

Why Did Jesus Have to Die?

On Thursday morning, Chris and myself spent it with Meadowburn Primary. We began with their school assembly and watched P6 reenact the Easter story. It was brilliant! From Palm Sunday to after the Resurrection, they had it all...word for word...

Then afterwards, we did a 10-minute classroom visit round all the different classes presenting the Lego Easter Video which you watched last week.

I had it both English and Gaelic version.

It was greatly appreciated, and every child and every teacher in Meadowburn Primary heard and saw the Easter story. I was also in at Bishopbriggs Academy and along with other clergy presented the Easter story to over 100 secondary school pupils. So the message has gone out to our young people this Easter.

P4 was the first class we visited at Meadowburn, and the first question that I received was this, "Why did Jesus have to die?"

Questions are always acceptable, so we are told from the floor of Presbytery, and they are always acceptable on a classroom floor.

Arguably, one of the deepest and most profound theological questions that anyone can ask – and many theologians have spilt much ink over this one question – "Why did Jesus have to die?" so thank you to the wee 8-year-old boy who earnestly asked this deep question because it made me think deeply about Easter.

Let me take you on a walk this morning, along the Emmaus Road.

For there we meet two people who were returning from the Cross, one was called Cleopas. Their heads were bowed low. They had watched their friend being crucified – not a pleasant sight – they were reeling from the events of the day, and now they were making their lonely way back home. It was a five-mile journey – the sun was setting - probably a 2-hour walk, maybe longer that day, for their hearts were heavy and they were in no mood to race back home.

But something happened, a stranger joined them. With hindsight, we know it was Jesus, but they didn't know this, for we are simply told that they were kept from recognising him.

What is the topic of their discussion?

Well it's that old question again.

Why did Jesus have to die?

This is the conversation that they were having with the stranger, as they recounted the events of what we call Good Friday.

Jesus responded to them, "Did not the Messiah have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?"

So, we see from Jesus' answer, that he had to suffer these things. He had to die before he could enter his glory. This was God's choice. This was God's will. Jesus had to die. But why?

This takes us to the heart of the Easter story.

We live in a world of outrageous evil. I am reading a book by a theologian called O.S. Guinness and it's called UNSPEAKABLE, some evil in this world is indeed unspeakable.

Anyone who tells you that this world has not a problem is living on another planet. This world has a problem. Just look at Gaza and we can't help but see suffering, pain, and misery for so many people. That is happening all over the world.

When will people back off, when will the two sides sit round a table and talk, when will this madness end. It will one day, but yet the madness continues. Just look at our history books. Germany, Ireland, Iraq, and the list is endless.

Has Easter anything to say to this world problem?

I believe it has, and I believe that Jesus had to die!

He had to die, because in Jesus, we see God coming into this world to fix our problem.

On Good Friday, on the Cross we see God engaging with this sinful and evil world. We see God suffering and dying to confront evil and sin.

Jesus said to the two lonely figures on the road, "The Messiah had to suffer these things."

As they walk and talk, they speak through the Easter story. Jesus begins the Easter story with Moses and all the Prophets, and he explains to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself.

This is an important fact about Easter, Jesus takes out his history book, the Old Testament Scriptures and he gives them a history lesson. He revisits the time when their forefathers lived in Egypt, when the Israelites were slaves, and he points out to them how Moses was called to free God's people, and he takes them through the different prophets, and how they engaged with the evil in their world and how God rescued them, and so it was that Jesus had come to a world of evil and suffering and in his day God saved the world through him and it was through a cross.

For the Cross was the ultimate sacrifice for God to fight evil.

This is why Jesus had to die, because God reconciled the world through his Son.

Donald Baillie was a brilliant theologian within the Church of Scotland, a parish minister, and then professor of theology at St Andrews University, and he wrote this, which I think tells us why Jesus had to die.

“The crucifixion of Jesus set men thinking more than anything else that has ever happened in the life of the human race. And the most remarkable fact in the whole of history of religious thought is this: that when the early Christians looked back and pondered on the dreadful thing that had happened, it made them think of the redeeming love of God. Not simply of the love of Jesus but of the love of God.”

How I answered that wee boy, who perhaps spoke for the rest of his class, was that what happened at Easter, and why Jesus had to die, was simply to show God's love for this world. He took all the bad things on himself and so made us right with God and through the Cross we know God loves us.

But you may say, John we came today expecting to hear a resurrection story and not a crucifixion story, and you'd be right, but both must go together.

The story of the two travellers, takes a twist, as they arrive at their home in Emmaus, and they urge the stranger to stay on, for it is nearly evening; the day is almost over. So, he went in to stay with them.

Then they share the breaking of bread, the symbol of his body broken on a cross, and he gave it to them, and suddenly, their eyes were opened and they recognised him, and he disappeared from their sight.

What was it that they saw? Was it the nail prints in his hands as he broke the bread? Their eyes were opened and they realised that the Jesus who had died is now alive.

They said, “Were not our hearts burning within us, while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?”

We come to the glory of Easter found in the risen Christ. Jesus had come to do what he was called to do. To take the sin of the world on his shoulders, and now he has passed through his trials and death and resurrection and glory is His for evermore.

Jesus Christ said, “I am the way, truth and the life” and these words ring true. There is no other religion that has a God who cares for this world, and who comes to the aid of those who look for Him. Our God is not detached from this world but he is a God who entered it in such a way that he feels our pain; he took the sting of death and he triumphed over evil and through the resurrection has opened the Kingdom of heaven to all who believe.

In the final analysis, this Emmaus Road story tells us that he is a God who walks with us in the valleys of life; a God who is there in the shadows and often we are kept from recognising him, but he is there in our pain and suffering for he is the resurrected Christ, death has no hold over him.

The famous author Dostoyevsky came to faith as he stood before Hans Holbein's painting of the cross and he realised that the painting was a window into the reality of the universe and he said, “if God's son suffered like this, there could be redemption in the world.”

My friends, this is the most glorious story ever told but it's not a fairy tale; it's a story to be entered and to be lived. On this Easter Sunday, I invite you to enter the story, don't just be a spectator but a participator, and come and follow our resurrected Messiah, who had to die, so that we also might enter his glory.

Amen.