assuaged by killing His son, but as the expression of love of the Father to us, in Christ reconciling the world to Himself. **4** He also reminded us that this is not about getting saved from earth to go to heaven, but that the end of the story is about heaven and earth coming together, resulting in humanity turning from the worship of what is not god to the full humanity which carries the image of God and, as those who have returned to God from the false path we were following, are free to fully worship and to represent God in the world, bringing heaven and earth together.

**5** Liz in her sharing reminded us that the cross is the act of God's supreme love. She presented to us the reality that, far from the Father vengefully punishing Jesus, **6** He is at the cross, supporting and offering Him to us, involved in the sacrifice. This sacrificial love reveals the value and worth God sets on people, and calls us to reflect that love to others as well, as Liz concluded in the words of St Teresa of Avila, 'Christ has no body now but yours, yours are the hands through which He blesses the world.'

**7** And last week, Naomi drew us back to the source of this love in the covenant of God with Israel, speaking of their call, the covenant, the choice and the consequences; as Israel turns away from the Lord to follow idols, ignoring their call, distorting God's image in them, the consequence is exile. But the prophets call them back to the God who is

unfailingly good, promising Israel resurrection, as in Ezekiel's valley of dry bones, releasing them from the power of the powers that had captured them. **8** And so, in the cross, Jesus takes the full force of evil on Himself, freeing us from the consequences of idolatry. As Naomi put it, 'Everything that holds us captive has been destroyed in the cross'; we are called to the new Covenant in His blood and we are called like Israel to choose life.

### **The Passover Plan**

**9** Last time I spoke in this series, I drew heavily on Tom Wright's book 'The Day the Revolution Began: Rethinking the Meaning of Jesus' Crucifixion.' I highlighted from his book the fact that Jesus deliberately chose to die at Passover, because it was the feast marking the defeat of the power of Pharaoh, the showdown with evil, the freeing of Israel, the passage through the Red Sea and the encounter of the Lord with His people to inaugurate their calling as His royal priesthood.

**10** We saw how as a church, we have forgotten that connection by separating the celebration of the death and resurrection of Jesus from the celebration of Jewish Passover. But when we connect them back together, and when we see that as well as delivering us from the power of the powers, **11** Jesus is also proclaiming His kingdom, as He hangs under the title, 'King of the Jews' on the cross, the whole thing comes into focus, and we walk into freedom, the horse and the rider of Satan's power thrown into the Red Sea of death, as Jesus in His resurrection rises onto the far shore of worship and holiness, taking humanity with Him, and restoring our purpose in God.

### **The Cross as Meeting Place with God**

That is all leading up to what I want to share today, which is to orientate us to what the consequences are for us of all we have been sharing.

**12** Tom Wright in his book takes a long time revisiting the traditional theology of the cross, which involved 'man broke God's law; God punishes Jesus for us; man gets to go to heaven.' In particular, he focuses in on the reading we had from Romans, where it is suggested that Paul is saying God's righteousness comes to us as a gift from God because Jesus is given as the sacrifice to appease God – in some translations, the propitiation for our sins. What that is saying is, that

God needs to be made 'propitious', something needs to happen to turn away His anger from us. But, as Tom Wright keeps pointing out, that's a pagan view of God – a God who basically needs to be kept happy so He doesn't hit us.

It all hinges on two words in Roman 3 – the word 'redemption' or 'ransom' and the word which has been translated 'propitiation'.

*'For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement through the shedding of His blood - to be received by faith. He did this to demonstrate his righteousness for the remission of sins that are past, through the forbearance of God.'* (NIV Romans 3.23-25)

Now, as good protestant, reformed Christians, we put all that through our evangelical filter and come up with that formula – we sinned, Jesus pays the price, makes God happy so we can be forgiven and go to heaven.

