

Four Lenten Studies

Series E

"The Scandal of the Cross"

by
Rev. Dr Nick Hawkes

Leading the four Lenten Studies

THANK YOU

Thank you for being a small group leader for this Lenten series.

THE GROUP LEADER

The leader should be a facilitator. This means that he/she should make it possible for things to be organised and happen. The leader should not necessarily do everything but should delegate responsibility. It is particularly a good idea for the leader not to be personally responsible for the domestic arrangements but to give this responsibility to an appointed host or an assistant.

PROMOTE DISCUSSION

The leader's main job in the group discussion time is to get people talking. It is not to provide all the answers. A leader's skill is in making people feel at ease, appreciated and in gently drawing people into discussion. Leaders need to treat all questions seriously and with respect so that people will be encouraged to share, because no question or opinion is considered too stupid or antagonistic to be appreciated.

The purposes of a man's heart are deep waters, but a man of understanding draws them out. (Proverbs 20:5)

PREPARING THE VENUE

A venue should be comfortable and non-threatening. Chairs should usually be placed in a circle for discussion. Avoid having chairs behind each other if possible as it encourages those sitting in them to be less involved.

Some people also take the phone off the hook or switch them off to avoid distractions.

THE FIRST MEETING

People will come to the first meeting with some apprehension, particularly if they are unfamiliar with Christianity or church. They will also bring with them all sorts of fears and preconceptions of what Christianity and church are about. The first meeting is the ideal time to shatter people's negative preconceptions and put them at their ease. For this reason, ensure the venue is welcoming and looks good. Consider using soft, indirect lighting and having background music as people arrive. Surprise people with excellence and how "normal" things are.

BREAKING THE ICE

'Warm up' activities at the start of a home group meeting can be anything that will help people relax, smile and get to know each other. It can be as basic as a chat over a cup of coffee.

WHAT SHOULD PEOPLE BRING?

Ask people to bring their Bibles (provide some for those who may not have one).

TIMELINESS

There is no spiritual merit in meetings being long, drawn out marathons. People will tire of them if they are. Be disciplined with time and let people go home at a civilised hour.

Before people go home, the meeting should have a definite ending e.g. a concluding prayer.

PRAYER

All prayers prayed by leaders before or after a meeting should be simple, sincere, relevant to what has been discussed and short. Such prayers will not intimidate people and will encourage them to believe that they too might soon be able to pray in such a way.

DOING THE STUDIES

Encourage members of the group to take turns in reading the readings out loud to the group (checking with them first privately that they are willing and able to do so).

Be familiar with the teaching sections so that you don't necessarily have to read them verbatim but can paraphrase them easily in your own words. The text provided is not meant to be prescriptive but, rather, a resource.

The text written in small print are instructions for the leaders and, as such, should not be read out. Similarly, the Bible references in brackets have been included for further information. It is not intended that they all be looked up and read out unless there is need.

God bless your ministry
Nick Hawkes

The Scandal of the Cross

This series of four lenten studies has the cross as its central theme. In particular, it argues the case for a right understanding of the cross and highlights our need to respond rightly to the cross.

Lesson 1

The meaning of the cross

Introduction

The leader introduces the subject by saying:

Today, Christianity is not just under attack from those outside the church but also from those who claim to be within the church. Sadly, some religious leaders deny the divinity of Christ and the biblical teaching of the meaning of Christ's death on the cross. Perhaps we should not be surprised at this for the Bible warns us to be on guard against false teaching (Phil 3:18; 2 Pet 2:1; Jude 4). What, then, can we believe about the meaning of the cross?

The cross, and all it represents, is central to the Christian faith. To preach Christ without appreciating the significance of the cross is, according to the famous German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, to preach "cheap grace". He says:

"Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, communion without confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate".

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, (Collier, 1963) p.47.

If we are to avoid teaching a false 'cheap grace', we need to have something to say to those who seek to deny the significance of the cross by suggesting that the Bible teaches that Christ's death on the cross can be interpreted in many ways. Such people say that because there are many interpretations of the significance of the cross, we should not unduly stress just one.

What, then, are the different explanations of the significance of the cross, as taught by Scripture?

Ask people to divide into pairs. (Try and put less biblically literate people with some who can find their way around the Bible. Remind them to use the index to find the right book in the Bible.)

Ask them to look at the verses listed on the handout and to write down a phrase (in their own words) which they think best describes the significance of Jesus' death on the cross, as taught by each verse.¹ Allow about 15 minutes. Then invite people to share some of their phrases before going through the phrases suggested below.

¹See: handout at the end of this lesson.

