

INTRODUCTION

I was 19 when I first truly experienced the forgiveness of Jesus in my life. I had been brought up to know God and I had wanted to follow him but it had been so hard as a teenager and I was unsure about whether the cost of being a Christian was really worth it and miles away from living a Christian life.

I went as far as telling my friends and family that I didn't want to be a Christian but then God put someone alongside me who I barely knew, and yet who He used to open my eyes. I came to see the extent of the sacrifice Jesus made for me and what it meant for me to be truly forgiven to live a new life in relationship with Him. It was one of those wonderful light bulb moments.

Our passage today is one which I am drawn to again and again as I consider the good news of Jesus death on that first Good Friday. I know we have only recently remembered the joy of the first Easter morning, but I don't think we can ever tire of the wonder of the cross.

This account is vivid as we imagine, not only the three crosses bearing the dying bodies of 3 naked men, with nails through their hands and feet, beaten and struggling as they gasp for each breath, but as we visualise the crowds sneering and the

soldiers mocking taunting Jesus to prove himself as King and come down and save himself!

As he dies, with no desire to save himself I am struck again that in doing so he dies to save others, including a repentant criminal and to save you and me. His offer of Salvation is open to all and that is Good News, the best news in the world! Every time someone gives their life to Jesus today there are unsurpassable celebrations in Heaven.

HE SAVED OTHERS

Those standing at the foot of the cross were prepared to admit that Jesus had saved others during the last 3 years of his life, but for them it proves nothing! Only if he comes down off the cross will he convince them that he really is God's Messiah, the Chosen One, the King of the Jews.

And yet ironically the evidence for his saving others was massive – the incredible healing and forgiveness of the paralytic man, the restoration of sight to the blind man, the raising of the widow's son and of course Lazarus. But, none of this seemed to carry any weight with them at all – They refused to see Jesus as Saviour and King, an innocent dying for the sake of the guilty.

But The criminal on the cross is also one of the 'others' that Jesus saves.

In his last dying moments, his eyes and heart are opened to his need of forgiveness. He recognises his sin and that there is

nothing he can do to make himself right with God. Indeed, he says “we are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong.”

All he asks is that Jesus remembers him when he comes into his Kingdom and Jesus not only remembers him but welcomes him into His kingdom, telling him that he will that very day be with Him, face to face in paradise – a place in Jewish thought of future bliss, symbolic of heaven itself.

Quite simply, all the criminal does is recognise that Jesus is Good News, and he reaches out to Him as God’s true King who can save him!

For me, growing up in a Christian family it seemed good news that my mum was a Christian, and it seemed good news when my Dad came back to God and gave his life to Jesus. But, the good news of Jesus didn’t really make a difference in my life at that point – it didn’t affect me, and I was quite happy letting others experience his saving power without it having any personal impact. Like the crowds at the foot of the cross wanting Jesus to prove Himself, I wanted lights in the sky to convince me Jesus was really worth following – I wanted my own personal miracle, despite recognising the impact he had had on so many people I loved and cared for.

But this account reminds me that he saves others, but that the good news of the cross is for me too.

Jesus' death was Good News for all those on that first Good Friday – for the crowds, the religious rulers, the soldiers and the criminals. And his death is Good News too for you and I and for all humanity. It demonstrates his love and power to save all those who come to him.

Just like a criminal our sins deserve to be punished, and yet Jesus, our innocent Saviour died in our place, receiving the punishment we deserve so that we, in turn, might be made innocent before God because of his sacrifice. As Isaiah writes, “The Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all.”

There is nothing we can do to make ourselves right with God, everything has been done for us – all we need to do is reach out to Jesus, look him in the face and recognise him for who he is just as the criminal did.

My penny dropping moment as a 19 year old was significant because I realised that I was effectively a criminal in the eyes of God, a rebel against Him, a sinner who could do nothing to sort myself out. And I realised that because of the cross I was forgiven for my past and that nothing I had done could keep me from His loving mercy. I realised too that just as the curtain of the temple was torn in two and the way now open for all to come to God so I could do the same....I was welcome into his kingdom, both now and for always.

When we receive Good News we want to share it – we phone people, we stick it on social media, we can't wait to let people know – How much more do we want to share the best news in the world? Please don't keep it to yourselves – The offer of salvation is open to all who come to Jesus!