

Title: What Easter meant to the Apostles - Part 1

Purpose: Appreciating Easter by asking what the 1st Easter meant to the Apostles by way of what they wrote about it.

INTRODUCTION

Associations surrounding Easter

Q. I wonder what associations Easter time has for you?

One of the memories that has forged itself quite deep into my mind is the excitement of a child because today was the one day in the year that my Mum would get up a bit earlier than usual and would conjure up freshly baked hot cross buns.

The smell would waft upstairs and when we got down to breakfast there would be the buns on the baking tray. They had crosses made out of real short crust pastry.

I'm sure you too have certain memories or linkages to this time of year and no doubt we could spend an interesting hour going around everyone hearing stories and indulging that nostalgic side.

This Easter series

Looking at Easter both today and also a second part on Sunday morning - I want to take two bites of the cherry by seeking to discover from the very disciples of Jesus what Easter meant to them.

And I'm **not** really asking the superficial type of question as to whether they had positive or negative memories from those rollercoaster days of the first Easter - **BUT RATHER** - I'm asking **the much deeper question of:**

Q. What the CROSS and (for Sunday) the RESURRECTION meant to them?

There is no question that these things were events that had happened but which they had moved on from - take, for example, Paul's statement to a set of Christian brothers he had dealings with:

(1 Corinthians 2 verse 1-2) "When I came to you, brothers, I did not come with eloquence or superior wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God. **For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.**"

Q. Have we moved on?

That is quite a challenge in and of itself:

- maybe we have **long moved on**
- maybe **the only thing** that Easter is to us is - **the PUREST NOSTALGIA**
- maybe, **even worse**, as Easter beckons to us - we can only think of **CHOCOLATE and BANK HOLIDAY LEAVE!!**

Perhaps it is, therefore, long overdue for us to spend some time with Jesus immediate disciples and apostles and breathe in deeply the FEELINGS and more importantly the MEANINGS which they knew when they thought of the CROSS and also when they recalled the RESURRECTION.

Selecting 3 themes

Now clearly it would be nigh on impossible to do real justice to what the apostolic authors had to say about the cross, about Jesus' crucifixion and death - in just 20, 25 minutes - so let me give you the sound bite that would have been broadcast on Jerusalem radio:

"HE WINS - WE'RE INCLUDED - AMAZING LOVE!"

So with no further ado - theme #1:

1] HE WINS

It was only 10 days after Jesus had finally left the disciples to themselves that Peter would be standing before a massive Jewish crowd and making a statement that would prove to be decisive in 3,000 people changing sides and coming over to Jesus.

Acts 2 verse 36 "'Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: **God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ.**' When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, 'Brothers, what shall we do?'"

In those days Emperor worship was the big test that acid test of the calibre of a believer's Christian faith:

- **EITHER** you had to compromise and say that Caesar was Lord and the Anointed King.
- **OR** you chose to reject this as incompatible with the declaration that was put down on Calvary: that Jesus was BOTH Lord & Christ (anointed one).

Calvary was a place of declaration, it was a place of the greatest victory ever known to mankind.

Even the **charge sheet** (what the **Romans** called "**the TITULUM**"), that was nailed to the cross saying:

"**JESUS OF NAZARETH, THE KING OF THE JEWS**" was correctly declaring what was reality (even though from most it was obscured) - though remember one thief seemed, after a while to catch on - gaining an interest to be remembered when Jesus came into His Kingdom!

Colossians 2 - triumphing over them by the cross

Now the apostle Paul brings out this triumph aspect in more detail there in **Colossians Chapter 2** where we read:

(Colossians 2 Verse 14-15) "He forgave us all our sins, having cancelled the written code, with its regulations, that was against us and that stood opposed to us; he took it away, **nailing it to the cross**. And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, **triumphing over them by the cross.**"

Jesus was for ever in the habit of turning upside down and inside out the way we tend to think about things - you might say that this is absolutely to be expected as a rather natural outcome of where you have divine teaching meeting human wisdom.

And here around the cross people were imagining that Jesus was the public spectacle (which at one level He was) but much more fundamentally this is **Jesus' great triumph** :

- a victory over **the devil**
- AND a victory over **death**.

Hebrews 2 Verse 14&15 "... he too (that is Jesus) shared in their humanity so that by his death he **might destroy him who holds the power of death** - that is, **the devil** - and **free those** who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of **death**."

The Roman Triumph

In the Roman era, victory was made a big thing of - they would hold what they called a TRIUMPH and for this the returning victorious general would become like a King or a demi-god for a day wearing a gold and purple painted robe, a laurel-wreath crown and drawn on a chariot by four horses through the streets of Rome to the adoration and cheering of the crowds and he would end up at the Temple of Jupiter on the Capitoline Hill.

Either at the front of this grand procession or trailing at the rear, would be the captives of war. In another section would be some of the generals troops lapping up something of the applause of the excited crowds.