Different aspects of the meaning of Christ's death on the cross

- **Mk 10:45 = The ransom aspect.** Christ on the cross was the place where a ransom/redemption price was paid for us. A ransom is the price paid to free someone from captivity (in this case, captivity to evil and Satan).
- **Gal 3:13 = The redemption aspect.** Redemption has a similar meaning to ransom. Redemption is the act of buying back the ownership of something e.g. from a pawn shop. In particular, it was a term typically used of buying back the freedom of a slave, (we being slaves to sin, [Jn 8:43]).
- **1 Jn 4:10 = The atonement aspect.** Christ on the cross was the sacrificial price God paid for our sins (to atone for our sins) (see also Rom 3:25; 1 Jn 2:2). This reflects the obligation of Jewish people to sacrifice animals at the temple to atone for their sins and imperfection before a holy God. Jews were required to do this to teach them that God was holy and could not tolerate sin. It was also a way in which they could express their desire to be free of sin and be right with God. However, such sacrifices were symbolic rather than effective for ridding people of the consequences of their sin (Ps 40:6; 51:16). The requirement of Jews to make atonement for their sins at the temple was a foreshadowing of what Jesus would conclusively and effectively do in sacrificing himself to pay the price for the sins of all people (Heb 10:1-10).
- **Col 2:13-15 = The legal payment aspect.** Christ on the cross put paid to the legal demands that stood against us. The cross cancels the written code that condemns us ().
- **Lk 22:20 = The new covenant aspect.** Christ on the cross brought in the new covenant (agreement) with God (see also Heb 8).
- **1 Thess 1:10 = The 'rescue from wrath' aspect.** Christ on the cross was God's way of rescuing us from divine wrath.
- **Is 53:4-6 = The 'self-sacrifice for others' aspect.** Christ on the cross was God stepping in to take the punishment on himself that was rightfully ours to bear.
- **Rom 5:1 = The peacemaker aspect.** Christ on the cross removed the barrier of God's hostility against those who were not his people (Eph 2: 16) and brought us peace (Is 53:5; Col 1:19-20).
- **Col 1:21-22 = The reconciliation aspect.** The word reconciliation is sometimes used instead of peace. Christ on the cross brought us reconciliation with God (Rom 5:10-11; 2 Cor 5:18-20; Eph 2:16).
- **Gal 3:13 = The 'curse removal' aspect.** Christ on the cross bore God's curse on our sin.
- **Rom 4:25 = The justification aspect.** Christ on the cross won for us our justification (made us sinless and holy) in God's eyes.
- **Phil 2:5-6 = The moral example aspect.** Christ on the cross is a moral example of endurance (Heb 12:3) and humility (Phil 2:5-6).

It will be seen from this list that when all the biblical explanations as to the meaning of Christ on the cross are examined side by side, they all tell part of the one story, viz: the substitutionary atonement of Jesus Christ in order to get rid of our sin which would otherwise make us ineligible for life with a holy God. This is the central truth. This truth is the diamond and all other biblical explanations as to the meaning of the cross are facets of this one diamond. As such, the different understandings of the significance of Christ's death are not competing understandings but facets which add to the one understanding.

The centrality of the atonement to Christianity has even influenced our language, giving us the word 'crucial' which means literally: 'pertaining to the cross'.

Let's look at Hebrews 10:1-10 in more detail in order to get a better understanding of Christ's atonement of our sins.

Study of Hebrews 10:1-10

The leader asks someone to read the Bible passage Heb 10:1-10 and then invites people to discuss the next six questions:

Questions for group discussion:

- 1) Why do you think the writer of Hebrews says that the “*law is only a shadow of the good things that are coming*” (v.1)?

Leader's note: The “law” (the moral standards God requires of us²) point to the holy requirements of God but the law does not make us holy. As such, the law is only the “shadow” of true holiness that eventually came to us when Jesus exchanged his holiness for our sinfulness on the cross. Read Romans 8:1-4

- 2) What is the link between “law” and “sacrifices”?

Leader's note: As no one can ever fully live up the 'law' of God and be holy enough to be in fellowship with God (Rom 3:23), people in the Old Testament continually needed to offer sacrifices to atone for their sin.

- 3) What reasons are given to indicate that making sacrifices is not the final solution when it comes to atoning for our sin?

Leader's note: The inadequacy of making sacrifices to God to atone for our sins is illustrated by the fact that such sacrifices had to continually be made every year. This particularly happened when the High Priest offered sacrifices on behalf of all the Jewish people once a year on the Day of Atonement. Therefore, no sacrifice we could make was ever enough to deal with our sins for all time.

- 4) If sacrifices could not atone for our sins, what did they serve to do?

Leader's note: The annual sacrifice on the Day of Atonement served only to remind people of their sinfulness but did nothing to address it (v.3).