**13** But Tom Wright challenges that, precisely because it ignores the Scriptural story in which it is set. So many preachers have made Romans about God punishing sin and giving us grace, but it is actually about God keeping to His covenant promise to Abraham, despite Israel's idolatry. So Romans 1 makes that point – mankind, including Israel, has turned away from God's purpose to follow non-gods, to whom they have given power to enslave them. But God has responded by calling a man, Abraham, and promising to overturn that usurped power through His family. Israel is that family, released from slavery through God's passover plan, who later strayed from God in their going to idols resulting in exile and occupation, but through whom God is still going to deliver not just Israel from the power but mankind in their Messiah, the one who carries Israel's calling in Himself, because He is the embodiment of Israel's God coming to rescue them.

**14** So, going back to the words, redemption and propitiation, or 'sacrifice of atonement', when we put those into the context of Jesus' story, which is Israel's story, God has put forth Jesus because of His righteousness – which Tom Wright explains is actually God's just faithfulness to His covenant – as the ransom, that is, the payment which releases the slaves – in Greek, apolýtrosis. We are back to Passover

again, the freeing of slaves from the powers of sin; this is not about paying out God in blood for our badness. It is about paying back the powers for their illegal, usurped hijacking of mankind – and getting us out of jail.

**15** Then, the second word, atonement, is key. The word in Greek is *ilastèerion*, or mercy-place. It refers directly to the lid of the ark of the covenant, where God meets with His people in the holy of holies of the tabernacle. What Tom Wright presents here is the insight that, rather than the cross being about a legal transaction in Jesus' blood, it is about a meeting of heaven and earth, through the cleansing, making holy by Jesus' blood, but where, to use Tom Wright's own words,

*Jesus Himself is put forward by the Creator as the place and the means of the fresh meeting between the true God and His human Creatures.<sup>1</sup>*

To quote the Professor further,

*The whole passage from (Romans) 2.17 to 4.25 is all about God's covenant with Israel and through Israel for the world, and about the true worship at the heart of this covenant, the worship of the One true God which replaces the idolatry of 1.18-23 and thus undoes the sin of 1.24-32.<sup>2</sup>*

He later goes on to describe this as the 'symbolic recreation of Eden'<sup>3</sup> as Jesus brings together God and humanity, so that:

**16** *Jesus in Himself and in His death is the place where the One God meets with His world, bringing heaven and earth together at last, removing by His sacrificial blood the pollutions of sin and death that would have made such meeting impossible.<sup>4</sup>*

Thus, rather than being about pacifying an angry, bloodthirsty God, we find the cross, the new *ilastèerion*, is the breaking of the slavery of the powers (ransom) and the meeting of God and man in the bleeding body of Jesus Christ. His blood, the blood of God, is on the doorposts of our lives, He has freed us from the whip of the idols we have worshipped; He calls us to Himself.

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<sup>1</sup> Tom Wright, *The Day the Revolution Began: Rethinking the Meaning of Jesus' Crucifixion* (London: SPCK, 2016.) p.308

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, p.315

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, p327

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, p336

## Passover People

It's impossible to do justice to this in so short a time, so breathtaking is it. But I want to take us to see how Tom Wright concludes with a revelation of who we are in Christ because of this.

**17** When Moses goes before Pharaoh, he says that Israel has to go and worship God in the desert.<sup>5</sup> This is not just an excuse, this is their calling coming out. So, as they are freed through the Red Sea, it is to be what Tom Wright calls, a 'passover people', a nation of priests and kings to use Peter's term, that is, fulfilling the 'true human vocation, to be 'image-bearers' reflecting God's glory into the world and the praises of creation back to God.'<sup>6</sup>

**18** Through the cross of Jesus, we are called into that same Passover People – freed from the power of Pharaoh, whose horses and riders are broken in the Red Sea, and brought to encounter the living God at the meeting place of heaven and earth, the cross, the mercy-seat. This now means that we have the dual calling along with Israel to be worshippers (priests) and rulers (kings) releasing the kingdom into the world we inhabit.

