

13th September 2020 10 am The Importance of the Gospel

Service led by Michelle Harris, PCC notice and readings by Kim Matthews,

“What the Cross means to me” by Andy Collins, talk by Andrew Attwood.

This transcript is only of the notices, “What the Cross Means to Me”, readings and the talk.

Notices

[Michelle Harris:]

Denise has sent out [...] the weekly updates, and we're back to doing a monthly news sheet now. And so if you're not signed up to those, get signed up to them, it gives you all the information about what's going on in church. Obviously things are restarting again now. And we can do church activities and youth activities. My small notice is that we are looking for someone to come and help with our small groups, and preferably a man, because we're hoping to split the group into boys and girls, but we need another guy to come and help us out with that, so if you think that's you, that God's calling you to work with young people, specifically with lads, then please, please get in touch. The rest of the notices are all on [the weekly update] and Kim has one from the PCC for us.

[Kim Matthews:]

Thank you. So just to add to Michelle's, on the notice sheet you'll see there's a notice about the annual meeting, which we would have held back in April. But we were unable to do that, but now we have permission to host the annual meeting online. So that will be at 7:30 on the 19th of October.

So two things linked to that:

- if you would like to be added to the electoral roll ahead of that meeting, please contact Kevin Broadbent, our electoral roll officer.
- But perhaps even more importantly we do have quite a number of vacancies for PCC, and for Deanery Synod as well actually, and in case you're not sure what the PCC is, this is the group that's responsible for the running of St. John's in the background.

And actually at this stage it would be really good to thank all of those PCC members who have been busy in the background, helping Andrew and the wardens out. I would like to thank them for their service, but can I ask all of you to pray, prayerfully consider whether you're being prompted to serve in either of these rôles. And if you want to talk about that to any existing PCC member or one of the wardens or Andrew, and it would be very helpful to know before the APCM if you'd like to stand for one of those rôles, because of this slightly awkward way in which we're going to have to run the meeting online. And if you want to participate, and you don't receive the newsletter electronically, but you want the link for the annual meeting, then again let Denise know on the admin email address [admin@stjohn316.co.uk] and she can add you to the list for that. Thanks very much.

What the Cross Means to Me

[Andy Collins:]

When I think of Christ dying for us all, I have to say that my overriding sense or emotion is one of being very overwhelmed, in a positive way, by the generosity and the selflessness, of what He did and the extreme act of love that it was. The only thing that I can really compare it to is how it felt to stand in front of a wonder of the world like the Grand Canyon or the Taj Mahal. And just that very powerful sense of awe and wonderment that you get, looking at something like that, that you don't quite understand. And that you feel very overwhelmed by it but you also just feel very grateful that for a few moments you get to look at it and drink it in. But the very cool thing about Christ's act on the Cross, is that its consequences last forever, which is a really cool thought indeed.

Readings: Matthew

[Kim:]

This morning's reading is taken from Matthew 7, verses 13 to 14. And it's Jesus speaking. And this is part of His Sermon on the Mount, which covers the three chapters in Matthew from 5 to 7. So, Matthew 7:13-14:

¹³ 'Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. ¹⁴ But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it.

This is the word of our Lord.

Thanks be to God.

Talk

[Andrew Attwood:]

Hi everyone, good to see you. It's another opportunity this morning to talk again in some detail about the Gospel itself, and as Michelle said earlier on, it has to do with the importance of the Gospel. Kim just read to us there from Matthew 7:13-14, this tiny little couplet that you find in the Sermon on the Mount. I often forget what a huge privilege it is to have the words of Jesus Christ. These are words that have been written down for us to enjoy, to understand and to live by. And my goodness me! The idea that we can know what the Son of God said and taught: it's extraordinary, so a tremendous privilege for me to be doing this.

Just as a basic preface for this: we know that life is made up of all kinds of decisions, things that we choose, things that we choose to do, things that we choose not to do, trivial ones, serious ones. The biggest immediate decision that I've had to make in these last few weeks, alongside with Lindsey, is to dare to do a pop-up open-air art exhibition. I'm feeling a bit nervous about this, but I don't know if you can see behind me in my room but there's a handful of paintings that are kind-of scattered around my study. And basically, we're getting ready to do a pop-up exhibition on the 19th, on this coming Saturday. We're going to be Talisman Square from 10am to 4pm and I'll be honest with you, I'm a bit nervous. I'm a bit nervous because I've not shown any of my stuff in the public realm before. So that's a decision I've made, and I'm hoping that it goes well. It's trivial though, it doesn't change my life in any way.

