

## Sermon preached at Wymondham Abbey

October 20<sup>th</sup>, 2024

### Jesus as Ransom

*Isaiah 53.4-end; Mark 10.35-45*

When you were listening to that first reading, I wonder how many of you thought ‘goodness, have we just fast-forwarded to Good Friday?’ That’s when we’d expect to hear those amazingly visionary words, amazingly *appropriate* words in the way Isaiah seems to foreshadow the horror of Jesus’ final days and death (several centuries before they happened).

They are powerful words, not just because they seem to *describe* Jesus’ suffering, but because they also seem to be saying *why* Jesus suffered so terribly, and to the point of death. He was wounded for our transgressions, for example; or *the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all*.

It’s absolutely central to our faith that we get to grips with the meaning of this: which is to say, get to grips with the meaning of Jesus’ suffering and death. Why did it happen? Why did it need to happen? And what did it achieve?

Then we had the Gospel reading, and we seemed to be back where we left off three weeks ago, with Jesus responding to the disciples arguing about who was the greatest.

But then as Jesus takes them to task for wanting the best places at his table, so to speak, he doesn’t just repeat his mantra about the first being last, he goes further. He starts to talk about himself (the ‘Son of Man’). He’s done this before. Three times he’s told them he will die and rise again, but they simply don’t seem to have got it.

Now he comes at it another way. And it’s quite an abrupt move. One minute he’s saying, you shouldn’t be thinking about lording it over others: if you want to be great, that means serving others, being like a slave.

You can imagine them thinking, that sounds grim, is that what we’ve given up everything to follow him for?

And then he makes a body-swerve in the conversation.

*For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve...*

In other words he’s telling them why they need to be properly humble: *I’ve come to serve others, so if you follow me that’s what you should be doing too.*

But he doesn’t stop there. He spells out what that’s going to mean for him. *And [the Son of Man came] to give his life a ransom for many.*

So they’re told a *fourth* time that he’s going to die; and, although Mark doesn’t say so, for a fourth time they don’t seem to get it.

But we do. Like the first hearers of Mark’s gospel, like all Christians since, we’re hearing Jesus from the other side of the Resurrection.

And with that perspective, of course, we hear the connection to that first reading from Isaiah. What Jesus says about his death – *given as a ransom for many* – adds another image to those we hear in Isaiah.

*wounded for our transgressions,  
... upon him was the punishment that made us whole,  
and by his bruises we are healed.  
...his life an offering for sin...*

And now in Jesus’ own words, he is going to die *as a ransom for many*.

It's actually no bad thing that we get such a blizzard of ideas, and I'll say why in a moment or two.

But, you may be thinking – do we really need to get so deep into all this? Isn't this all a bit academic?

It's certainly true that millions of words have been written and said and even hurled about in argument when it comes to understanding the death of Jesus, and the meaning of it. Some of it is incredibly complicated and even pernickety. Death by detail, perhaps. It can get very argumentative because it really matters.

So here's a scenario. I call it the Bus Stop Challenge. You're waiting at the bus stop, and the descriptor board says there's three minutes till the bus is due to arrive. Someone joins the queue next to you, and they say *don't you go to church? So what's all that about the cross? What on earth's it all about?*

This is something that happens to me from time to time, and of course I'm a target because of my dog collar. It's one of the best reasons for wearing the collar, because it starts such conversations. The bus stop question can be anything, sometimes as simple as *so what is it you believe?*

Whatever the question, you've got three minutes to say something before the bus comes. What are you going to say?

Because the cross is at the heart of our faith, we need to be able to tell ourselves something about it, let alone anyone else who might ask.

The cross of Jesus – and by that we properly mean his death AND resurrection, they're indivisible – the cross is central to the gospel, the good news. But the fascinating thing is that the Bible does *not* give some simple, clear-cut explanation of how it all works. It's not in the Creed either: you will notice this when we say it. The Creed just says he died and rose; and then towards the end lists some key beliefs including the forgiveness of sins.

What that tells us is that this is a mystery, in the best sense of the word. That means it's God – the transcendent, utterly other, indescribable God in heaven – acting in the world, in human history, and revealing his love in the most staggering way. The early Church was not afraid of mystery.

And because it's mystery, because in Jesus it's God himself acting in the world, no human words or ideas are going to capture it fully. The best we can do are images, metaphors, analogies. So all those phrases we read in Isaiah, any of the phrases that the NT writers use, even Jesus' own phrase about being a ransom – all these are partial: looking through a glass darkly, you might say. Each idea is saying, 'it's a bit like... he took our sins upon him' or 'it's a bit like he's a ransom paid to set us free'. In that blizzard of ideas, a bit of theological snow-blindness is no bad thing. Because it's true to a truth which is divine. And much truer to the infinite richness of God working in the world than either super-complex theology (which is dry) or some ancient, fantastical myth of divine intervention (which is make-believe).

So what would I say at the bus stop? Maybe something like this:

God loves us so much, that he became one of us – in Jesus. He came because we just keep going off the rails, sometimes really badly, and that breaks his heart. But we're never going to be perfect, never good enough on our own. So he comes – as Jesus – to reconcile us himself, to bring us home, to himself. He does this by teaching and living out such a radical love that the authorities are enraged and engineer his death. He submits to the worst that humanity can throw at him: torture and crucifixion. But death cannot hold him, and God raises him up. And in this he shows us that death is not the end, and that sin will never win; *and* that he shares in our suffering. That cross is the sign that signposts us onto a new road where however often we fail or fall, Jesus always lifts us back up and keeps alongside us on that journey towards God his Father, towards heaven, towards eternal life.

Now that only took a minute and a half to say, which leaves time to tell the person at the bus stop when Sunday services are....