- 5) Verses 5b-7 are a quotation from Psalm 40:6-8 written hundreds of years before Christ came to Earth. What does the writer of Hebrews understand verse 7 as being?

Leader's note: The writer of Hebrews understands verse 7 as being a prophecy about Jesus and his willingness to do his Father's will in coming to sacrifice himself for our sins.

- 6) In verse 9, what has been set aside, and what has replaced it?

Leader's note: The old system of yearly sacrifices has been replaced by the one sacrifice made by Jesus Christ for all people over all time. It is the sacrifice of Jesus on our behalf that finally makes us holy in God's eyes.

²See: Rom 3:20; 7:7.

The ten commandments are some of these laws.

Conclusion

The leaders concludes by saying:

Christ's atonement for our sins on the cross is the heart of the Christian gospel. Knowing this, we can say with confidence that the essentials of the Christian gospel are:

- God created in order to share his love with us.
- God gave us freewill to accept or reject his lordship and love.
- Rejection of God's love and God's ways is called sin.
- Everyone has sinned (Rom 3:23).
- Our sin separates us from God (Is 59:2).
- Sinners are slaves to sin (Jn 8:34).
- Sin's penalty is eternal spiritual death (Rom 6:23).
- Christ has paid the penalty for our sins (1 Cor 15:3; 1 Pet 3:18).
- We need to accept Christ to receive this salvation (Jn 1:12; Jn 5:24).

In our study together we have examined the meaning of the cross. It is perhaps fitting to end by declaring God's motive for the cross. The Bible makes it quite clear that God's motive for the cross was love (Jn 3:16). Celebrate the cross and rejoice in God's love.

Close with a brief prayer.

(Photocopy enough copies of this sheet so that each pair of people has a copy)

Different aspects of the meaning of Christ's death on the cross

Mark 10:45 indicates theaspect of Jesus' death on the cross

Galatians 3:13 indicates theaspect of Jesus' death on the cross

1 John 4:10 indicates theaspect of Jesus' death on the cross

Colossians 2:13-15 indicates theaspect of Jesus' death on the cross

Luke 22:20 indicates theaspect of Jesus' death on the cross

1 Thessalonians 1:10 indicates theaspect of Jesus' death on the cross

Isaiah 53:4-6 indicates theaspect of Jesus' death on the cross
(Isaiah 53:4-6 is an Old Testament prophecy about Jesus)

Rom 5:1 indicates theaspect of Jesus' death on the cross

2 Corinthians 5:18-20 indicates theaspect of Jesus' death on the cross

Galatians 3:13 indicates theaspect of Jesus' death on the cross

Romans 4:25 indicates theaspect of Jesus' death on the cross

Philippians 2:5-6 indicates theaspect of Jesus' death on the cross

Lesson 2

The scandal of the cross

Introduction

The leader introduces the subject by saying:

Some have suggested, rather disparagingly, that the idea that God sacrificed his son in order to atone for the sins of humankind should be rejected as it smacks of divine child abuse. Such an action is seen as being altogether too violent and shocking to those who seek to define God solely in terms of him being a perfect moral being who has no place for violence of any sort. They would prefer to think of God as a divine lover incapable of wrath or anger.³ Should we discard the orthodox Christian emphasis on the cross because it is too violent and horrible?

Discuss in the group: “Is being incapable of violence a necessary attribute of God?”

Allow a few minutes for discussion before sharing those principles below that have not already been covered in discussion.

Leader's note:

The Bible does not support the idea that God is incapable of violence. God reacts violently to evil in the form of cruelty and injustice (Ex 22:22-24). God can also react violently to those who promote the worship of false gods, i.e. who deny God's lordship over all (Ex 20:4-6). Fortunately, however, violence is not God's dominant characteristic. God's dominant characteristic is love (Ex 34:6; Ps 30:5; 1 Jn 4:8).

In the specific case of the violence of the cross, three things should be born in mind:

- 1) The first is that the violence against Jesus was not perpetrated by God but by deceived or evil men.
- 2) The second is that God allowed this violence to be perpetrated against himself to rescue us from God's judgement. As such, the cross is an act of love, not violence.
- 3) Thirdly, although the Bible describe Jesus Christ as being God's Son, this relationship is not exactly the same as that between a human father and son. The divine Father and Son are part of the one God who exists in the community of three persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, each indwelling the other. As such, it can be argued that in sacrificing the Son, the Father was also sacrificing himself.

The leaders goes on to teach:

There are two characteristics of our holy and almighty God which must always be kept in tension. They are that:

- 1) God is just
- 2) God is loving

We must appreciate both characteristics. If God's justice is emphasised to the exclusion of God's love, you have legalism. However, if God's love is emphasised to the exclusion of God's justice, you have sentimentality and license. Therefore, both God's justice and God's love need to be appreciated.

