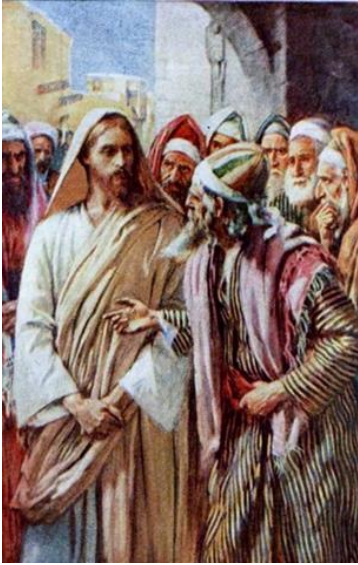


**High St Uniting Church Frankston**  
**Matthew 21: 10 - 17**

All this for us



Each year Easter comes around and the question hangs in the air, “Why did Jesus have to die?” And our usual answers, even those from scripture, seem oddly self-serving. He died for us. He died for our sins. He died to reunite us to God. He died to bring us into God’s promised reconciliation. Those answers may be good theology, but they don’t get at what was going on in Jerusalem 2000 years ago. The High Priest, Caiaphas, and the Roman Governor, Pilate, weren’t in on the grand theological plan. They weren’t appealing to God and practicing human sacrifice in ordering Jesus’ death. In their minds, the question had different answers. And this is not just side-stepping theology to look at the question from a historical perspective. It is recognising that we need a broader view. Thinking of the crucifixion only in terms of us and our salvation severely narrows our understanding of what was happening on the cross. And that narrows the way we live out our faith in this

pluralistic world.

Maybe it’s due to our usual practice of jumping from the entry into Jerusalem – Palm Sunday – to the crucifixion – Good Friday – and leaving out all the controversy and confrontation of that last week of Jesus teaching in the Temple. The confrontations that we see throughout the telling of Jesus’ ministry are raised almost to a verbal war with the religious leaders in that final week. The street theatre of the entry into Jerusalem – donkey, branches, cloaks, and praise – set the scene for Jesus’ challenge to Temple and religion. Who do you serve, the institution or God?

Straight after entering the city, Jesus first stop was the Temple. Not like a tourist, or even a dutiful Jew coming to worship. Jesus came as the Messiah, to set things right. In direct defiance of the religious leaders, he ‘cleanses’ the Temple of all the financial corruption that had grown up around the sacrificial system – exchanging Roman coins for temple coins and selling animals for sacrifice – and then, in further, deeper, defiance of religious tradition he begins to heal people. The sick, the lame, and the blind had no place in the Temple, it was meant to represent and embody God’s holiness. For Jesus, if the temple is the place of prayer, it is also the place for answers to those prayers. And the religious leaders were angry.

And that initial action is just the start of a stream of confrontation in the coming week.

An argument over Jesus’ authority.

Parables in which the religious leaders are the butt of the parable; the two sons who give different answers to their father, the vineyard tenants who kill the son to take over, the wedding banquet to which people refuse an invitation.

The religious leaders respond with questions aimed at trapping Jesus and showing him up in the eyes of the crowd; is it right by the Law to pay taxes to Rome? whose wife will a woman of many husbands be in the resurrection? what is the greatest commandment?

And then Jesus answers with a question to the Pharisees; whose son is the Messiah?

Taken individually these questions and teachings are religious competition, but taken together, and in the light of the street theatre and the demonstration at the Temple, they are

a challenge to the authority and rule of the religious leaders; one that they don't ignore. Their affront, and anger, boils over into a plot to have Jesus arrested and killed.

Why did Jesus have to die? Privilege, self-interest, religion as institution instead of faith, righteousness instead of mercy, preservation of nation, legalism. The list can go on, but none of those reasons is about our sins, or uniting us to God.

Similarly, when Jesus is standing in front of Pilate, his life hanging in the balance of Pilate's judgement, it's not about us, or our connection to God. It's all about national interest and Pilate's career. He had already been told off by Rome for being too brutal and not understanding the Jews, he didn't need another controversy or criticism of his governing. Here is this man who appears to have done nothing against Roman law to deserve death being dragged before him. He had heard about some street demonstration and trouble at the Jewish Temple, but this man didn't look like a troublemaker. Pilate was intrigued, but the insistence of the High Priest, and the agitation of the crowd, had him worried about his position.

Why did Jesus have to die? Political convenience, self-interest, punishment that had nothing to do with justice, a culture of violence, preservation of the peace. The list can go on, but none of those reasons is about our sins, or uniting us to God.

Why did Jesus have to die? Not as a human sacrifice, or a scapegoat, or to wash me clean of my little moral slip ups. It was for sin, but in the sense that all the messiness of human life that flows from ignoring God is on display on the cross. All the reasons that the religious leaders used to justify getting rid of Jesus, many of which still live in the church today. All the reasons that Pilate used to justify condemning Jesus to death, many of which still live in courts and governments today. All the power and privilege and prejudice of military conquest and domination. All the anger, fear, power, and violence as an answer, that stands behind the brutality of crucifixion as a means of death. All of that is on display on the cross. And the wonder and joy of Easter is that God takes on all of that and gives back life.

That is why Jesus had to die, to get through to us the depth of God's love and open us to both the possibility of sharing that love in the world, and looking for better ways to live as people, and a world, that is loved by God.