

## **I believe the Son Suffered and Died**

### **John 19:1-42**

*Did you know* that in the last Australian Census,  
close to 48,000 people claimed to follow the Jedi religion?  
This is down on previous years.  
In the 2001 census, more than 70,000 people identified as Jedi.

What is *Jedi*? It's something out of the *Star Wars* movies.  
Luke Skywalker is a Jedi Knight,  
and this concept—*found in a movie*—is finding its way into our census results.

*Did you know* that the capital of earthly *Jedi* is Dunedin, in New Zealand?  
They have the highest rate of Jedi per capita in the world.  
In fact, if we take the census results of New Zealand as a whole,  
there are more Jedi in that country (at 1.3%),  
than both Buddhists (1.2%) and Hindus, (also at 1.2%)

It's got to be a joke, surely! These people cannot be in any way serious!  
A concept dreamed up by George Lucas in a screenplay,  
is entered into a nation's official records as a form of identity.  
They're having a laugh obviously.

*But did you also know*, that in its earliest years,  
the Christian religion was received in much the same way?  
People thought Christianity was ludicrous, and the most ridiculous aspect  
was that we worshiped a man who'd been crucified.

Here's a quote from Ancient Rome, from a man called Marcus Cornelius Fronto  
who was a well-known Roman teacher and educator  
*"The religion of the Christians is insane, in that they worship a crucified man,  
and even the instrument of the punishment itself"*  
*They worship a Crucified Man*, he says, *What insanity!*  
And he notices that the cross has become an important symbol  
*even the instrument of the punishment itself.*  
He can hardly believe what he's seeing.

We have a cross here on the front of our lectern.  
We forget that it was an instrument of torture and execution.  
Imagine that a new neighbor moves in down the corridor or across the street  
And you notice that everyday  
they wear a hangman's noose around their neck.  
Just a rope looped around the neck with a slip-knot attached,  
hanging down the front of their shirt.  
You'd probably start keeping your distance, wouldn't you?

Or imagine that every week here at church we had a model of an electric chair set up.  
That would be strange and just a little bit off-putting!  
Well, speaking about a crucified man isn't that much different.  
And yet, in the Creed we say we believe  
that Jesus "*suffered under Pontius Pilate and was crucified*".

Surely if we are going to own up to such a strange belief  
then we ought to have some good reasons.  
And so this is what we are going to discuss today:  
the reason why Christian people see the crucifixion of Jesus as so central.

One thing to address first is whether or not this event actually happened.  
Many of our Muslim friends think we've got it wrong.  
Islam views Jesus as a prophet, as a very important prophet,  
but most Muslims think that it wasn't Jesus who died on the cross,  
rather it was someone else who took the place of Jesus.

So when we say that Jesus *suffered under Pontius Pilate*,  
we're saying that Christ's death was a real event in history.  
Apart for Jesus and Mary, Pilate is the only other person named in the creed.  
And by including him, the Creed locates Christ's death at a point in time.

Our reading was from John's Gospel ch 19,  
and the chapter opens in the middle of Jesus' trial before Pontius Pilate.  
Pilate was the governor of the Roman Province of Judea,  
and as such, only he had the authority to execute someone,  
this is why Christ's enemies had brought him before the governor.

John's account of the trial of Jesus makes it clear  
that Pilate was placed in a very difficult position.  
Three times he says "I find no basis for a charge against him"  
and he tries a number of different ways to get Jesus released.  
He appeals to a tradition of releasing a Jewish prisoner at Passover,  
But the enemies of Jesus call out for another prisoner: "Give us Barabbas!"  
Then at the beginning of our reading, Ch 19, Pilate has Jesus flogged,  
presumably in attempt to placate the hostile crowd; 'maybe flogging will do'.  
But they won't be placated until Jesus is crucified.

Finally the crowd indicate that any refusal by Pilate  
will result in some kind of negative report getting back to the Emperor  
"If you let this man go, they say you are no friend of Caesar."  
Anyone who claims to be a king opposes Caesar." It's a thinly veiled threat.  
And so not long after that, Pilate hands Jesus over to be crucified.

Pilate's decision to have Jesus crucified wasn't only recorded in the Gospels,  
it was also recorded in sources outside the Bible.

Here's another quote from Ancient Rome.

This is from a Roman historian known as Tacitus, and he's speaking about the *great fire* that swept through Rome under Emperor Nero.

