

I, if I be lifted up...

Readings: Numbers chapter 21, verses 4-9; John chapter 12, verses 27-36

How do we understand what Jesus did for us on the Cross?

There have been many different ways of understanding. One is the idea that Jesus, on the Cross, was being punished by God for the sins which men and women have committed. The argument behind that view is that God is Just and his justice demands that sin be punished before it can be forgiven. So he took it out on His own son. It is what is known as the penal substitutionary theory of the Cross. It is a theory much in vogue in evangelical circles these days but one which I cannot subscribe to.

But enough of the negative stuff. Our text this morning offers a positive understanding of what was happening on the Cross. *"I, if I be lifted up from the earth will draw all men to me"*. Here we have an understanding of the Cross which does justice to God's nature. God is love and what we see on the Cross is the love of God in Jesus accepting, absorbing and transforming the evil that men do.

But to understand our text we need to go back to an Old Testament incident which is its background and context. It's a story about what happened to the people of Israel whilst they were wandering in the wilderness. They complained bitterly about the privations they were suffering and the story says that the Lord sent venomous snakes amongst them. The snake bites set up inflammation. The people cried to Moses for help and he is told to make a serpent of brass and fasten it to a pole. Everyone who looked at it was cured. It's a story full of superstition yet there is a truth embedded in it. *"Like cures like"*, the uplifted serpent is a cure for the harm other serpents have done. Jesus seized on this truth emptying it of all superstition. *"As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness so must the son of man be lifted up from the earth"*. Healing can come at a glance and to see this man, lifted up on a Cross, is a cure for the ills that humanity has wrought.

In what sense is it a cure?

The answer is to see Jesus hanging on his Cross and to understand his suffering, not as a punishment by God for human sinfulness, but as a demonstration of the love of God for sinful humanity.

Ours starting point is to recognise that *"God was in Christ"*. That is a fundamental Christian assertion.

Everything that Jesus did represents the action of God in and through a human life. And, if Jesus goes out of his way to welcome and accept and forgive sinners then that is God's way. If Jesus appeals to men and women to follow him rather than compelling them into belief that is God's way.

Everything that Jesus said represents the word of God to men and women and if Jesus tells us to forgive our enemies that is God's word to us. And, if Jesus suffers on the Cross because the sinfulness of man insists on crucifying the Truth, then his suffering is the suffering of God.

So Jesus dies. No doubt he could have retaliated against his enemies but he didn't. Rather Jesus persists in showing the love which *"bears all things and endures all things"*. And this is true even at the extremity of crucifixion. St John says that *"having loved his own who were in the world he loved them to the end"*, even if that end meant death by crucifixion. And God was in Christ!! Which means to say that Jesus dying on the Cross is a demonstration of the extent to which God loves us.

The story is told of a famous Scottish preacher who, on Good Friday, mounted his pulpit and held up a crucifix and cried out to the congregation *"He loves you as much as all that"*. When you remember that a crucifix is the Cross with the figure of Christ outstretched upon it and that it is a common image amongst Roman Catholics then you can imagine the impact it had on his severely Protestant Scottish congregation. They were outraged. Catholic symbols have no place in a Protestant church!! But the point was made. This tortured figure on the Cross was a sign and symbol of how much God loves us.

Now this. When that truth hits home at us, when we really see it and understand it, when we get to the point of actually feeling it, then that truth has a transforming effect. It shames our indifference. It highlights our unworthiness. It leads us to *"count our richest gain but loss, and pour contempt on all our pride"*. More than that such love evokes within us an answering response, and in response we are motivated to give our all.

The Cross has a magnetic appeal. And its appeal is all-powerful. To see Jesus lifted up is not just a demonstration of God's love; it is at the same time a transforming influence. It is not just the love of God demonstrated to us; it is also the love of God generated within us.

There is a story told of a negro woman who stood amongst those who lined the funeral route of Abraham Lincoln's last journey. He was the man who had fought a civil war at outrageous cost to liberate the negro slaves. And, as the cortege passed the place where she was standing, the woman bent down and said to her son; *"Take a good look son, that man died for you"*.

Jesus said, *"I, if I be lifted up, will draw all men to me"*. And what we need to do is take a good look at the crucified figure of the Christ. That man died for you.

Which is what Isaac Watts did in his great hymn.

*When I survey the wondrous cross,
On which the Prince of glory died,
My richest gain I count but loss,
And pour contempt on all my pride.*