

# Passion Sunday — Why Did Jesus Die ?

Today is Passion Sunday and our thoughts are directed towards the Cross of Christ.

Why did Jesus die?

For many Christians the answer is simple and straightforward. The Cross was the Will of God. Jesus died because that was God's Plan and Purpose from the beginning. There are different facets to this argument. Some say that God is Just and justice demands that sin be punished. So the Cross is interpreted as Jesus as our substitute, accepting God's punishment for the sins of the world that we might be forgiven.

I cannot subscribe to that. If the Cross was predestined by God then you cannot attribute any blame or responsibility to the Pharisees or Herod or the Romans or anyone else implicated in His death. They were just acting out a script written in advance.

And if the Cross was in any way substitutionary then the argument fails at a crucial point. The point being that the guilt for doing something sinful cannot be transferred.

Someone else might accept the consequences of our wrongdoing. They cannot accept the guilt.

A simple illustration makes the point. Suppose I have committed a crime and am hauled up before the courts. The Judge finds me guilty and orders a hefty fine. It is perfectly possible for someone to pay the fine for me. But what they cannot do is pretend that they are the guilty party! The guilt is mine and mine alone. It cannot be transferred. It can only be forgiven.

When I was a youngster a favourite hymn on Good Friday went like this:

*"My soul looks back to see  
The burden Thou didst bear  
When hanging on the accursed tree  
And knows its guilt was there"*

It took a long time before I realised this was nonsense. Yet, for many people, it is a crucial understanding of the Cross.

**So why did Jesus die?**

*My first answer is that Jesus died because of the sins of ordinary men and women.*

He died because the religious authorities saw Him as a threat to the faith by which they lived. In particular the Pharisees who saw themselves as guardians of that Law given by God to Moses and on which the whole life of the nation was based. Time and again Jesus challenged the Law of Moses. Time and time again Jesus said; "You have heard it said (by Moses) BUT I say to you..." And what Jesus said went way beyond anything that Moses said — and sometimes contradicted it. Moreover, Jesus made claims for Himself which properly belonged to God. The claim to forgive sins being the major one! I am not surprised that the Religious Authorities felt that the whole basis of National Religion was being threatened and undermined. Better that this man was eliminated rather than allowed to propagate this heretical teaching.

**Jesus died because those in power could not face the Truth and its consequences.**

I am thinking of Pontius Pilate the Roman Governor who was responsible for maintaining Law and Order in Palestine. When Jesus was accused and brought to Trial, Pilate could find no fault in him. He knew that Jesus was innocent. Yet he also knew the possible consequences of acquitting him. Pilate was ambitious to succeed and the last thing he could afford was an adverse report to Rome. So Pilate washes his hands of the matter and hands Jesus over to be crucified. And how often today is the Truth sacrificed on the altar of expediency and personal ambition?

And Jesus died because the vast majority of ordinary people are fickle. Many of those who stood silent must have been amongst the crowds who had welcomed Jesus into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday and perhaps they had even joined in the chorus "Hosanna to the Son of David". Now they were silent. Peer pressure is a powerful thing and often enough it is enough to silence previous conviction.

So I conclude that Jesus died because of the sins of ordinary people. Fear and jealousy and thwarted ambition and misplaced expectation. Those same sins are alive and well in our world today. They are our sins too.

*And yet! My second point is this. It was the Will of God!*

Not in the sense that God planned and purposed this from the beginning. I have rejected that understanding. But it was the Will of God in the sense that Jesus was not prepared to compromise the Truth by which he lived. Right at the beginning of His ministry he went out into the desert for six weeks to determine how he would use His power in the exercise of His ministry. He rejected the way of bribery and coercion. He rejected the way doing miracles to compel belief. He rejected the way of compromise and of being all things to all men. He resolved to rely on one method and only one. The way of Truth and Love. Jesus refused to be deflected from this way and His single-minded pursuit of Truth and Love brought Him into inevitable conflict with the rest of human nature. The rest is history. Crucifixion was the inevitable result.

I have told you before of an incident off the coast of Newfoundland when two ships were on a collision course with each other in thick fog. Radar was in its infancy and one ship's captain read his radar wrong. "Hold fast your course" he ordered. A collision was inevitable and many died.

Jesus was set on a course determined by Truth and Love and would not be deflected. Equally human nature is set on an opposite course and the Cross is the collision point: crucifixion the inevitable outcome when human nature collides with the Divine and refuses to change course.

Not only did it happen 2000 years ago. It happens today and every day. Crucifixion is an ongoing reality whenever and wherever Truth is denied and Love is rejected.