

St Anne's Church Wandsworth

JESUS' DEATH AND RESURRECTION

WHAT ARE THE EVENTS RECOUNTED IN THE NEW TESTAMENT?

The New Testament has many references to the death and resurrection of Jesus. All four Gospels give detailed accounts, and there are plenty of references in the other books of the New Testament which fit in with the gospel accounts but add little to our knowledge of events. Those in Paul's letters are interesting mainly because they are much earlier (ten to thirty years after Jesus) than the gospels (written thirty to sixty years afterwards).

The basic story is very clear. Jesus entered Jerusalem a few days before the Passover festival. His arrival was feted by the crowds who were hoping he would lead them in a revolt against the occupying Romans. Matthew, Mark and Luke say he then embarked on a 'cleansing' of the Temple, driving out traders.

On the Thursday evening Jesus had his last meal with his disciples. Most sources say this was a Passover meal. Afterwards he was arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane outside Jerusalem by the Temple police who were led to the spot by Judas Iscariot, one of the twelve. Judas's motives are never really explored. After a hearing by the Temple authorities he was taken to the Roman Governor, Pontius Pilate, and condemned to death. He was crucified the same day and died before sunset.

His body was placed in a nearby tomb. The following day being the Jewish Sabbath everyone observed the Sabbath rest. Early on the Sunday morning women came to the tomb and found it was empty. They claimed to have seen angels who told them Jesus was raised from the dead. Also various followers claimed to have seen him alive. There are differing lists in each gospel (except Mark which has lost its original ending) and in Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, chapter 15 which includes an occasion when he was seen by more than 500 people. The resurrection was the start of the Christian movement, giving it both emotional momentum and also content: that in Jesus Christ we see the reality of God in his love and victory.

STANDING BACK: WHAT DO HISTORIANS MAKE OF IT?

The New Testament gives us better information about Jesus than we have about virtually any character in the ancient world, including almost all the Roman emperors. The fact that we don't know which year this happened is a common problem of ancient history. The account of the crucifixion is generally regarded as one of the most accurate that has come down to us.

The fact that Jesus was crucified – a Roman, not a Jewish means of execution – emphasises the role of the Roman governor. Most modern historians suspect that the gospel accounts, shaped by later rivalry with Judaism and the need to live under Roman rule, tend to play down Roman involvement in Jesus' arrest and death. In all likelihood the Romans and the Temple authorities were concerned about public order at the Passover festival and worked together to apprehend and execute a potential troublemaker. Both would have recognised Jesus as a religious problem – if he was a straight revolutionary the Romans would not have bothered with priestly collaboration but would have arrested and killed him themselves!

The role of Judas as betrayer can hardly have been invented but we can only speculate about his motive. Historians are not clear either about the precise legal status of the Temple authorities' hearing. The trial before Pilate (without giving much detail) reflected standard Roman procedure when a non-citizen was on trial.

The bodies of those who had been crucified were often dumped in communal graves but many, like Jesus, were properly buried, often by pious Jews as a religious duty. The tomb was one in which the body would be left to rot then the bones transferred to an ossuary, a special chest, and the tomb could then be re-used. Archaeologists have found an ossuary with the bones of a crucified man, the nail still fixed in his ankles.

The resurrection is not the sort of event that a conventional historian can make much sense of! Some would say simply that miracles do not happen, therefore it did not happen; others would say the claim of the resurrection is simply outside the province of history. Either way the historian might be challenged to suggest an explanation for the sudden impetus of enthusiasm which burst out after Jesus' death. As a leading New Testament scholar noted, we are aware of different strands of early Christianity even from the very beginning, but no trace of any which was not based on the resurrection.

REFLECTING: HOW DO CHRISTIANS UNDERSTAND IT?

The death and resurrection of Jesus is the core event that makes him, for Christians, more than just a great teacher or the great example of perfect love – though those are important too!

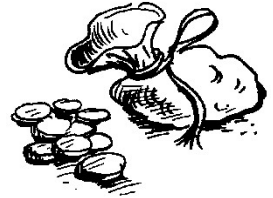


GOD WITH US

In Jesus God identifies with our human predicament. Nothing is beyond his love. As a friend betrayed, Jesus deals with all that destroys relationships and offers restoration.

FREED FROM DEBT

Sins are often spoken of as like debts – they ensnare us and we get more and more trapped in them. God loves you and wants to free you – even at the price of his own Son! (We often speak of being “redeemed”, the usual word for buying freedom for a slave!)



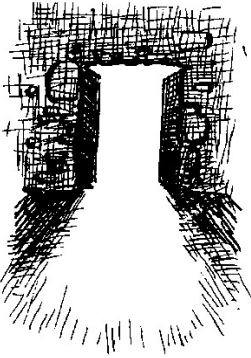
THE FAMILY

Like the prodigal son you have wandered far from God. Through Jesus’ death on the cross you can be reconciled with the Father

THE SACRIFICE

In the Jewish sacrificial system, the death of an animal takes away sin. In the same way, the death of Jesus takes our sins away, once and for all. And the modern notion of sacrifice speaks of what God is prepared to suffer to reach us: ‘God loved the world so much that he did not spare his own son.’





DEATH

Death is not to be feared. Whatever threats death holds for us are dispelled because Jesus has been there already. Christians follow him in sharing his life. In addition to our human nature, in which we all die, we all share eternal life as a gift from God.

LIFE

- Eternal life does not begin after death. It begins with us knowing the Jesus who rose from the dead and we share his life here and now.
- It involves a new way of life, in which we join in Jesus' self-giving love and service. 'It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me.'
- As for the first disciples who witnessed the Resurrection, we are called to unite everyone in the life and forgiveness of Jesus.

ENTERING INTO THE STORY

The gospel stories

The gospels already invite us to share imaginatively in the events through the portrayal of the characters which take different poses: from the betrayal of Judas and the determined injustice of the Temple priests to Pilate's mixture of weakness and cynicism; the frail bravado of Peter and the disciples, the fickleness of the crowds, the sadistic cruelty of the soldiers; and among them all the character of Jesus who alone is incorrupt, unblaming and ultimately recognised by the centurion as the Son of God, and in the resurrection as God's victory over sin and death.

Holy Week and Easter

The earliest celebration of Easter was the service that we now know as the Easter Vigil on the Saturday evening before Easter Day. In the first centuries the whole of the passion, death and resurrection were celebrated on that night.

Holy Week and Easter arose in the fourth century AD as an imaginative way of following the story, with the entry to Jerusalem fixed on the Sunday before Easter and the then the events as they occurred through the week.