There are other decisions that we make in life. So they're much, much more serious. I can remember when I was curate in Leamington Spa, getting to know a guy who had come to St Mary's Church where I was working, because he had an alcohol problem. This was a guy who was well-known to the church community: he had a wife, he had a child, who was about maybe 6 or 7. And this was a guy who had been drinking for years, and it had already started to affect his health. I can remember having maybe 10, 20, 30 conversations with this guy, about the serious consequences of carrying on drinking, and he would smile, and he would nod, and he would agree. And he would carry on drinking. And I did his funeral. I can remember leading his funeral, with his 7-year-old child and wife there, thinking to myself, he had multiple, multiple moments where he knew what he was doing, who he was damaging. And he still did it. You see, there are choices that we make in life for the trivial, and there are choices that we make in life that are actually fatal.

We have this story from Jesus of a narrow road and a broad road. And I think we have to be realistic about the nature of human beings like us. Sometimes people ignore guidance, sometimes people ignore the diagnosis, there's this classic dilemma that we wrestle with in the West, the wrestling between short-term

pleasures and long-term wisdom. It might be easier to do something that gives us comfort in the short term, and we resist the decision that might feel harder. But when we're talking about stuff to do with God, this is to do with absolute choices, it's to do with choices and actually according to this little two-line parable, destinations as well. And it chimes in with many things that have already been said all the way through the Old Testament, all the way back in Deuteronomy: Deuteronomy 30:15-17, when Moses was summarising the law that God had given to the people of Israel, he says, "I set before you life and death." And he's setting it before them: there was a choice between life and death. And he saying, "choose life, choose life don't choose death."

Later on, hundreds of years later, you get Elijah, who is now in a confrontational situation where the people of Israel had turned their eyes away from God and they were serving false gods, the god of Baal at the time, and in 1 Kings 18 verse 21 Elijah challenges the people, he kind-of picks away at their vacillating, their wavering and he says, it says,

'How long will you waver between two opinions? If the LORD is God, follow him; but if Baal is God, follow him.'

And he's goading them into deciding, into making a clear decision.

All the way into the New Testament you get interesting moments of conflict and contrast, and people choosing and rejecting. You get a fascinating example in John chapter 6, verses 66 onwards, where Jesus has started to speak to the crowds. He's been very popular up to this point, but He's starting to speak a little bit more frankly to the crowds, and He's talking to them about the fact that they need to eat His flesh and drink His blood, and this big crowd begins to evaporate. They kind-of scratch their heads at him and think, "What's He on about? What do you mean?" And so it says in verse 66, it says,

⁶⁶ From this time many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him.

⁶⁷ 'You do not want to leave too, do you?' Jesus asked the Twelve.

⁶⁸ Simon Peter answered him, 'Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.

⁶⁹ We have come to believe and to know that you are the Holy One of God.'

Even when Jesus was speaking words of choice and decision before a crowd, several walked away, many walked away, and He queried the Twelve to make sure, "Do you know what you think? Are you deciding to stay or are you going to go?" You see, unlike the choices that we have in the wider world, Jesus doesn't offer comfortable syncretism. Syncretism is where you assimilate multiple perspectives and you pick and choose, a bit like a pick-and-mix sweetshop, where you say, "Have a bit of this." "I'll have a bit of that, I'll have a bit of this." Jesus never ever does that in His communications throughout all the Gospels. Jesus presents two options. And these two options are quite stark. Let me read to you again those two lines that we heard from Kim earlier,

¹³ 'Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. ¹⁴ But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it.

What Jesus is saying, if I was to simply summarise, is this: everyone will live somewhere forever. Everyone is going to live somewhere, forever, but they're going to have to choose where: one destination or another.

Just to set it in the context of the Sermon on the Mount, when Jesus is rounding up this long piece of teaching, He does another contrast. It's the one that we have the children's song from: you know, the wise and foolish builders. A wise

man built his house on the rock, the foolish man built his house on the sand. It's a contrast again. Jesus is basically saying you've got a choice. You have a choice. With the wise and foolish builders He's saying, These people have both heard my words. The wise one puts them into practice. The foolish one ignores them and it's like a house built on sand. And when the storms of life come, it will crash to the ground.

Now all of this sounds really clear. But one of the things that is mysterious and difficult in life is that all kinds of options sometimes seem right. They seem like the way to joy, the way to God, the way to heaven. But there's a problem, you see, and this is my first point for today's talk. The Gospel of Jesus Christ is actually exclusive. The Gospel of Jesus Christ says this: only the death of Jesus Christ saves. Now this exclusivity defies all the other running narratives that we experience in modern life. Let me give you some examples of the other stories that shape how people make their decisions:

- ◆ The narrative of the successful life, the life that pursues qualifications, good career, accruing possessions, building a pot of money, having a nice family, having a selection of friends. Your life is successful if you have all of these things. It's an attractive narrative that draws lots of people towards it. But it doesn't save. According to Jesus that does not save.
- ◆ Another narrative: the full life, a life that is full of adventures and interests, where people accrue experience or things that they enjoy doing, where their days and their weeks are booked up with many things that they do, because they want a life of stimulus all the way through: the full life. But the full life doesn't save, according to Jesus.
- ◆ More recently, we've had the development of the authentic life, I think since the 60s, people are saying, "Be true to yourself. Be real with yourself. Create your sense of identity." And that applies to all aspects of life now. You can create yourself out of almost anything! One of the horrors that you get sometimes when you're faced with funeral requests, as a minister, is someone coming up and saying, "Well do you know what my deceased partner's favourite tune was? It's Frank Sinatra singing, *I did it my way*. "I did it my way". I'll be honest with you. That's a banned song to play in funerals. I will never allow a funeral to go ahead where someone says "I did it my way", because that is a devastating thing to say at the point of someone's death. The authentic life, the self-centred life, the life that's all about you, doesn't save.
- ◆ Surprisingly as well, and this will be a surprise that people of Jesus' day, even the virtuous life doesn't save. There's a lot of people I know who will say, "Well, I did my best. I try my best to be good, I try to help people, I do good work. You know, I have an ethical life." A virtuous life doesn't save either. That's not good enough.

So the successful life doesn't save, the full life doesn't save, the authentic life doesn't save, the virtuous life, even the religious life doesn't save. You find in this particular parable Jesus saying that there is only one way. And in this parable He describes it as a narrow road and the narrow gate and He's echoing some words He says in other teachings: in John 14:6 very famously He says,

'I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.

That's explicitly exclusive, He's saying, I'm it! And the only way, and He describes Himself in John 10 verse 9:

I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved.

And by inference He's saying, if you don't go through this gate, you're not [saved]. Is this something only Jesus said? You'll find in Acts 4 verse 12 that Peter picks up the same theme. When he was arrested early on in the story of Acts, when he's going public about his faith in Jesus Christ, Peter says this, "There is no other name by which we will be saved," no other name! So the Gospel is a starkly exclusive claim.

Imagine for a moment with me as we journey through this strange COVID phase of human history that a vaccine is finally arrived at. Now obviously we know from what the newspapers and the press tells us, there are many organisations throughout the world trying to find many possible vaccines, but imagine that there's only one that works, imagine that there's only one that works and imagine that only one nation has it. Just imagine that nation, feeling compelled to share it wider, because it's the only way that people are going to get through this crisis.

So it is in this little parable with Jesus, only one narrow door enters life, and it's narrow for a particular reason. In contrast to the width and the breadth of the other one. It's only as wide as Jesus Christ on the Cross, you kind-of have to squeeze through this one and you can't get through it without looking at the Cross of Jesus Christ: you can't avoid it. You can't ignore it. You can't approach the Christian faith for example and simply adopt Jesus as a good moral example, with some nice teachings that help us live in the present. You can't do that. You can't just adopt a few ethical values that fit in broadly with the Christian faith and call yourself a Christian. You can't do that. A narrowness that Jesus talks about is an individual facing the Cross on their knees. You see in contrast to this, all the kinds of options in the world are much, much easier. They scratch us where we itch, they're less effort to stay on that road. And according to Jesus, there's a large number of people on that road. So my first point: the Gospel is exclusive. There's only one way.

Second point: the Gospel is to be told and shared with all you know. This is so important. This is absolutely vital. When Jesus was describing the narrow gate and the broad gate, the narrow road and the broad road, He's speaking continuously to crowds. All the way through Jesus' ministry He was speaking to many. You will remember the parable of the sower, and how the seed is thrown in all directions. Jesus isn't reserved in who He shares His message with. He shares to those who aren't listening at all, He shares with those people who respond quickly, but then walk away because they're not interested any more. He shares with people who go, "Yeah, I'll fit that into my life," but then other pressures of life choke up the message of Jesus. The Gospel is a saving message that needs to go out to the entire human race. Why is that important? Because it is the message that saves! Wherever the seed of Good News lands in good soil, it sprouts up and changes lives. It's profound. It's extraordinary to think that a message could actually transform and save a life. Interestingly though, that same message needs to be said to everybody, even if they reject it.

I think sometimes there is a kind-of resignation that happens in the heart of many Christians today, where we shrug our shoulders and say "What's the point of saying?" I'll give you two reasons, there's two reasons, even for sharing the Gospel with people who are going to reject it.

- ◆ The first thing is, it's actually a witness to them, about what's going to happen at the end of the age. Because everyone is going to get to the end of the age, and everyone will need to know, "I had an option, I had a choice." So that's the first reason.
- ◆ The second reason is this: it's a witness back to God, to say, this is for everybody and we have met it and we will witness to you.

You remember back in mediaeval times, or even in Tudor times, when we used to have town criers. This is before the days of newspapers or internet obviously, and the town crier would come out and ring the bell. "Oyez! Oyez! Hear the words

of the king!" and he would pronounce messages and communications that are to let everybody know what is happening. Even if people didn't listen. So there's something really important about that.

