

Easter Sunday

“We did not break into his light – he crashed into our darkness!”

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Matthew 20:1-10, Eph 1:17-23

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“We did not break into his light – he crashed into our darkness!”

I want to speak about hope. The hope we have in Jesus victory over death.

There are so many things that can cause us to feel hope - less.

We are infected by what some commentators have called the “post Polokwane Syndrome”. Many are concerned and anxious about the future. We are watching the leadership of our country move into new hands. Whose hands actually? Zuma’s? Motlanthe’s?

The determination to get rid of the Scorpions seems ill conceived and self serving. It does not fill us with hope.

We read of Judges, Police Chiefs and the Government Chief Whip being caught drunk driving and then trying to manipulate and intimidate people to cover up their crimes.

Apart from the sheer inconvenience power cuts and rolling black outs, the economy is adversely affected, and investment confidence is dropping.

And looking north the key question around the election in Zimbabwe next weekend is will the South African observers have the courage to call it the sham it already is, or will they give Mugabe a further extension to continue his destruction of the country and its economy.

Here at home we have interest rates going up and petrol prices rising rapidly.

Add to this reports police brutality in Stellenbosch, deep seated racism in Bloemfontein, Housing battles in Deft, and a plans to mine, and effectively

destroy the unspoilt coast of Eastern Cape, ...

... there is plenty of factors that would cause us to feel hopeless, despondent and anxious about the future.

I have become aware that as in the 80s there is talk again of emigration. But that is now viewed with greater circumspection as we are also seeing the knock on effect of higher world oil prices and the start of a world wide recession, particularly in the UK and the US with their major housing crisis.

So in what do you place your hope?

Is your hope in the Rand strengthening?

Is it in Zuma being prosecuted and so being disbarred from becoming President?

Is it in the prosecution of Robert McBride, Judge Motata, and Tony Yengeni – would that give us hope?

Is our hope in Mugabe being removed by fair means or foul?

Is our hope in installing solar panels on the roof?

Does our hope rest on the performance of our off shore investments?

What is the source of your hope for the future?

What has been particularly on my heart over the last few weeks is Paul's prayer for the church in Ephesus.

He prays that they may know the hope to which they are called.

Eph 1:17ff

¹⁷I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit^o of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better.

¹⁸I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in his people,

¹⁹and his incomparably great power for us who believe.

That power is the same as the mighty strength

²⁰he exerted when he raised Christ from the dead

and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms,

*²¹far above all rule and authority, power and dominion,
and every name that can be invoked,
not only in the present age but also in the one to come.*

That is an amazing prayer.

He prays that we may know the hope to which we are called.

He prays that God would give us by His Spirit wisdom and revelation... that we would be intelligent and discerning, and grasp personally and clearly the hope that is ours in what God has done through Jesus' mighty victory over death on the cross.

I find Eugene Peterson's paraphrase of this prayer of Paul's in *The Message* so fresh and pertinent to the climate we are living in right now.

He puts it like this ...

*¹⁷I ask—ask the God of our Master, Jesus Christ, the God of glory
—to make you intelligent and discerning in knowing him personally,
¹⁸your eyes focused and clear,
so that you can see exactly what it is he is calling you to do,
grasp the immensity of this glorious way of life he has for Christians,
¹⁹oh, the utter extravagance of his work in us who trust him
—endless energy, boundless strength!
²⁰All this energy issues from Christ:
God raised him from death and set him on a throne in deep heaven,
²¹in charge of running the universe,
everything from galaxies to governments,
no name and no power exempt from his rule.
And not just for the time being, but forever.*

Not just for the time being ... but for ever!

Let's be intelligent and discerning.

Theologians have used different ways – different models - to help us understand – to use our intelligence - how Jesus' death brings hope. How it brings us into a relationship of being at one with God and so made whole.

I want to mention three this morning.

Forensic Model of Atonement

Firstly, the one with which we, as evangelicals, are most familiar is what is termed the **Forensic Model of Atonement** which uses legal courtroom imagery.

