

Sermon

Awe and Wonder

Acts 10:34-43; 1 Peter 2:22-25; Matthew 28:1-10

9th April 2023

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On Good Friday, in the morning service, we looked at some of the strange things Matthew reported around the time Jesus died. There was darkness for 3 hours before his death from noon to 3 o'clock.

We might assume it was a solar eclipse, but no, solar eclipses only occur at new moon and Passover is, by definition, at full moon. Furthermore, this darkness lasted 3 hours and the maximum duration of totality of a solar eclipse is just over 7 minutes! The idea that it might have been a locust or dust storm, is ruled out by the report of a Samaritan historian writing in 52AD which says during the darkness the stars were visible as they would be at night. I don't know what caused that darkness, but it was reported by historians outside the Bible. What did it mean? Perhaps that the Light of the World was being extinguished?

The second mysterious event was that the veil in the temple was torn in two from top to bottom at the time Jesus died. This veil separated the Holy of Holies from the Holy Place. Only the High Priest was allowed to enter the Holy of Holies, once a year, there to encounter the very presence of God. Yet when Jesus died, this curtain which was 20m high, 10m wide and woven 10cm thick torn from top to bottom. What did it mean? Perhaps that access to God was now open to people through Jesus' death.

The third mysterious event was a great earthquake when Jesus died which split rocks and was felt across the eastern Mediterranean. What did that mean? Perhaps that the foundations of the earth were shaken when her architect died. But more mysteriously still, Matthew tells us in Chapter 27:52-53:

The tombs broke open and the bodies of many holy people who had died were raised to life. They came out of the tombs, and after Jesus' resurrection they went into the holy city and appeared to many people.

This resurrection life spilt over to raise some of the righteous dead as well. These events should cause us along with the soldiers at the cross to be filled with awe and say, "Truly this man was the Son of God."

And now we reach Easter Sunday. As we heard in the gospel reading, Jesus came back to life that Sunday morning. We have these eye witness accounts of finding the tomb empty but more than that meeting Jesus alive again. And not just a few people: all the twelve disciples and the circle of followers beyond them were involved. There were multiple meetings with time to go fishing, to eat a meal together, to talk. They were able to touch him, see and feel the wounds. At one time, St Paul tells us that 500 saw him together.

Peter in the account from the Book of Acts, summarised those meetings when they talked and ate together. That is pretty convincing that someone is real and alive. He went on to say:

All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.”¹

That was what was achieved through Jesus’ death on the cross and resurrection. He dealt with the sin problem which separates mankind from God. Everyone who believes in Jesus receives forgiveness of sins through his name.

In the other passage from Peter’s letter he explains a bit more about Christ’s death by quoting from the prophet Isaiah:

“He himself bore our sins” in his body on the cross, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; “by his wounds you have been healed.” For “you were like sheep going astray,”[f] but now you have returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.²

On Thursday we held a Christian Passover meal. We did that because the Last Supper was a Passover meal. The Biblical essentials for the Passover celebration are unleavened bread (the Matzah), bitter herbs and roast lamb.

I said that the bread must have little holes in it – that is be pierced and to have stripes on it from cooking on a rack. We know this was so in the first century, but Jewish Rabbis do not know why.

At the Last Supper, Jesus took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me."³

Today, as we celebrate the resurrection, we shall use Matzah bread as we remember the Last Supper in the light of the resurrection.

What was Jesus seeing when he said those words? The bread was pierced and had dark stripes across it. Surely, he would have thought of those same words of Isaiah which were quoted by Peter:

Isaiah 53:5-8 But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds/[stripes] we are healed.

⁶ We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all. ⁷ He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; he was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth. ⁸ By oppression and judgment he was taken away. And who can speak of his descendants? For he was cut off from the land of the living; for the transgression of my people he was stricken.

There in Jesus’ hands was the bread pierced as his body would be the next morning. There was the bread with stripes on it as his body would be striped with the fearsome scourge as he would be flogged the next morning.

It is too poignant! How did he hold that bread and so calmly say it represented his body and then break it as his body would be crushed so soon?. What courage! What determination! What love!

What does Isaiah prophesy about this crucifixion again?