Jesus' Triumph to Calvary

Now think of Jesus' walk to a different hill, the Jewish hill of Calvary. He was preceded and surrounded by those who were the enemies, those who were his captives and following up the rear, at a distance, were his own disciples, his own soldiers.

The apostle Paul writes of this **GREAT TRIUMPH belonging to Christ our Great General:**

(2 Corinthians 2 verse 14) "But thanks be to God, who always leads us in **triumphal procession in Christ** and through us spreads everywhere the fragrance of the knowledge of him."

And so this would be one un-eraseable dimension of meaning for the disciples thinking about Easter, thinking about the happenings of Good Friday - HE WINS.

Rather like that unforgettable feeling you might get after a lengthy legal process has finally exhausted all its avenues, it has fully run its course and this is the end outcome - HE WINS!!

The next thing that I think would have been deeply etched into their minds would have gone on from this: HE WINS and #2:

2] WE'RE INCLUDED

I'm sure you had those conversations with people where you are telling them how you feel, maybe sharing something quite deep, quite sensitive perhaps - and how reassuring it is, when they say something like:

"...you know I can really identify with you ... I can really identify with what you're saying..."

***Not* the loneliest of all deaths**

When the apostles looked back to Calvary they saw somewhat more than one man dying the loneliest of all deaths. You see they came to understand that they, being JOINED TO JESUS, were also being crucified simultaneously.

You might be interested to know that the expression "in Christ" or "in Christ Jesus" or "in the Lord" or "in him" etc. occurs a massive 216 times in the letters of Paul and 26 times in the writings of the apostle John.

The NT teaching of UNION WITH CHRIST, of being WHOLLY IDENTIFIED WITH CHRIST, of their being this SOLIDARITY WITH JESUS - is a very strongly developed one.

If this is rather new to you - then I must say that this is a really wonderful teaching.

Romans 5 gives us a bit of an intro. into this subject of our UNION with Christ - and the way it does so is by comparison with our original UNION WITH ADAM.

At the start we were all on ADAM'S team - simply because we are human beings and we all, without exception, descend from him - he is the "representative head" of all human beings.

BUT THAT IS NOT ALL - because as Romans 5 goes on to teach, that there is now another "representative head" who is similar in the sense that he is also a member of the human race, BUT in contrast he heads up a different team - and he is not the one whereby SIN ENTERS but He is the one whereby the GIFT ENTERS (that is the gift of eternal life).

As Paul says: "As in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive."

He goes on: "So it is written: 'The first man Adam became a living being', the last Adam (so that is Jesus Christ), a life-giving spirit."

So all throughout the NT we are coming to see that there is a change of teams, we are now IN CHRIST, He is our representative head, He is our "Last Adam" and that is where our primary identification is.

And so when the apostles thought of the Cross, when they thought of that horribly efficient Roman execution - this is what was going through their minds:

Paul - Galatians 2 verse 20 "**I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me.** The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me."

Galatians 5 verse 24 "Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires."

Galatians 6 verse 14 "May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world."

If it is still not quite clear: Romans 6 verse 5&6 "If we have been united with him like this in his death, we will certainly also be united with him in his resurrection. For we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be done away with..."

First command in the book of Romans

You know it is quite an amazing thing that in the book of Romans - Paul does not command us to do anything whatsoever at all UNTIL HALFWAY THROUGH THE 6TH CHAPTER.

6 and a half chapters of Paul setting the scene and explaining OUR SINFULNESS, OUR NEED and OUR GREAT SALVATION before ever he gets to tell us to do something.

Q. And do you know what he first tells us to do?

Romans 6 Verse 11 "...count yourselves **dead to sin** but alive to God **IN** Christ Jesus."

So you see, the apostles weren't just saying - "Oh yes - I was there - terrible business"

Not at all, they were saying:

"Oh Yes - I boast about the cross alright - Great Victory - AND I WAS INCLUDED IN THE TRANSACTION - my old self was dying at the same time - dying to the Law and its condemnation, the demands of the written code were nailed to the cross and it was "paid out" once and for all!! Hallelujah!"

HE WINS - WE'RE INCLUDED just one last abiding sense #3:

3] AMAZING LOVE

Now I won't be telling you anything you don't know - to say that the NT has a lot to say about God's love for mankind.

In the Greek language there are 4 words that get used to speak about love:

- **Storge** - that is a lot to do with love inside family relationships
- **Philia** - which is a lot to do with loyalty, affection and friendship between equals in family, friends and community.
- **Eros** - which is, how shall we say: "Romantic love"
- but the NT writers, seeking a word that could describe the Love of God for men are driven to an entirely new word which is known very little outside of the Bible - it is that word **AGAPE**.

The word **AGAPE** is one which is *not* qualified or determined by the worthiness of the recipients but rather by the nature of the bestower, the donor.

God loves us for the simple reason that he is like that:

"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son..."