³From this, of course, it is only a short step to suggesting that because God can only be loving, God would approve of any behaviour that we would define as being non abusive such as homosexuality or marital unfaithfulness.

God's love and justice are both seen in the cross. God's justice is seen in God's determination to deal with sin and get rid of it. God hates sin as it is rebellion against God and is destructive of the object of God's love, you and me. No God could be truly holy if he simply turned a blind eye to sin and accommodated it. However, God's love is also seen in him choosing to bear the cost of paying for our sins himself in sending Jesus to die on a cross in our place.

The reality is that the cross was horrible, cruel and shameful. The wonder of it was that God's love was big enough to embrace it in order to win us to himself (1 Pet 3:18, Jn 3:16).

The cross is a gibbet, a cruel apparatus of execution designed to inflict the maximum amount of humiliation and pain. It was a form of punishment usually reserved for slaves or foreigners who were convicted of murder, rebellion or armed robbery. It is therefore not surprising that many considered it foolishness to believe that a god could die on a cross. The Greeks thought that any god would be too uncaring of humankind to die on a cross for their benefit, whereas the Jews thought such an action would be too dishonouring to God who could only exist in the form of a splendid, powerful, triumphant being.

Study of 1 Corinthians 1:18-2:5

Graffiti from the end of the first century was found scratched on plaster in a building on the Palatine Hill in Rome. This ancient building was considered by some scholars to have been used as a school for imperial pages. The graffiti shows a man with an ass's head, and clad in a loin cloth being crucified. Nearby there is another man in an attitude of prayer with the mocking legend *Alexamenos sebetai theon*, i.e., "Alexamenos worships God."⁴

Show a copy of the graffiti (seen at the end of this lesson) and say that the idea that a God could be crucified has always been scored by some. Then ask someone to read 1 Cor 1:18-2:5 before inviting them to discuss these four questions:

Questions for group discussion:

- 1) What reasons are given in this passage for people rejecting the idea of the cross?
- 2) In what form do these same reasons still exist today?

Leader's notes:

The Greeks believed that gods were too remote and unfeeling to care about you and me. The Greek idea of god/s was that they were *apatheia* (the Greek word from which we get the word apathetic, meaning "unable to feel"). Gods could have no feelings towards humankind. If humankind could make a god feel joy or sorrow it would mean that humankind had control over that god and was therefore greater than god.⁵ The Greeks therefore thought they had to develop understanding and wisdom for themselves without any help from a god. Their preoccupation with their own wisdom has much in common with the dry, academic, impersonal teaching of some liberal church institutions of today.

The Jews, on the other hand, thought God to be too glorious and holy to ever be crucified", after all, their own Scriptures said, "*He that is hanged on a tree is accursed*" (Deut 21:23). The Jews therefore preferred a messiah who was glorious and powerful. For example, a

⁴This *graffito* is now to be seen in the Kircherian Museum in Rome.

Tertullian, (the second century North African bishop) also tells us that Christians were accused of adoring an ass's head in his day (Apol., xvi; Ad Nat., I, ii).

⁵Plutarch (circa 45 - 125 AD), priest of the Delphic Oracle in Greece, said, for example, that it would be an insult to God for God to involve himself in human affairs.

man called Theudas persuaded thousands of Jews to abandon their homes in AD 45 to follow him into the desert to the banks of the Jordan where they would see him miraculously part the waters. Today, we see aspects of this sort of thinking in churches that promote themselves with sensationalism.

- 3) Despite many claiming the cross to be foolishness, Paul insisted in knowing nothing other than Jesus Christ and him crucified (1 Cor 2:2). Why do you think Paul says this?
- 4) Paul insists that the message of the cross, with all its horror and shame, is the power of God (1 Cor 1:18)? Why do you think this is so?

Leader's note:

After listening to the discussion, read the answer to this question given by Edgar Mayer from Toowoomba City Church:

The Apostle Paul knew that humans are: *“addicted to control and therefore need the cross of Christ to be confronted by the absurd foolishness of God ... That God would save the world by sending his Son to die under torture leaves us speechless and helpless and clueless – as Paul said: “Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles” - and at last the penny drops, we are not in control...*

The cross strips away everything that we hold dear. All human deeds, dreams and desires, even the most noble aspirations of clergy, need to die on the cross.

