

Lord God, help us to see you s a God of love through the life and death of your Son Jesus Christ. Amen

- There's a story, I've no idea if it's true or not, of a Christian, living before the People's Revolution, in China. He was a rice farmer, and his fields lay high on a mountain. Every day he pumped water into the paddy fields of new rice. And every morning he returned to find that a neighbour who lived down the hill had opened the dykes surrounding the Christian's field to let the water fill his own. For a while he ignored the injustice, but at last he became desperate. What should he do? His own rice would die if this continued. How long could it go on? After praying, he came up with this solution. The next day the Christian farmer rose early in the morning and first filled his neighbour's fields; then he attended to his own. The story tells how the neighbour became a Christian, his unbelief overcome by a genuine demonstration of a Christian's love for others.
- That's a nice heart-warming story, but what shall we do with it?
- Because today we seem much more interested in apportioning blame than learning from little stories like this. And it's much easier to blame other people than take the rap ourselves.
- For instance we've just been retelling the story of Jesus' crucifixion, and I want to ask the question, "Whose fault is that Jesus was crucified?"
- Over the centuries, this question has been rattling around Christian circles with terrifying consequences.
- Ask yourself the question again, and see what answers you come up with. "Whose fault is that Jesus was crucified?"
- You're likely to come up with one of the three most popular answers.
- Judas is a big contender. After all he went to the High Priest and received money to betray Jesus, so they could arrest him quietly.
 - With Judas as the culprit we can apportion blame onto one scapegoat and be appalled that someone would stoop to such depths. We can safely consign him to hell and be relieved that we would never do anything so dastardly. It's always satisfying to uncover wrongdoing whether it's in politics, the NHS or the Church. And it's even more satisfying if the person uncovered is senior and well known. We can enjoy the righteous indignation and the sight of them squirming.
- If you didn't choose Judas, you might well have opted for the Jews as the guilty party who caused Jesus to be killed. After all, they plotted. They manipulated. They nefariously planned his arrest.
 - Sadly it is one of the most awful truths of Christianity for nearly two thousand years that we have pinned the death of Jesus onto the Jews. It has caused persecution, racism and vindictive suffering beyond measure as we blame someone else rather than ourselves. After all how could it be our fault when we weren't even there?
- It is to get out of this problem that people blame the Romans for the death of Jesus. After all Pontius Pilate sent him to his death and was too influenced by the crowds to stand up for an innocent man.
 - The Romans are an ancient race so it's quite safe to blame them! Oddly, the Church, which is quite big in Italy, has never suggested that as Italians are descendants of Romans, they might deserve the same treatment as the Jews! That's not a popular viewpoint in Christian circles! I wonder why?
- I want to suggest that we don't get very far if we try to apportion blame. Even if we blame ourselves, it is highly likely to lead to guilt and anxiety which in my view do not often turn out to be healthy emotions.
- I want to suggest that the death of Jesus was about a gift rather than about fault. The gift of God to his beloved human beings, like you and me, like the Romans, the Italians and the Jews, like Judas Iscariot. A gift to us to show how deep his love for us really is. How far he is prepared to go to rescue us from our own self-doubt and low self-esteem and the need to find someone else to pin it on in a vain attempt to take the blame off ourselves.
 - What more could God do to prove his love than share the heights and depths of human life and emotions with us by offering us his Son?

- And it is really true that love has the potential to overcome every divide, every wound, every broken relationship and all sin. You only have to wait till Easter Day to prove that!
- As we come closer to the cross, think about the part blame has in your life. Do you have a natural inclination to find out who is responsible when something goes wrong? Does it leave you dissatisfied if you can't prove it? And what do you do with the information if you can?
- The message of holy Week and Easter is to bring love into these situations. God's love brought close to us through Jesus. The sort of love that is prepared to make sacrifices. The sort of love that is prepared to give second chances. The sort of love that is able to begin to break down the barriers of hurt and anger.
- All of which brings me back to the Christian rice farmer at the beginning of this short address. Had he discovered the greater transformative power of love over blame? Did his faith influence him in his actions?
- The challenge to you and me then is to go away and practise! Amen!