In that verse we read earlier, [Galatians 2 verse 20](#) - loves comes up:

"I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, **who loved me and gave himself for me.**"

Christ's love compelling

There is something really contagious about Christ's love when you get it. It is something that is strangely compelling:

Paul speaking about the ministry of reconciliation that all believers are a part of - says this:

[\(2 Corinthians 5 verse 14-15\)](#) "**For Christ's love compels us**, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again."

Our emancipation from the binding principle of sin & death through the crucifixion of Jesus sets us free to love others and not live for ourselves alone.

1 John 3 verse 16

- If [John 3 verse 16](#) is **the best known love verse**:
"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son..."
- then [1 John 3 verse 16](#) **should become the second best known**:
"This is how we know what love is: **JESUS CHRIST LAID DOWN HIS LIFE FOR US....**"

2 Stories to end with

I want to draw our time, this Good Friday, with two stories - one fiction, one true:

1] Sydney Carton - Charles Dickens - A Tale of Two Cities (1859)

The first one is drawn from **Charles Dickens** - considered by many as **the greatest novelist of the Victorian era**.

In 1859 he wrote a **historical novel** called **"The Tale of Two Cities"**.

This is its famous opening:

"It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair..."

And it covers the period of time just prior and during **the French Revolution**.

The main character is one **Sydney Carton** - who has always loved passionately one **Lucy Manette** but who he had to accept would never be his. Her affections had instead been for one **Charles Darnay**, and they gone on to become man and wife.

Well now, as the story unfolds, it is **the height of the French revolution**, 63 victims have already gone that day to the guillotine and now **her husband Charles has been captured, imprisoned and will the very next day face the guillotine**.

On that night **Carton** walks around the deserted streets of Paris and for the first time in his wayward life, **Sydney** sees clearly his course before him.

His years had been spent aimlessly, but now he set his face towards a definite goal.

He stepped out into the moonlight, not recklessly or negligently, but:

'with the settled manner of a tired man who had wandered and struggled and got lost, but who at length struck into his road and saw its end.'

He would find some way of taking **Darnay's** place in the gloomy prison; he would, by his substitution, restore her husband to **Lucy's** side; he would make his life sublime at its close.

To cut a long story short - as he looks in appearance similar to **Charles Darnay**, he visits him in jail and gets him to swap clothes.

A **little seamstress** who had come to trust **Charles**, came up to him to request that she might gain courage by riding to the scaffold with him - however, as she looks him in the face she realises that it is ***not* Darnay** and asks the stranger in whispered tones:

(Seamstress) "Are you dying for him?"

(Sydney) "And his wife and child. Hush! Yes."

(Seamstress) "O you will let me hold your brave hand, stranger?"

(Sydney) "Hush! Yes, my poor sister; to the last."

The book ends with **Carton** having a vision of the future whereby he sees **Darnay** and his wife living on happily and

have a child that they name in **Sydney's** honour and this child becomes everything **Carton** had always wanted to be. **Sydney lives on in all of their lives as one lovingly remembered.**

His final words as he goes to the scaffold:

"It is a far, far better thing that I do than I have ever done; it is a far, far better rest that I go to than I have ever known."

2] The foot washing episode (John 13)

The second story comes from John's Gospel and chapter 13 it is that foot-washing incident - maybe you recall how it gets introduced:

(John 13 verse 1) "Having loved his own who were in the world, **he now showed them the full extent of his love.**"

And it would be very easy to think that this simply meant that he was going to do an incredibly humble and loving thing for his disciples by cleaning up their smelly and disgusting feet - no this explanation falls somewhat woefully short.

Virtually all other translations (and now this is what the latest version of the NIV also adopts as a more faithful translation) is: "Having loved his own who were in the world, **he loved them to the end.**"

The end that is in view is the impending END of the Cross.

You see the **foot-washing** was **simply a warm-up act** to kind of preview the sort of humiliation that he was to undergo.

Perfect love was being lived out on the cross:

- Jesus - still forgiving those that were executing him
- Jesus - still looking out for his mother Mary
- Jesus - still showing His love to His Father by firmly rejecting pain-killing wine that would mean he was not drink to the dregs the very cup of suffering that was His Father's will
- Jesus - still had time to save the lost and seeking in the form of the 2nd thief

CONCLUSION

Perhaps we should simply go full-circle and ask the question I posed at the start:

Q. I wonder what associations Easter time has for you?

OR MAYBE the rather deeper question - Q. What does Easter mean to you?

If you come up with a bit of a blank on this one - I'm not sure you can do a lot better than to mould thinking & feeling around that which seemed to be uppermost to the immediate disciples and apostles of Jesus:

THE CRUCIFIXION:

HE WINS - Jesus' Great Victory

WE'RE INCLUDED - we're now **IN CHRIST** - wonderfully **UNITED TO HIM**

AMAZING LOVE!! - He has shown us the full extent of His love - for He has loved us to the end

Let's pray AMEN