God has a strange way of wresting control from us. But that is the way of salvation.”⁶

Conclusion

Ask what people's reaction was to the violence of the cross as portrayed in the media, such as *The Jesus Film Project* or Mel Gibson's *The Passion*. Go on to say:

The savage reality of the cross was discussed by the media columnist Kenneth Woodward when he wrote about Mel Gibson's film *The Passion* in the *New York Times*, saying:

“Mr. Gibson's film leaves out most of the elements of the Jesus story that contemporary Christians now emphasize ... He doesn't promote social causes, as liberal denominations do. He certainly doesn't crusade against gender discrimination as some feminists believe he did, nor does he teach that we all possess an inner divinity, as today's nouveau Gnostics believe.⁷ One cannot imagine this Jesus joining a New Age sunrise Easter service overlooking the Pacific. Like Jeremiah, Jesus is a Jewish prophet rejected by the leaders of his own people and abandoned by his handpicked disciples. Besides taking an awful beating, he is cruelly tempted to despair by a Satan whom millions of church-going

⁶Edgar Mayer, “The cross alone makes us one” pp.1-2 in *One Heart for the Nation*, (Queensland: Toowoomba City Church, 10, Oct-Dec 2004)

⁷The Gnostics were an heretical sect that grew out of Christianity and were particularly active in the third century. Gnostics thought that God remained very distant from his creation and that only they possessed the secret knowledge about God (*gnosis* = Greek for 'knowledge') that teaches the truth about God. It has been suggested that 'nouveau Gnostics' of today are those religious or philosophic academics who claim to have a superior understanding about God because of their academic training. This can make them scornful of those orthodox Christians who, whilst not being anti-academic, also stress the need for humility, openness to God's spirit and the need for faith like that of a child (Mk 10:15).

Christians no longer believe in, and dies in obedience to a heavenly Father, who, by today's standards, would stand convicted of child abuse. In short, this Jesus carries a cross that not many are ready to share.”⁸

Kenneth Woodward recalls the 20th Century theologian Neibuhr's condemnation of the “easygoing American Christianity that has, in our time, triumphantly come to pass: 'A God without wrath brought men without sin into a kingdom without judgement through the ministrations of a Christ without a cross'.”

Woodward warns that:

“Mr. Gibson's raw images invade our religious comfort zone, which has long since been cleansed of the Gospels' harsher edges. Most Americans worship in churches where the bloodied body of Jesus is absent from sanctuary crosses or else styled in ways so abstract that there is no hint of suffering. In sermons, too, the emphasis all too often is on the smoothly therapeutic: what Jesus can do for me.”

Let us not be like the Corinthian church who were in danger of emptying the cross of its power (1 Cor 1:17), preferring human wisdom rather than God's foolishness and human strength rather than God's weakness (1 Cor 1:25). The cross was God's dreadful and comprehensive way of freeing us from the power and consequences of sin. The holiness of God required God to expunge the power of sin completely rather than simply ignoring it. If we spurn the shocking reality of the cross, we risk failing to understand God's holiness. This can result in us subtly beginning to shape our personal religious beliefs so that they accommodate our own preferences. Eventually, this will result in us living a carnal life in which we live as “enemies of the cross” (Phil 3:18-19).

The scourging of Christ and his crucifixion was brutal. Old Testament prophecies about the coming Messiah speak of him being so badly beaten that his back would be like a ploughed field (Ps 129:3; Is 50:6). One prophesied that many would be “appalled at him – his appearance was so disfigured beyond that of any man and his form marred beyond human likeness” (Is 52:14). The Roman philosopher Cicero (born in 106 BC) wrote about crucifixion, describing it as being “a most cruel and disgusting punishment”.⁹

The shocking reality of our sinfulness called for God's shocking solution – the cross. It is offensive. Nonetheless, although it appeared to be so terrible and foolish, the apostle Paul wrote that he would boast of nothing but the cross (Gal 6:14). The drastic situation of our sin called for drastic measures. The grace of God is seen in the fact that God himself chose to bear the drastic measures rather than us. Such was the love of God.

