

Holy Cross Day, 14th September 2025

Exodus 32.7-14

1 Timothy 1.12-17

Luke 15.1-10

On a Sunday evening,
when I turn the telly on to watch
while I iron my shirts for the week,
I often catch the end of a programme called
Antiques Roadshow
where people bring their old things from home
to have an expert value them.

At the start of the year,
a man had brought a box for the expert to value.
He had taken the box home
from the dump where he worked.
Inside the box was
a top hat,
a half-smoked cigar,
and over 200 letters, all written home
by the cook of the wartime Prime Minister
Winston Churchill,
who was famous for his
top hat and for smoking cigars.
Because the letters were found together with the hat and cigar,
it made it highly likely that this was Churchill's famous hat,
and Churchill's cigars.
So the expert valued the collection at £10,000.

This Sunday today is Holy Cross Day,
when we remember
when Helen, the mother of the Christian Roman emperor
Constantine the Great,
is said to have discovered the True Cross,
the actual cross on which Jesus died,
in Jerusalem,
on the 14th September
some three hundred years after Jesus' death.

Like finding Churchill's hat and cigar,
the association
with the cross on which Jesus died for our sins,
meant that these bits of old wood,
were something that Christians wanted
to treasure
to pray in front of
to kiss
to venerate,
in order to show wonder and gratitude,
for what Jesus did for us on the cross.

Those churches which grew out of the Reformation,
chose to stop venerating relics,
and instead made Holy Cross Day
a day to remember Jesus' saving work on the cross.

And so, I intend to proclaim, in the words of our reading today,
"That Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners"
and that, as Paul's first letter to Timothy goes on to say that
*"There is one mediator between God and humankind,
Christ Jesus, himself a human, who gave himself a ransom for all".*
This can be found in Chapter 2, verse 5.
And so my sermon will have three points:
Jesus came to save sinners;
Jesus is the mediator between us and God the Father;
And Jesus gave himself as a ransom for us all.

What does it mean to say that Jesus came into the world to save sinners?
It means that we are all caught up in, affected by, sin.
Sin is the term for what the Christian faith understands is wrong with the world.
Sin is a state of alienation from God and from each other.
Sin is the refusal to have fellowship with other humans,
and the refusal to have fellowship with God.
It is not only a personal problem between the individual soul and God,
but a problem with and between the whole human community.
As a term it covers the greed and selfishness that we are each capable of,
and also what can be called structures of sin:
the unequal economic systems,
and the environmental degradation
that are the outcomes of the sin of powerful individuals,
that trap everyone else,
and the consequences of which
are suffered the most by the world's poor.

What this does not mean is
that we should each see ourselves as the worst person in the world.
True, St Paul described himself as the chief of sinners.
But he did so because he formerly murdered Christians.
Nor, in my view, does a balanced reading of Scripture
give any support to the idea that human beings are incapable of doing any good.
The Black South African theologian Simon Maimela
argued that such a pessimistic theology,
so full of hostility and mistrust for other people,
led to the Apartheid system of his day.
Nor, when I say that we are sinners,
does it mean that sin is what is most natural to human beings.
Instead, the essential nature of all human beings
is that they are made in the image of God.
This is why Scripture uses the picture language
of God being angry over sin,
to say that it is contrary to our truest nature.

And this brings me to the second point of this sermon,
that Jesus is the mediator between God the Father and human beings.
We can use Moses from our reading from Exodus today,
as an illustration of what Jesus does.

Moses has been up the mountain for an extended period of time,
and the people have built the Golden Calf and begun to worship it.
God tells Moses

“Now let me alone
so that my wrath may burn hot against them
and I may consume them”.

But this does not mean that God is an angry God,
or that the essential nature of God is to be angry.

I am told that in Jewish services on fast days,
the verse of our reading is read along with some later verses,
and we need to take the two passages together now.

Moses intercedes for the people
by reminding God that though he is angry in response to the current situation,
God’s essential nature is

“Merciful and gracious
Slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness,
keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation,
forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin,
yet by no means clearing the guilty.”

When the Bible speaks of God being angry,
it is the Bible’s way of telling us that something is wrong here.
And so when Paul writes that

there is one mediator between God and humankind, Christ Jesus,
We are not to imagine Jesus putting himself between us and a sulky God.
We are to imagine that Jesus reminds God the Father
of his essential nature to be merciful and gracious,
and who reveals God to us as abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness.

Finally, these verses speak of Jesus giving himself as a ransom for all.

In the first few centuries,
the Church came to understand this to mean
that Christ’s death on the cross was like ransom money.

It was paid, by God
to the devil, in exchange for humanity,
who were bound by Satan in sin.

Except, since Jesus had done no sin,
Satan had gone beyond his authority in claiming him,
and the greatest structure of sin of them all was broken,
the power of Death which traps us all.

Those who are familiar
with C.S. Lewis’ *Chronicles of Narnia*,
will be familiar with this kind of talk.
When the Christ-figure Aslan the Lion,
is killed by the Witch,
the stone table on which he was killed is magically broken,
and Aslan rises from the dead.

His friend Susan asks him how this happened.
Aslan replies:

“...though the Witch knew the Deep Magic,
there is a magic deeper still which she did not know.
Her knowledge goes back only to the dawn of time.
But if she could have looked a little further back,
into the stillness and the darkness before Time dawned,
she would have known that when a willing victim
who had committed no treason was killed in a traitor’s stead,
the Table would crack and Death itself would start working backwards”.

And so, just like Aslan,
When Jesus died in our place,
Death started to work backwards.
He was the first to rise from the dead,
and at the last day,
we shall rise from the dead also.

Now we must not get ahead of ourselves:
there are quite clearly still forces in this world that trap people,
forces of division and hate.
But, to quote Simon Maimela again,
“because God has succeeded in winning the victory over evil,
Christians can start to embody and institutionalise this victory
here and now in anticipation of the ultimate victory
that comes with Christ’s second coming.”

And so the application of this sermon is simple.
It is to respond to the invitation to be part of Christ’s victory.
This means two things:
First, to respond in faith to what Jesus did for us all on the cross:
to believe and accept that Jesus died to free you from sin.
And secondly- for faith without works is dead-
it means to ‘start to embody this victory’,
to begin to dismantle the structures of sin,
and to rebuild this world founded on freedom and trust.

I pray that we would each respond to this invitation anew today.

Amen.