¹ Acts 10:43

² 1 Peter 2:24-25

³ Luke 22:19

- He would be pierced for our transgressions;
- Crushed for our iniquities;
- Punished to bring us peace;
- By his wounds we are healed;
- He has carried the iniquity of us all;
- For the transgression of the people he was stricken.

There is a sheet hanging over the cross. At the Good Friday service, we looked at this list and wrote the things we needed to send to the cross: our transgressions – where we have crossed the line and broken God’s laws, our iniquities – the twistedness within us that distorts us from the way of God, our brokenness. We wrote them on the sheet and hung it over the cross to represent our identification with what Jesus did for us. To represent our prayer for what he would still do for us.

And Isaiah was inspired to write that as Jesus carried our transgressions, he would be stricken and pierced as he was by nails and spear.

He would carry our iniquities and be crushed by them. This punishment on him, would bring us peace.

What is it that Peter said was achieved at the cross?

“Everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.”⁴

“He himself bore our sins” in his body on the cross, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; “by his wounds you have been healed.”

St Matthew quotes from the same passage in Isaiah, when he reports Jesus healing many in Capernaum after he had healed Peter’s mother-in-law from a fever.

Matthew 8:16-17 When evening came, many who were demon-possessed were brought to him, and he drove out the spirits with a word and healed all the sick. ¹⁷ This was to fulfil what was spoken through the prophet Isaiah: "He took up our infirmities and carried our diseases."

St Peter and St Matthew both were with Jesus for the forty days after resurrection until the ascension. In that time he taught them about the fulfilment of Old Testament scripture and the outworking of the Kingdom of God. They both link Isaiah 53 to the crucifixion and apply it to salvation and healing.

Healing then is **through** the atonement. Scripture is clear that there is only sickness and death in this world because of the sin of humanity. That does not mean that all sickness is directly caused by a sin of the individual. On the contrary, it is the sin of the human race which collectively has brought death and sickness upon the race. Some actions may bring natural consequences – like smoking causing lung cancer, but we normally we are not talking about a one-to-one connection between sin and sickness. It is a general connection.

Since sickness has a root cause of human sin, it is reasonable that the atonement which deals with human sin is the fount from which healing flows.

The atonement is the direct root of our salvation – on the cross God was in Christ Jesus reconciling the world to himself. As we put our trust in that redeeming work of Christ on the cross, where he, the innocent, paid for the sins of the world, the promise is that the way is restored for us to approach God.

Even salvation is a process. Dr George Ladd called this the already but not yet. God the Holy Spirit pursues us to draw us to trust in Christ. That may happen slowly or quickly. Once we do make that decision, we are declared saved from our sins. There is still a maturing and more parts of our lives

⁴ Acts 10:43

come into that salvation. So the Bible can refer to us as saved, being saved and that we will be saved when Jesus returns. It is a process which God works in us through the rest of our lives. When we die trusting in Jesus, our salvation is completed as we enter into glory. So when we trust Jesus for salvation, we are already saved and not yet fully saved. We have relationship and declaration, but salvation is still developing in us.

Sanctification works similarly. Sanctification is being made holy. When we come to Christ, we are declared to be holy. But practically, we continue to be sanctified as God works on us to make us more like Jesus. So we are being sanctified. And we will be sanctified when perfection comes. There is a past, present and future to our sanctification. Again: the already but not yet. We are declared holy but not yet fully holy.

Healing is only possible because Jesus died on the cross to deal with human sin. The fullness of healing will be in the next life when there will be no more pain, no more suffering, no more tears. Obviously, since aging and death remain in this life, healing is a work of the kingdom of God, which again is already here but not yet fully here. There are inbreaking moments when the kingdom breaks through and we see healings and miracles. But we won't see the fullness of healing until we are in glory. Nonetheless, we do see healings as we pray for the sick, not all the time but often. They are signs that the Kingdom is near to us. They are outworkings of God's grace to us.

As we take communion today, you will see the holes in the bread – remember that Christ was pierced for our transgressions – as you trust in him, they are dealt with. As you see the stripes on the bread, remember that by his stripes we are healed.

After the service, you may wish to come forward for prayer to apply the work of Christ more fully to your life spiritually or physically.