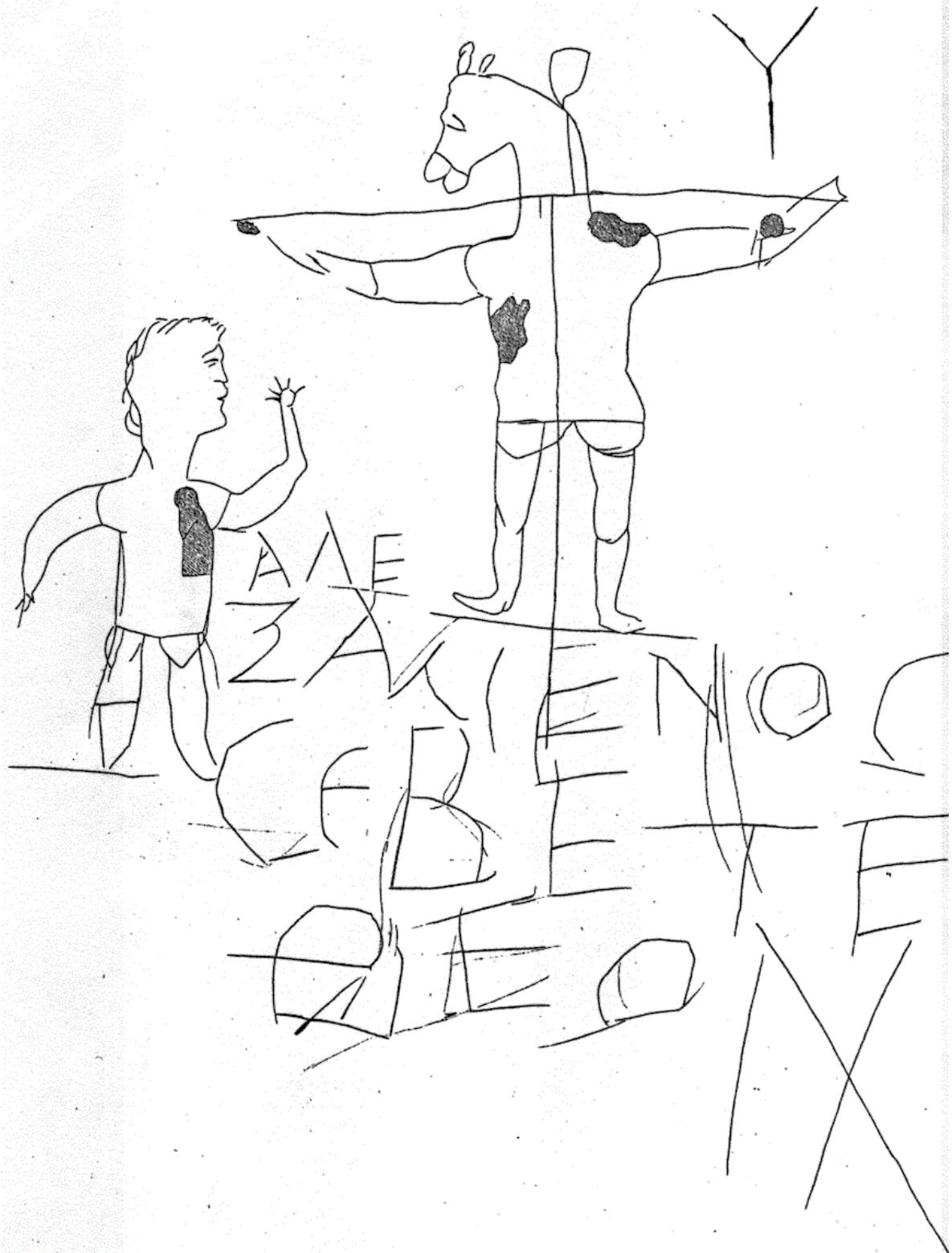
“God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us” (Rom 5:8).

Close with a brief prayer.

⁸Kenneth Woodward, “Do You Recognise This Jesus?” *New York Times* (Feb 25, 2004)

⁹Cicero, *Against Verres II*, v.64, para. 165.

First century graffiti from Rome



"Alexamenos worships God."

Graffiti from the end of the first century mocking a Christian called Alexamenos.

Lesson 3

Being priests, by the cross

Introduction

The leader introduces the subject by saying:

It has been said that the vertical bar of the cross points to God – indicating that we must engage with God in fellowship and worship. The horizontal bar points to each other – indicating that we must also relate in love to others. Some use this model to suggest that one must balance the other.

This is not so. It is not a question of balancing each other. It is not a question of love for others needing to moderate or balance our enthusiasm for worship of God. The truth is that the more you open your arms to engage God in authentic worship, the more you will open your arms to others. As such, worship of God should not compete with, or moderate, our engagement with others.

The symbolism of the two pieces of the cross is excellent. It is quite true that we must have a vertical relationship with God. Equally, it is quite true that we must ensure we have a loving, caring relationship horizontally with others. Both the Old Testament (Is 1:10-17; 58:5-8) and the New Testament (Jas 1:27; 2:14-17; 1 Jn 3:17-18; 4:20-21) make it very clear that authentic faith in God can never be a purely intellectual thing. If we have a relationship with God that is authentic and healthy, we cannot help but allow the passion and purpose of God to compel us into community and mission with others.

It should be self-evident that authentic faith from an authentic relationship with God logically results in authentic love and care of others. To set worship of God in opposition to an emphasis on social justice is to depart from Christianity.

If personal love for God and the saving work of Christ on the cross is not central, there will be a tendency for our ideas about God to become increasingly vague, our relationship with God to be increasingly impersonal and for us to transfer our emphasis from God to ourselves. Subtly, we can begin to grasp at God's crown and wear it ourselves. We can try to control our own eternal destiny and do those things which we feel will earn us acceptance by God rather than doing things God's way and trust in a Saviour.¹⁰ When this happens, Jesus is reduced to being a good moral example, religion becomes reduced to moralism and spirituality becomes a vague feeling, lacking any definition and certainty.

