

Lord Jesus you died for our sins. As we stand at the foot of the cross, help us to live in your forgiveness.

- The Priests were men of responsibility. They had a divine duty to keep the worship of the temple proceeding smoothly. All they really wanted was for their lives to continue without problems so that they could obey the God given command to sacrifice in the temple.
 - And actually it wasn't a bad life. They were respected members of society. They temple had a roaring trade in sacrificial animals and an equally roaring trade in changing shekels and denarii into official temple silver and they made a comfortable living out of it.. They loved their families and because the role was hereditary they expected their sons to follow in the same profession. Clearly they wanted the best for them, as we all do for our children.
- How could God want anything else for them? He was a good God, the God of the Israelites, and he had pledged his love for them, his chosen people. They trusted him.
- Henry was a person of responsibility. He was on the PCC at his local church. At the last meeting they had made a decision to support Ukrainian refugees with a donation of £1000. They had wanted to give more but with heating costs rising so sharply they were not sure they had the resources. Henry was in church every week, well, most weeks, he had one Sunday a month off or so when he played golf, but church mattered. God mattered. All he really wanted was for his life to continue without problems so his nice settled existence would not be challenged. Was that too much to ask?
 - And actually it wasn't a bad life. He loved his partner and children and wanted them to work hard and experience something of the life he had.
- How could God want anything else for him? He was a good God, Henry's God. He read about him in the bible. He trusted him.
- Back to those priests in the time of Jesus. They were worried. They needed to keep good relationships with the Romans or else their whole purpose in life would be in danger. If the Romans sniffed an uprising they would react swiftly and mercilessly and the most obvious place for the Romans to make their point was in that great centre of Jewish National identity, the temple. The priests' *raison d'être*.
 - But this unknown Jewish upstart from rural Galilee was rocking the boat. Bringing Lazarus back from the dead was bad enough but now he had entered Jerusalem on a donkey surrounded by hordes of peasants, a political sign, fulfilling an Old Testament prophecy, that he wanted to be king. The Romans wouldn't tolerate this dangerous civil unrest for long.
- The priests were faced with a stark choice. Either they somehow eliminated the threat of Jesus the Jewish pretender, or they faced the very real threat of a crackdown by Roman troops. They decided '*it was better to have one person die for the people.*' But how to arrest him quietly when he was so much the popular man of the moment? And then Judas came along
- Mary and John were bereft at the foot of the cross. Her son; his closest friend; their whole focus for living, hung nakedly before them, an object of ridicule and shame, a victim betrayed by the very people who cheered for him, slowly dying. They carried the burden of grief and loss and incomprehensible failure. How could this man, who changed water into wine, enabled the blind to see, raised Lazarus and drew huge crowds, have allowed this to happen to him? They could not see '*it was better to have one person die for the people.*' As far as they could see, they had no future. Life had no meaning. They had wasted the last three extraordinary years.
- And Jesus saw them and loved them and groaned with immense effort in the hot sun, '*Woman, here is your son*', and then, '*Here is your mother.*' The Church, the community of people bound together because of Jesus was founded. Founded upon a backdrop of loss and the cruelty of the cross. And suddenly there was a little bit of meaning in the aching void.
- Leanne was worried. She lived just a mile or so from Henry but they had little in common. Her social housing, which she had been so delighted to be offered for her and her two children was freezing. You don't expect a

cold snap like this in April after the beautiful weather last week but she was caught in fuel poverty and it was either eat or heat. She pulled another thin acrylic hoodie round her but didn't feel much warmer. She hadn't always made sensible decisions in her life but she was doing her best. It didn't seem fair. And her antidepressants didn't seem to be working so well today. She picked up her phone and rang for a foodbank voucher. It was based at Henry's church.. Henry occasionally made a donation but he had no idea where it went.

- Would Henry and Leanne meet at the foot of the cross?
- What would need to happen for them to meet and what would they say?
- What difference did the cross make for these four groups of people: the priests, Mary and John, Henry, and Leanne? Did Jesus die for them? And how, or when, would they know it?
- *'it was better to have one person die for the people.'*
- It is very easy to say that Jesus is sacrificing his life to take their sin, their weakness so they don't have to. Jesus is sacrificing his own life so the role of the priests in the temple is redundant. A new covenant. An assured way to salvation and the forgiveness of sins in heaven. And all we have to do to receive this forgiveness is to turn towards the cross and acknowledge our need and give our lives to Jesus.
 - I'm sure there is nothing wrong with this. After all, Jesus said to Pilate, *'My kingdom is not from this world'*, which seems to imply that his Kingdom he is preparing for us in not here it's in heaven.
 - But the problem is, the unfairness is, that the person I feel most sorry for out of the four little stories in this address is Leanne, who has had the least life chances, and is perhaps the least likely to discover her route to salvation. And Jesus' death certainly won't help her heat her house or learn that woollen clothes are warmer than acrylic ones. And that seems to restrict the power of the cross to help the helpless. It rather seems to help more, those who can already help themselves. Like Henry.
 - And it also seems to devalue creation, because it is temporary, it doesn't really matter what we do to it because it's heaven that's really important and that's somewhere else!
- So look again at those words of Jesus, *'My kingdom is not from this world.'* Look at the inoffensive little preposition *'from'*. Jesus has left his Kingdom, has come *'from'* it, to save us. He is fulfilling his Father's plan, which the bible assures us is to value his creation rather than replace it. He is to include the fallen world in his love and unite heaven and earth in one glorious Kingdom by drilling through the impervious rock called death that divides earth from heaven. Only Jesus could do it! Who else could beat death but the sinless Messiah identifying with his unreliable people on his donkey? On his cross? Perhaps John should have given Jesus another nickname, Jesus the masonry drill bit of acceptance. He could drill through death because he was going home, back to his Kingdom. And once he had drilled through the rock of death and the stone had been rolled from the tomb, that Kingdom began seeping through to the world he came to save. In fact it seemed to begin before that at the foot of the cross with Mary and John.
- Of course we can wait until we die to discover the truth of this or alternatively we can claim it for ourselves now at the foot of the cross and allow the Kingdom to spread.
- John and Mary discovered the strength of a shared faith in Jesus at the foot of the cross and it brought meaning and companionship into their brokenness which was proved to be valuable two days later.
- Henry knew the truth of Jesus' sacrifice. Was he going to let it live through him by his attitude towards people like Leanne? Or was he going to use it merely to rely on a place in heaven and continue his largely pleasant life undisturbed by the cross on earth? But would he cope when that existence was challenged by personal tragedy, climate change or international despots drawing that bit too close?
- Would the priests discover the greater security of the sacrifice on the cross, than the sacrifices in the temple before the destruction of that same temple by the Romans in AD70?
- And what can we do for Leanne so that she understands more fully how Jesus can change her life today?
- *'it was better to have one person die for the people.'* What difference does Jesus's death make for you? And for your neighbour a few doors down?