Never mind Judge Motata and Robert McBride, we recognise that we do not live up to our own standards of morality, let alone God's. Our standards, and what we would allow and tolerate for ourselves, do not come near God's perfect standard. We have failed ourselves and those close to us. We have failed God.

So we stand before God aware of our failing, owning the fact that we are guilty sinners and recognising that logically and justifiably, punishment should follow.

And that punishment is to be separated from God. To be banished and cut off from him. And as God is the giver and source of life, separation from him logically means death.

But on the Cross Jesus took our punishment upon himself. He died in our place. He was separated from his Father as his cry from the cross reveals ...

"My God my God why have you forsaken me?"

And Isaiah's words from chapter 53 speak into this understanding of the cross.

⁴Surely he took up our pain and bore our suffering, ...

⁵But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace, was on him, and by his wounds we are healed.

And so the verdict is pronounced – guilty!

But the price has been paid. The ransom made. The debt discharged.

We, the guilty, are set free. Jesus took our place and gave his life for us.

And so we sing ...

*Amazing love, O what sacrifice,
the Son of God, given for me.
My debt he pays, my death he dies
That I might live, that I might live.*

That is one way we can understand the cross and what Jesus has done for us. That brings hope for us. There is forgiveness and restoration for us as we turn to God and ask for forgiveness and to be made whole. That applies to Jacob Zuma, Robert McBride, Duncan McLea, for you...

A second model that theologians have used to help us understand how Jesus death on the cross brings us into a relationship with God is the ...

Sacrificial Model of Atonement

This is draws on the rich imagery of the Old Testament and the system of sacrifices that the Jews used to deal with sins and be reunited to God.

There are elaborate details given in Book of Leviticus of what preparations need to be made. There is a looking back to the great liberation event in Exodus when God liberated his people from slavery in Egypt. The blood from the lambs daubed on their door posts and lintels caused the angel of death *passover* and their first born sons were saved.

Some find this intriguing and it opens a wonderful window of understanding of the cross. Jesus is the sacrificial Lamb of God who laid down his life to bring forgiveness of sins.

Others find talk of sacrifice so far removed from our culture and daily experience that it fails to be of any help.

But if we scratch just a little it is not that far removed from our culture. On a special occasion, or when we are trying to express our solidarity when some one has suffered a loss, we send flowers.

We also send flowers when we are trying to say sorry – when there has been a break down of communication or a betrayal of trust. We use flowers to express the depth of our regret and remorse. The flowers are saying what our words are incapable of saying. They say we have taken time and trouble and used our money our resources to express and show our sorrow trusting that this will be received and that the relationship can be restored again.

One could say then that in the same way in a world where the currency was your live stock you did not “say it with flowers” but said it with “sheep and goats”. The Jews of the Old Testament were using the blood of animals to express the depth of their sorrow and repentance, trusting that God would receive them back.

But can the blood of bulls and goats take away sin, the writer to the Hebrews asks? The answer, no!

But Jesus through his obedient offering of himself and his life laid down in complete surrender - that is the one complete sacrifice that deals with sin.

So St John writes (1 John 4:10) ...

This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.

And so we sing ...

*Jesus Christ, I think upon your sacrifice,
You became nothing, poured out to death.
Thank you for the cross, thank you for the cross.*

That is the second model. So the forensic model. The sacrificial model.

Christus Victor

But there is a third model of Atonement, which I want to focus on this Easter morning, referred to by theologians as “**Christus Victor**” – from a classic theological study of that title by Gustav Aulen.

This model sets before us and the draws on the image of the cosmic battle between Good and Evil, between God and the Satan. In the Incarnation Jesus, the only Son of God, enters this battle. He steps into the midst of the struggle confronting Evil head on.

From the beginning the Devil tries to destroy him energising the jealousy and brutality of Herod who slaughters the babies of Bethlehem trying to get rid of him.

The battle continues as Jesus prepares for his earthly ministry spending time alone with God in the wilderness, Satan throws every temptation he can at him.