The cross of Christ crashes against such an understanding. It shows us that we are helpless in our sin before a holy God. As such, it was necessary for God to sacrifice himself (in Jesus) to deal with our sins. The fact that God did this demonstrates the extent of God's love to us.

God, in turn, requires us to love him. The requirement to do this is spelt out in the first and greatest commandment (Mk 12:28-30). Worship of God must therefore be the absolute

¹⁰The tendency for us to relapse into legalism, (doing good deeds in order to earn our salvation) rather than trusting in Christ, was a heresy which the Apostle Paul fought with particular vigour (Rom 3:20; Gal 2:16; Eph 2:8-9).

priority of his people. In worship, we celebrate God's love. This, in turn, inspires us to love others as God loves them. As John explains: “*We love because he first loved us*” (1 Jn 4:19).

Study of 1 Peter 2:4-12

Ask someone to read the Bible passage 1 Peter 2:4-12 before inviting everyone to discuss these next seven questions:

Questions for group discussion:

1) What is the function of a priest?

Leader's notes:

A priest is an intermediary between God and people. He represents God to the people and the people to God, (their prayer requests, sacrifices and their worship: see verse 5).

2) What are acceptable spiritual sacrifices?

Leader's notes:

See verse 5.

3) Why can all Christians now be considered to be priests? What changed to make this possible?

Leader's notes:

Priests were set apart for holy use and so made sacrifices on their own behalf in order to consecrate themselves so they were fit to be the intermediary between God and the people. However, because Christ exchange his holiness for our sinfulness on the cross, we now have free access to God's presence and no longer need a priest to represent us.

4) Read Mk 15:37-39 and ask:

What significance does the tearing of the curtain in the temple immediately following Jesus' death on the cross have regarding us now being priests?

Leader's notes:

The curtain separated off the holiest place in the temple which represented the very presence of God. Only the High Priest entered this area to make a sacrifice for the sins of all the people once a year (on the 'Day of Atonement'). The tearing of the curtain indicates that people can now have free access, through Christ, to God's very presence, without the need for a priestly intermediary.

The writing of the Apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 3:16 tells us that the temple in which we priests now worship is our own bodies. He calls our bodies a 'temple of the Holy Spirit', i.e. it is a place where God dwells and a place in which God should be worshiped.

5) What are the responsibilities of a priest particularly mentioned in this passage?

Leader's note:

See verse 9.

6) Why does Peter expect his readers to feel very privileged in their calling to be priests?

Leader's note:

See verse 10.

7) Jesus is described as the foundational corner stone. Some will reject (“stumble over”) Jesus, others will build on him (vv.6-8). What will you do?

Leader's note:

Allow a brief moment of time to reflect on this.

Conclusion

The leader concludes by saying:

The cross of Christ won for us the right to be priests who have free access to God. This right was won for us at huge cost, the cost of Christ's death on the cross. The cross is therefore an incontestable demonstration of God's love. This should prompt us, as priests of God, to put the highest priority on worshiping God in response. In fact, there is nothing more important we can do.

However, the cross also calls us to a life of sacrificial love of others in which we follow the example of Jesus (Lk 9:23). When we allow the love of Jesus to transform us, we share his heartbeat for others and become motivated to engage in his ministry. Without a knowledge and passion for Christ, there will be little to motivate a life of self-sacrifice, love and mission to others. This means that our service of others flows from worship of God – or, as Archbishop William Temple said:

It is often said that conduct in Christian life is supremely important and worship helps it. ...No, worship is supremely important and conduct tests it.

Close with a brief prayer.

Lesson 4

Taking up the cross

Introduction

The leader introduces the subject by saying:

This lesson highlights our obligation to 'talk' of the cross and 'walk' with the cross. Whilst some may consider the cross to be a stumbling block or a foolishness, we are to celebrate it, boast of it and tell as many as we can about the good news of God's saving action through the cross. This means that we must challenge any idea that evangelism is an optional activity for the church.

The word “evangelism” comes from the Greek word *euangelion*, meaning “good news” or “gospel”. All Christians are called to share the good news of Christianity to others. The only reason God has not wrapped up this imperfect world is because God wants to allow more time for people to come to know him (2 Pet 3:9) - and the agency God uses to bring others to faith is us, his church. This is our life's mission. Jesus made this plain, saying:

Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you." (Mat 28:18-20)

It is always regrettable when people refer disparagingly to a group of Christians as being 'evangelicals'. The truth is, God calls all of his disciples to be his messengers, i.e. evangelists. It is not optional. Hear what Jesus said:

As the Father has sent me, I am sending you (Jn 20:21).