There was a rumor that Nero started the fire so he could build a new palace, and so this is how Nero tried to shift the blame, according to Tacitus:

*"Nero fastened the guilt and inflicted the most exquisite tortures on a class hated for their abominations, called Christians by the populous. Christus, from whom the name had its origin, suffered the extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of one of our procurators, Pontius Pilate "*

Now as Tacitus explains how Nero tried to blame the Christians, what else does he inform us of?

That Christ, whom he calls *Christus*,  
suffered the extreme penalty by the hand of Pontius Pilate.  
Pilate's decision to crucify Jesus is a matter of historic fact.

It's not a story made up by a screenwriter,  
it's not a misunderstanding on behalf of the earliest followers of Jesus,  
it's something that happened in history,  
an event demonstrating the accuracy of what's here in the Bible.

But we Christians also believe there is great *meaning* attached to Christ's death.

Yes, the crucifixion is historic fact,  
but it's an event which possesses enormous significance.

One of the things you notice during John's account of Jesus' trial  
is the confusion over Christ's status as King.

Pilate asks Jesus "Are you the King of the Jews?"

Jesus replies by saying "Well, my Kingdom is not of this world."

Pilate says "So you are a King!"

Pilate then speaks to the crowd

asking whether they would like him to release the "King of the Jews"

Three times he calls Jesus a king in front of the Jews,

which the Jews hate hearing; they're not about to accept Jesus as King.

The Soldiers think the idea of Jesus as a King is worth mocking,

so they dress him up in a robe and with a crown of thorns to make fun of him.

When Jesus is crucified Pilate fixes a sign to the cross saying

*Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews.*

The Jewish leaders object to this and say to Pilate

"Do not write 'The King of the Jews,' but that this man *claimed* to be king of the Jews."

So the issue that is being raised all the way through this scene  
is about whether Jesus really is a King.

The answer is there to be seen, but it comes to us in a very subtle way.

Have listen to John's description of this scene from verse 23

<sup>23</sup>When the soldiers crucified Jesus, they took his clothes, dividing them into four shares, one for each of them, with the undergarment remaining. This garment was seamless, woven in one piece from top to bottom. <sup>24</sup>"Let's not tear it," they said to one another. "Let's decide by lot who will get it." This happened that the scripture might be fulfilled that said, "They divided my clothes among them and cast lots for my garment." So this is what the soldiers did.

John is saying that the detail of the soldiers dividing up Jesus' clothes, quite remarkably mirrors something we read in the Old Testament.

The Scripture that is being spoken about here is Psalm 22,  
where King David, an ancient Israelite King,  
is lamenting the fact that he is being chased and hounded by his enemies.  
He uses all sorts of metaphors to describe how he's feeling,  
including this line which you find in Psalm 22.18  
"They divide my clothes among them and cast lots for my garment"

David wrote many Psalms where he cries out under the strain of persecution.

We find another example in Psalm 69, where in v3 he says  
I am worn out calling for help; my throat is parched. And then in v 20  
I looked for sympathy, but there was none, for comforters, but I found none,  
they put gall in my food and gave me vinegar for my thirst.

Now, skip with me to v28 of John 19,  
and we read these incredible words

<sup>28</sup>Later, knowing that everything had now been finished, and so that Scripture would be fulfilled, Jesus said, "I am thirsty." <sup>29</sup>A jar of *wine vinegar* was there, so they soaked a sponge in it, put the sponge on a stalk of the hyssop plant, and lifted it to Jesus' lips.

So we have at *least* two extraordinary parallels here:

King David laments that people want to divide up his clothes as a trophies,  
and Jesus himself has *his clothes* divided up as souvenirs;  
King David uses the metaphor of callously being given vinegar to drink,  
Jesus in his hour of rejection is actually given vinegar on a sponge.

Why is the crucifixion so important?

One reason is that a number of metaphors associated with King David  
start coming to life as Jesus is being killed.

The cross is a sign that a new David is being crowned.

It's a symbol that in Jesus we have a new leader,

That God is giving us someone to follow and someone to listen to.

But the new King isn't just a leader,

he's also a servant who does something wonderful for his subjects,  
and this too becomes evident by the manner in which he dies.