My first point was this: the Gospel is exclusive as the only way, but it's a message for everybody, even those who don't listen. The third point though, is the one I want to dwell on today. The importance of the Gospel is because it is Jesus' legacy. When you get to the end of Luke's Gospel, He says, "You are witnesses of this, take it to all the nations."

I meet lots of good Christians, good faithful Christians who say that they're followers of Jesus, that they're loyal to Him. But their loyalty to Him, my loyalty to Him, requires an equally clear loyalty to His Gospel. You see, if you say that you love Jesus, you must love His legacy. If you're a follower of Jesus, you must faithfully carry His saving message everywhere, no matter what the cost. Let me read to you from Mark 8:34-35. I only noticed this just the other day when I was reading. He says this,

³⁴ Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: 'Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. ³⁵ For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it.

Let me read that last verse again. "Whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the Gospel will save it." In other words, Jesus is tying together the following of Him with the sharing of His message. You get an echo of this later in Mark's Gospel, Mark 10:29-30, where Jesus has been saying how hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of heaven. And Peter speaks up it says,

²⁸ Then Peter spoke up, 'We have left everything to follow you!'

²⁹ 'Truly I tell you,' Jesus replied, 'no one who has left home or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields for me and the gospel ³⁰ will fail to receive a hundred times as much in this present age [. . . and . . .] in the age to come eternal life.

So once again, He's setting it in the context of a guaranteed inheritance for the future, if you follow Him, and give up your life for Him and for the Gospel. "And the Gospel" is attached to what it means to follow Him.

Imagine for a moment the artist, the famous artist Leonardo da Vinci - I don't know how much you know about him, but he was painstakingly slow when it came to painting. He was busy with all kinds of other things: he was an inventor, he was a scientist, he was able to architect, he did lots of things, but his painting, he did very very carefully and very slowly. Apparently at the time of his death he still had three or four of his most famous paintings in his studio. He refused to let them go until they were absolutely finished. Just imagine for a moment if we were doing a retrospective art exhibition of Leonardo da Vinci. There's only a handful of paintings because he didn't do loads. Just imagine if we did that, but we left out the Mona Lisa. Imagine a da Vinci exhibition, where it said at the top, 'Everything you need to know about Leonardo', but we left out the Mona Lisa: that wouldn't be representative of him, would it? That wouldn't truly be recognising his legacy, what he had done, what was most famous about him. And so it is with the Gospel. You see the Gospel of Jesus Christ is His masterpiece. The Gospel of Jesus Christ is the most beautiful, wonderful, powerful, amazing, transformative thing that He's done. His life is full and rich, but His death and resurrection are the crescendo. So when we speak as Christians, when we think about following Jesus as Christians and we think about, "well you know I'm a follower of Jesus, that's sufficient," you can't follow Jesus without embracing His message, too, because His message is the only saving message for a lost world.

But some may want to come back to me on this and say, "don't you think Andrew, that this is just a little bit narrow-minded?" I can see that this is absolutely narrow-minded. It is as narrow as the story Jesus taught. Let me read it to you again because it's only two verses long,

¹³ 'Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. ¹⁴ But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it.

This is as narrow as you could imagine. This is a personal choice. It's not a group experience. This is down to individuals choosing. This is to do with a hard choice: it's harder to get through the narrow gate, because you have to let go of things to get through. It's not easy to let go. It's not easy to submit. In many respects, when you step onto this narrow way of Jesus, it is a summons to die with Him. To follow Jesus is a call to lay down everything.

So how might I conclude about the importance of the Gospel? If I were to describe myself as a caring person, what would that mean in practice? If I say that I care about people, if I say that I care about the world, if I say that I'm a Jesus follower, I must carry His Gospel far and wide, otherwise I'm deluding myself about what I really care about. Now, I sent this [leaflet: *The Message of the Cross*] out with Denise, when she was circulating information to do with today's service. This is a tiny little one-fold booklet. I did it ages ago, but I wanted to write down in tiny little paragraphs, simple summaries of all the different ways in which the Bible describes the Gospel message, there's multiple ones: 'Jesus is the bridge', 'Jesus cancels debts', 'Adopted because of Jesus', 'Jesus is our substitute', 'Jesus is in charge', 'Jesus has bought us out of captivity'. It's a way of summarising the message of the Cross. It's a way of summarising the message of the Gospel and I wrote it - do you know why? So I could learn it myself, because I want to have in my head, quick to the thought, quick to the touch, ways of sharing with whoever I'm with, if the moment is appropriate. I just want to encourage us all this morning that the importance of the Gospel means we should embrace it, we should know it thoroughly, and we should be carriers of it. This is too important to consider to be a secondary issue.

Thank you.

[Transcribed by Hamish Blair with help from <https://otter.ai>]

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