But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you: and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8).

The Apostle Peter also said:

Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience (1 Pet 3:15).

Study of Philippians 2:12-16

The leader asks someone to read Phil 2:12-16 before inviting people to discuss these three questions:

Questions for group discussion:

- 1) Although Christ has won for us our salvation on the cross, what responsibility do we have to “work out” this salvation?
- 2) Paul wants us to pay careful attention to the manner in which we live within a depraved world. What does it mean for us to: “*Shine like stars in the universe as you hold out the word of life*” (Phil 2:15-16)?

3) What reason does Paul give for wanting the Philippians to be effective and faithful Christians?

Leader's note:

Paul does not want his ministry amongst the Christians at Philippi to have been in vain. He wants to boast about their achievements in heaven (v.16) and to know that his suffering for the gospel for their sake (being “poured out like a drink offering on the sacrifice”) was worthwhile (v.17).

Go on to say:

Tom Wright highlights our need to be outwardly focussed, i.e. to “hold out the word of life”, in his article “Grave Matters” in which he says:

If Easter faith is simply about believing that God has a nice comfortable afterlife for some or all of us, then Christianity becomes a mere pie-in-the-sky religion rather than a kingdom-on-earth-as-it-is-in-heaven religion. If Easter faith is simply about believing that Jesus is risen in some 'spiritual' sense, leaving his body in the tomb, then Christianity turns into a let-the-world-stew-in-its-own-juice religion, instead of a kingdom-on-earth-as-it-is-in-heaven religion. If Easter faith is about me, and perhaps you, finding a new dimension to our own spiritual lives in the here and now, then Christianity becomes simply a warmth-in-the-heart religion instead of a kingdom-on-earth-as-it-is-in-heaven religion. It becomes focused on me and my survival, my sense of God, my spirituality, rather than outwards on God, and on God's world that still needs the kingdom message so badly.¹¹

Therefore, each of us need to turn the focus from ourselves to God and the mission that God calls us to engage in. We need to 'talk' the cross.

We also need to walk the cross, or, as Jesus puts it, we need to “take up the cross”. Jesus said:

“anyone who does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me (Mt 10:38).

“And anyone who does not carry his cross and follow me cannot be my disciple” (Lk 14:27).

Study of Luke 9:18-26

The leader invites someone to read: Luke 9:18-26 before inviting people to discuss these three questions:.

Questions for group discussion:

- 1) At the time Jesus was alive on Earth, people had different ideas as to who Jesus was (vv.18-19). What different ideas exist today about who Jesus really was/is?
- 2) Why do you think Jesus immediately followed the correct declaration as to who he really was with the sobering news that he would suffer and die?

Leaders' notes:

Jesus wanted to cut short any idea that he had come, on this occasion, as a triumphant, all conquering, military Messiah. He wanted his disciples to understand that he had come as a suffering servant to die and pay the price for the sins of all of humankind (as prophesied

¹¹Tom Wright, “Grave Matters”, *Christianity Today*, April 6, 1998 vol.42, No4, p.51.

in Isaiah 53:1-6).

- 3) Jesus says in Luke 9:23: “*If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me*” (Lk 9:23). What does taking up the cross daily mean in practical terms for us?

Leader's note:

Conclude by saying that unless we appreciate the love of God seen in the cross we will not have the motivation to carry the cross ourselves and bear our share of hardship for the sake of the gospel.

Conclusion

Tell everyone that having spent four sessions studying the meaning of the cross, you want to give the opportunity for anyone to respond to God's love shown from them on the cross and to pray a prayer to become a Christian (or reaffirm their faith). Invite everyone to bow their heads in an attitude of prayer and for them to pray silently along with you as you pray this prayer:

**Heavenly Father,
thank you for your love for me.
Thank you for sending Jesus to die for me
and pay the price for my sins.
I turn from them now
and ask you to forgive me
for living life without you in the past.
I accept you as my Lord
and ask that you fill me
with the empowering presence of your Spirit
so that I can follow Jesus faithfully
and fulfill your purpose for my life, Amen.**

Invite anyone who has prayed that prayer for the first time to tell you so, after the meeting.¹²

| |

¹²When someone tells you they have prayed this prayer, congratulate them on their new faith. If possible, give them a copy of a daily Bible reading guide and ask them to:

- develop their friendship with God by developing a daily prayer habit in which they talk with God
- read the Bible each day to learn the principles of faith
- get along to a good church which will disciple them and allow them to minister in the areas of their giftedness.

Encourage them to work through doubts and questions honestly. Warn them that there will be days of doubts, so they are to rely on the **fact** of God's love for them, not their feelings (which can vary according to their mood).