**19** So mission looks different for us now; rather than being about getting souls saved to go to heaven, it becomes about proclaiming the victory of the cross, announcing the freeing of creation from bondage and the releasing people from slavery to the non-god powers, through prayer and proclamation, through healing and insight from God, so that, to use Tom Wright's words, 'rescued humans are set free to be what they were made to be'<sup>7</sup>

**20** It means seeing the world as God sees it, in the grip of evil powers without Him – Tom Wright uses a phrase which has been chilling me since I read it – 'idols are being worshipped and they demand human sacrifices'<sup>8</sup>. It chilled me, because I see it happening; there are no beating drums and Aztec pyramids, no druid rites, but the powers of evil are the bloodthirsty ones, and they are receiving human sacrifices

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<sup>5</sup> Exodus 8.1, 9.1, 10.9

<sup>6</sup> Tom Wright, *The Day the Revolution Began* p.357

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, p.363

<sup>8</sup> Ibid p.378

through abortion, euthanasia, suicide, drug abuse, war, gas attacks and murder – all these make the demons cackle with glee, part of the illegal worship humanity gives the non-god powers.

**21** But we have a calling to reverse that, to deprive them of their worship, to turn the hearts of men and women to the One true God, who loves them and has died for them at the cross; to use Tom Wright's words again,

*The royal priesthood is the company of rescued humans who, being part of earth worship the God of heaven and are thereby equipped with the breath of heaven in their renewed lungs to work for His kingdom on earth. The revolution of the cross sets us free to be in-between people, caught up in the rhythm of worship and mission.*<sup>9</sup>

And that mission, to continue his words,  
*Is the Spirit-driven, cross-shaped work of Jesus' followers as they worship the true God, and, confronting idols with news of Jesus' victory, work for the signs of His kingdom in human lives.*<sup>10</sup>

And that Passover People, that Kingdom of Priests are loving, serving, the ones who first stayed with the plague victims, founded the first hospitals, upended the power of industry to give people better working conditions, who refused to leave prisoners languishing in hell-holes, who released and are releasing people from slavery physical as well as spiritual. Says Tom Wright 'new creation can happen because the power of the satan, of Babylon, of Pharaoh has been broken.'<sup>11</sup>

### **He Has Given Us A Meal**

**22** We are coming to break bread together; this evening brings in the Jewish day of 13th of Nisan, and tomorrow evening, the full moon, will be 14th Nisan, Passover evening. So as we do this today, we are at the eve of the day close to Jesus' heart, when He chose to change history.

Tom Wright says of this feast, '*Doing it declares it:.. the bread-breaking meal, the Jesus-feast announces to the forces of evil like a public decree read out by a herald in the market-place that Jesus is Lord, that He has faced the powers of sin and death and beaten them, and that He has*

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid, p.363

<sup>10</sup> Ibid p.407

<sup>11</sup> Ibid p.414

*been raised again to launch the new world in which death itself will have no authority.*<sup>12</sup>

To mark this connection with Passover, we are using Matzah, unleavened bread symbolising purity, pierced and striped reminding us of Jesus' body given for us.

And I have a cup today to connect with the cups that are drunk at Passover, the cups which link to God's declaration in Exodus 6.6 and 7 'I will bring you out, I will free you, I will redeem you, I will make you my nation', the third of which, the cup of redemption, Jesus designates as the cup of the new covenant in my blood.'

**23** So, let's gather together around the table, since passover is celebrated in family, reclining at table. And let's celebrate and announce the amazing thing God has done, as His passover people.

### **Prayer from the Passover Seder**

**Our G-d and G-d of our fathers**, may there ascend, come and reach, be seen and accepted, heard, recalled and remembered before You, the remembrance and recollection of us, the remembrance of our fathers, the remembrance of Messiah the son of David Your servant, the remembrance of Jerusalem Your holy city, and the remembrance of all Your people the House of Israel, for deliverance, well-being, grace, kindness, mercy, good life and peace, on this day of the Festival of Unleavened Bread, on this Festival of holy convocation. Remember us on this [day], L-rd, our G-d, for good; recollect us on this [day] for blessing; help us on this [day] for good life. With the promise of deliverance and compassion, spare us and be gracious to us; have mercy upon us and deliver us; for our eyes are directed to You, for You, G-d, are a gracious and merciful King. Amen.

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid p.380