In the course of his ministry Jesus comes up against evil spirits and demons; the small mindedness of his disciples who want to have the best places; the religious establishment threatened, defensive, closed and manipulative; the zealots the conservatives.

The battle reaches it height as Jesus rides into Jerusalem and is proclaimed with shouts of "*Hosanna, Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!*"

Then the Devil throws everything in his arsenal against Jesus....

He uses money to get Judas to betray him.

He uses the fear in the religious leaders to abuse the authority given them to conspire and manipulate the system.

He uses the weak kneed fickleness of Pilate who did not have the courage to do what he knew was right, but goes the political expedient route.

He uses the self indulgence of Herod who wanted to be entertained with a miracle.

He uses the cowardly desertion of the disciples who flee.

He uses the "big promise but no follow through" of Peter who crumbles at the questioning of a slave girl and denies that he knows Jesus.

He uses the mob spirit of the crowd that are easily whipped into calling for his crucifixion.

He uses the blood lust of the soldiers who mock, spit and whip him and nail him to a cross.

The Devil unleashes every weapon in his arsenal and he plays his final trump card - death - and Jesus is nailed to a cross and dies an agonising death.

But ... Christ is the Victor! Christus Victor!

Death does not have the final say. Jesus throws off the shackles of death. The earth shakes. An angel from heaven, whose appearance is like lightning and his clothes white as snow, rolls back the stone, and declares –

“Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified.

⁶He is not here; he has risen, just as he said.

Come and see the place where he lay.

⁷Then go quickly and tell his disciples: ‘He has risen from the dead.’

The Devil played his trump card, but he is out trumped.

Yes, Jesus was naked on the cross, but the Devil is exposed, defeated and laid bare.

As Paul puts it in his letter to the Colossians (2:15)

Jesus having disarmed the powers and authorities, made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross

The writer to the Hebrews says ... (Heb 2:14 & 15)

He has shared our humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death--that is, the devil-- and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death.

And so we sing ...

Jesus Christ is risen today, our triumphant holy day. Alleluia!

*Jesus lives! Thy terrors now can nor more, O death, appal us;
Jesus lives! By this we know thou, O grave, canst not enthrall us.
Alleluia!*

The cosmic battle between good and evil reached its climax at Calvary, and Satan lost. Jesus won.

Paul writes to the Corinthians ... (1 Cor 15:54ff)

"Death has been swallowed up in victory."

"Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?"

Thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

But in the very next breath – maybe in the same breath – Paul says ...

⁵⁸Therefore, my dear brothers and sisters, stand firm.

Let nothing move you.

Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord,

because you know that your labour in the Lord is not in vain.

And he goes on immediately to talk about money and a collection for those in need. For the Corinthians that was the outworking of knowing exactly he was calling them to do.

As the “eyes of their hearts were enlightened” and as they had the spirit of wisdom and revelation and knew the hope to which they were called – that is what they were called to do – make a collection to help those who were in need in Jerusalem.

Now I know that many of you have already heard what God has called you to do, and you are doing it faithfully.

Some are literally making collection and taking food to Zimbabwe. They heard that that is what God called them to do and that is what they are doing.

Others of you are responding in other ways to other needs and other demands – within your families or at a community or level or in your places of work or at a national or international level.

In all of these callings we face set backs and discouragements.

What I believe God wants to remind you of this Easter morning is that in the face of all that would come against us and destroy our hope ...

In the face of the battles we are in his country for good moral leadership in all quarters...

In face of the battles you are facing where you are coming against ...

The power of money ...

The abuse of authority ...

Weak kneed cowardice ...

Egocentric self indulgence ...

Big promises with little content ...

Manipulated mob spirit ...

Downright injustice, lies and deception ...

What ever the enemy is throwing against you ... where ever you are faced with any of these tactics of the evil one ... know that Christ has won the victory over all of them.

And not just for the time being, but for-ever.

And made available to us is the same power that raised Jesus from the dead and seated him at the right hand of the Father in the heavenly realms.

"We did not break into his light – he crashed into our darkness!"