

Despite as individuals being prone to lazy, shameless plagiarism, as a species, humans are incredibly inventive. From blasting off to the stars to making excuses, human creativity knows no bounds. We wonder at beavers building dams, pigeons circumnavigating the globe using the earth's magnetic field, bees twerking the direction of the pollen or ants felling an elephant— such is the power of solidarity comrades— but amazing as these things are, rarely does the non-human animal produce something *new*: a bit like choral evensong, they just do what they've always done, and what their parents, grandparents, great grandparents have done. In the animal world, there is nothing new under the sun. Humans, though are always at it. New stuff. As a species, if not always individually, we are imaginative, inventive, ingenious, inspired and innovative. And never more so, historically, when it comes to killing each other.

The desire to kill other human beings has been one of— and sometimes the prime— driver of chemistry, industry, metallurgy, logistics, food preservation, computing, flight, nuclear energy and perversely enough, emergency medicine. For starters. You name it, it developed because it helped us to kill people. When not fighting a war or thinking about how we're going to fight the next one, humans keep themselves busy creatively killing in the form of execution, dispatching the criminal, the threatening and the inconvenient in an astonishing number of different ways. Even in the US where the constitution bans 'cruel and unusual' punishment, a stay on death row can end in lethal injection, electrocution, the gas chamber, hanging or the firing squad. The dispatching may also be televised, because execution is theatre; it is designed to make a point, to be memorable, *pour encourager les autres*. So the more dramatic the better; the more visual, aural, olfactory impact on the onlooker the better the drama, the better the execution.

As a method of execution, crucifixion is highly inventive: cruel and unusual with a double whammy of deterrence. The person crucified is both physically tortured to death and publicly humiliated, for a period that can extend to days. It takes a long time, so maximises the pain and the spectacle. It is, by all accounts, a thoroughly horrible way to die, one of the worst. And as every cross in every church bears witness, it's how Jesus was executed.

The Cross is such a familiar symbol to us it has long since lost its power to shock; familiarity breeds indifference, but still; Jesus was executed in one of the most thoroughly horrible ways possible.

If the symbol of the Cross is so familiar as to become almost drained of the reality it represents, so are some the statements we make about it. We don't really question them. Perhaps we hear them so often, repeated often enough, that we just believe them. Psychologists call it the familiarity heuristic; politicians know that if you keep repeating something, however outrageously untrue it actually is, people will end up believing it. And the statement about the Cross we hear a lot that I think we really need to question just a bit more is this:

“Jesus died for my sins.”

Christians hear that a lot. I can't imagine there was much shock running round this congregation when I said it just now, even though I've just enunciated a truly outrageous statement.

“Jesus died for my sins.”

Lots of our favourite hymns say it, many more popular worship songs and choruses say it, and there's a whole subset of Christian belief— substitutionary atonement to give it its technical designation— which says that our sins are such that they make God so angry that the only way he will be mollified is by the death of Jesus, a sacrifice that is big enough to make him forget our wickedness. It should have been me that was punished, but instead it was Jesus. Hence:

“Jesus died for my sins.”

It's such a familiar statement that you might have never thought to question it. But you should.

“Jesus died for my sins.”

What can you and I have possibly done that would merit being tortured to death on a cross? What? There can only be a few people who have ever lived for which we can say that it might be the case that what they've done is so terrible they deserve a horrible end; that few does surely not include you and me. What can you and I have possibly done that should be punished by someone being tortured to death on a cross? Do we say then that Jesus died on the Cross not for *us* but for the inhuman monsters who've done things that are so awful that they deserve crucifixion?

Could it be that that Jesus died for the totality of humanity's sinfulness— Lamb of God, you take away the sin of the world? Is it that stuck together all our transgressions make such a terrible lump of sinfulness that the cross is the only answer? Then, how does that work? Why should one person stealing a loaf of bread not require crucifixion as atonement, but a million people thieving to feed their hunger does? If you add up a large number of small peccadilloes, does that add up to the cross? If so, how many do you need before you reach the tipping point?

I'm not being facetious here. This is serious, deadly serious.

The Cross, Jesus's crucifixion, is at the centre of our faith and it is a mystery. It is our salvation. It brings us eternal life. But how that is, how that can be, how that terrible tortured death effects that, doesn't have a simple or a simplistic solution. It hasn't stopped us trying to work out what it's all about over the centuries, it hasn't stopped us trying to apply our human inventiveness to solve this central mystery of Christianity. The problem is, that every solution that we propose to a mystery of faith only works by removing God from the problem, which gives us not a problem solved, but a problem redefined.

The Cross, Jesus's crucifixion, is at the centre of our faith and it is a mystery.

"Jesus died for my sins."

It's such a familiar statement we might have never thought to question it. Now we have. I think it's too difficult, too complicated a statement to bandy around like we do.

"Jesus died for my sins."

How can we say that? Can we say that? I don't know. But what we *can* say without fear of contradiction is that Jesus died because he loved us.

*God so loved the world.*

*No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends.*

The Cross.

Remember. It's not that you're so horrible, your sins are so hideous, that somebody had to die to make up for it, and that somebody is Jesus. On the contrary, it's because you are precious to God beyond telling that Jesus died on Calvary.

The price of your sin is not the Cross: the Cross is the price of God's love. For you.