**Sermon at Stowe – Romans 3: 21 – 26, Matt 20: 17 – 20 & 27**

This week your sermon series poses the question is “Where was his (Jesus’) work achieved?” It’s answered immediately with the words ‘The Cross’. This could be one of the shortest sermons ever at Stowe since the question is posed and answered but I think we should consider both the question and the answer deserve deeper thought. In preparing this sermon both the question and answer have made me think and pray deeper and longer than I have for a long time.

I hope you won’t consider what I say as pedantic or picky. I want to start by digging into both the question and the response. The problem is that the question is massive – it invites us to consider everything about Jesus’ work on earth; his birth, his calling, his teaching, the way he gathered his disciples round him, his healing ministry, his prayer life, his challenges to the accepted religious teaching of his time, his death, resurrection and his ascension. The question is too big for a sermon, even if it were hours long. Mine won’t last that long. We are invited to consider the terrible cross; its pain and humiliation, to be the final achievement of Jesus life and work but there is a better case to be made for the resurrection to be the peak. Thousands of men were crucified over many years by the Romans but only one overcame it to rise again and become the inspiration of billions of people worldwide over the 2 millennia since it happened including you and me. Obviously there cannot be a resurrection without a cross; they are intimately intertwined. And there would not have been a cross without the life that went before and all it contained. May I suggest the answer should be ‘The Cross and Resurrection’? (But I understand the limitations posed by the rota on which it is recorded.)

And maybe the question is wrong anyway because the work that Jesus did was not on his own behalf. It is not HIS work alone. It was created and inspired by God in heaven. Earthly Jesus constantly referred to God in his prayer time and deferred to God at the crucial time of his passion. *Not my will but yours* was his agonised cry in Gethsemane. I think that what he did on earth was actually his, his Father and the Spirit’s work.

I apologise for having begun my wanderings in such a critical way. I’ll try to improve by suggesting that we think about an overview of the project that is Jesus’, The Father and the Spirit’s work. I take a Trinitarian view when we look at God’s work with humanity before Jesus, during Jesus’ life on earth and after.

I believe that God has been at work on his earth with his people since the beginning of time and what we read in the OT is a growing but always inadequate and partial understanding of who God is and what God is about with some significant peaks of the patriarchs and the prophets passed down through their preserved writings. But these peaks are only the foothills, the gentle slopes separated by deep valleys of shocking disbelief and behaviour – matched I must say by much of what is happening today in the way we treat God’s creation and humanity. God’s work continues today and we are his agents – inadequate and imperfect though we are when compared with the magnificence and scope of God’s work on earth.

What answer will you give if I ask you to define what God’s objectives have been from the beginning of human consciousness of a spiritual element to our existence, a recognition of otherness of God, up to now?

Our readings give us a good lead. Our reading tells us that Jesus talked to his disciples as they walked towards Jerusalem. He told them what would happen to him; that he would be arrested, tried, mocked and tortured by the Jews and then crucified by the Romans. The light at the end of the tunnel was that he would rise to life on the third day. I’m absolutely sure that his disciples had no idea what he was talking about – how could they? What was his objective in taking this action? *“The Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve”.* If the disciples didn’t understand what rising to life on the third day meant how could they think Jesus could serve anyone?

We, of course, have the benefit of hindsight and so did Paul writing to the Romans. Paul recognised that the whole of the OT and the NT is about being right with God. He wrote, “*This righteousness of God has been made known.”* In the OT the Law and the words of the prophets were the only source but now, writes Paul, “*The righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe*.” And if we follow the logic of this statement we ask, “Why should anyone follow Jesus or believe that he is worth following?” The event that seals the deal is the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. That is the giant pyramid of facts, events, insights built on the witness of Scripture through all the prophets and Patriarchs in the OT, the history of the Jewish tribe and nation, and the history of the life of Jesus including all the wonderful things I mentioned at the beginning of this talk. He was a hugely attractive man who by, the generosity of his personality and by the wisdom of his teaching, by the power of his healings, by his devoutness and dedication to do the will of God, gained the minds and souls of the men and women who surrounded him, who followed him though they often didn’t understand where he was going.

But central to all this, the foundation on which it was built, was his determination to know God’s will and, whatever the cost to himself, to do it. As we heard from Hebrews, “*God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement through the shedding of his blood – to be received by faith. He did this to demonstrate his righteousness.*” There are some amazing thoughts in these sentences. It begins; “God presented” To whom did God present? He presented the truth about his nature through Jesus to a sceptical and selfish world. And he gave that world of which we are part the choice whether to accept that atonement or not. Atonement is best understood by splitting the word up. It is about coming into a relationship with God through Jesus so that we are at one with them ‘at one’ in the sense that we understand, always partially, what God wants of us of our own free choice. That choice is received by faith. Is it true or is it false? Each person, old or young, has to decide. Accepting is an act of faith. You know and I know there is no knock down fact or argument that convinces people. We all know that we have failed to be loving, generous people at all times. We have sinned and that sin is by annulled by an act of overwhelming generosity by God through Jesus; it is forgiven. As Hebrews says. *He did this to demonstrate his righteousness because in his forbearance he left behind the sins committed beforehand unpunished.* God and Jesus chose to put to one side, to forget as if they had never been committed the things we have done over the years. It’s as if they had never been done. This is done so we can be at one with God. And this forgiveness is offered despite the worst that humanity could throw at Jesus, despite the vicious cruelty and pain and humiliation. It was done by the undeserved generosity of the God who created us.

The Cross and resurrection are the peak of what God through Jesus wanted to achieve and the result of this is the witness that’s down to Christians through the ages – down to us here in this church. We should rejoice that we can be reconciled to our creator by his forgiveness. Thank be to God.

I note that next Sunday that baton is picked up by Keith who will talk about Mission, mission that belongs to us all.