Because Jesus was a Jew,

they didn't want to leave the bodies up there during the Sabbath.  
 John explains what happened from v32 The soldiers therefore came and broke the legs of the first man who had been crucified with Jesus, and then those of the other.  
 (Breaking legs would speed up the crucifixion process meaning they could take the bodies down). V 33 But when they came to Jesus and found that he was already dead, they did not break his legs. <sup>34</sup> Instead, one of the soldiers pierced Jesus' side with a spear

In these first moments after Christ's death we see *two more* remarkable OT echoes  
 V36 These things happened so that the scripture would be fulfilled: "Not one of his bones will be broken," <sup>37</sup> and, as another scripture says, "They will look on the one *they have pierced*."

You may remember from our recent series in Exodus  
 the event of the first Passover when the Israelites sacrificed a lamb,  
 painting it's blood on the frames of their houses.  
 The blood protected the Israelites from the judgment of God  
 as he moved through the land of Egypt.  
 Every year the Israelites were to replicate this meal,  
 and the instructions were clear: *You shouldn't break any of the lamb's bones.*

So when John tells us that none of Jesus' bones were broken,  
 he seems to be recognizing that Christ's death is *a new kind of Passover*;  
 it's a new act of rescue and redemption.

But rescue or redemption from what?  
 This is where the spear into Christ's side is important.  
 As John saw the spear enter into Jesus' body,  
 his mind went to yet another OT text—Zechariah chs 12 and 13—  
 where God says these words: They will look upon me, the one they have pierced ... And  
 on that day a fountain will be opened up to Jerusalem, *to cleanse them from sin and impurity.*  
 The piercing of Jesus' side is a hint that this was the day  
 when God's people would be cleansed from sin and impurity.

I once attended church with a man who ran a dry cleaning business.  
 I had a pair of pants that had some rust stains on them,  
 I'd washed them plenty of times but the rust stains were set in.  
 But one day I thought, "I'll give them to Mark".  
 I asked him, "Could you remove this rust?" He said. "I can get rid of anything".  
 Next week they came back, they were like new.  
 I said "How did you do it?" He said "Trade secret! I'm not telling you!"

You may feel like your sin is a rusted stain that you can't get rid of,  
 Perhaps the wrong things you've done—or continue to do—  
 have been with you for many years and you've become used to them.  
 But know this: the blood that was shed at Jesus death *can get rid of anything*  
 The Muslims say that someone else died for Jesus,

the Bible says that Jesus died for us, to wipe clean our sins.  
Yes, he's the King, but he's the King who, through death, serves his subjects,  
and that's why we remember his death.

It's a nice idea, having a God who serves us, but is it really necessary?  
I mean once we're dead, then isn't that it?  
Isn't the good and bad that we've done simply resigned to history?

Well both the Creed and John's Gospel tell us that Jesus was buried, but the creed goes on to say that he *descended to the dead*. Older versions of the creed say he descended to Hell, but the better translation is to say 'he descended to the *place of the dead*'; to the place where those who've died await the final day of judgment when they will be led to either hell or eternal life with God.

This idea comes from some NT passages that speak of this underworld and that speak of Jesus having some access to it. Scholars disagree as to what exactly happened when Jesus went to the dead but the thing we find in both the Bible and creed is that physical death is not the end. There is a world beyond the grave; Jesus went there, and so will we. After we die there's another chapter and we need to be prepared for it! And the best preparation is to turn to Christ as King and to accept the cleansing of sin that his death provides. So it's a strange belief we have—Jesus and the cross—but it's a necessary one.

Here's another Roman moment for you,  
I've shared this with you before but it's a good week to share it again.  
This is the first artwork that we've found depicting the crucifixion.  
A piece of graffiti found in Rome  
from about the time that we think the earliest creed was being used: 200AD.

The inscription says *Alexamenos Worships God*.  
On the left you can see Alexamenos, and he is worshipping a crucified figure, and the crucified figure has the body of a person but the head of a donkey. The inference is clear. What a foolish thing for a person to worship.

But friends today I'm asking you to join Alexamenos:  
To accept Jesus as King  
and to receive the purification of your sins that we need so badly.  
We receive this purification by simply asking for it.  
As Jesus himself said, *Ask and you will receive*  
So I'll pray, and if you would like to make this to make this prayer your own  
then you can say Amen at the end.

Father in heaven,  
Last week we learnt that Jesus is your only Son,  
and today after considering the importance of his death,  
we wish to turn to him as our King,  
we wish to accept his death as the event that purifies us from our sins.  
And when we follow Christ into the world beyond death  
May we be found to be people who's sins have been cleared away,  
May we be identified as subjects of the true King of heaven and earth, Amen.