

John 18:1-14 The cross is God's plan to save the world

*Tim Anderson 10/4/22*

Back in 2018, as many of you will know,  
I travelled across to Gafcon in Jerusalem.  
It's a conference held once every five years  
to encourage the Anglican Church to stay faithful to the Scriptures.  
Anyway, the hotel we were staying in  
had a smorgasbord for breakfast and dinner.  
The food was very good.  
And if you know me at all,  
you will realise  
that I have very little self control about portion size in such situations.  
So after a couple of days of the conference,  
I was really in need of some exercise.  
I'd been running regularly at home.  
I thought I was in pretty good shape.  
And it seemed like God was providing for my needs.  
A couple of my fellow conference delegates  
mentioned that they were going for a run  
before breakfast the next morning.  
I had packed my running gear.  
I asked them could I join them.  
No problems, they said.  
It wasn't until we started running  
that I noticed some common features about my running mates.  
They were all about 20 years younger than me.  
And none of them were sporting a spare tyre like mine.  
And as we ran they chatted.  
I didn't join in because I needed all the air I could get for running.  
They were chatting  
about the marathons and half marathons they'd run recently.  
OK.  
And as we ran along the streets,  
we were plotting a course from Jerusalem

towards and then across the Kidron Valley.  
The route we were taking seemed almost random to me.  
I soon worked out it wasn't.  
Because the Mount of Olives is the steepest piece of real estate in town.  
They were running with a very definite purpose in mind.  
"I'm just going to turn around here, fellas."  
And I headed back to the hotel.

Like the guys I was running with,  
Jesus crossed the Kidron Valley with a very definite purpose in mind.  
His purpose is no less than saving the world.  
And he went across the Kidron Valley  
because he knew that Judas knew that was where Jesus would be.  
Jesus could have gone somewhere different.  
But he wanted to be found.  
He wanted to be arrested.  
He wanted to give his life for the sins of the world.

The key verse in our reading today is verse 11.  
"Jesus commanded Peter, "Put your sword away!  
Shall I not drink the cup the Father has given me?"  
The cup is referring to his mission of going to the cross.  
The Jewish leaders didn't think of it first,  
God the Father did.  
The cross is God's plan to save the world.  
Now I guess that probably doesn't strike you as a shock.  
We know that the cross is the central part of Christianity.  
There are crosses adorning  
just about every church building in the world.  
But think about it for a minute.  
The cross is not just something God the Father worked with.  
You know, sometimes we take a bad situation  
and try to make the best of it.  
God the Father could take a bad situation  
and turn it around to become the great victory over sin and death.

But Jesus doesn't say that.  
 Everything about this passage  
 says that things here are going according to the Father's plan.  
 Jesus doesn't say,  
 "Shall I not drink the cup the Jewish leaders have given me?"  
 He says, "Shall I not drink the cup the Father has given me?"  
 That's not to say that the Jewish leaders  
 can avoid responsibility for the crucifixion.  
 The Bible teaches that both things are true.  
 God planned that the cross should happen.  
 And the Jewish leaders are culpable for their sin  
 in killing an innocent man.  
 But if you want to rank those two truths in order of importance,  
 number 1, "God planned that the cross should happen."  
 "Shall I not drink the cup the Father has given me?"

Jesus also doesn't say,  
 "Shall I not go to the cross as the Father has instructed me."  
 He could have said that.  
 But he chose the metaphor of the cup.  
 The cup is not a random metaphor.  
 It's one pulled straight out of the Old Testament  
 with some clear connotations.

This is Jeremiah 25:15-17.  
 God is talking to the prophet Jeremiah.  
 "This is what the Lord, the God of Israel said to me:  
 'Take from my hand this cup filled with the wine of my wrath  
 and make all the nations to whom I send you drink it.  
 When they drink it, they will stagger and go mad  
 because of the sword I will send among them.'  
 So I took the cup from the Lord's hand  
 and made all the nations to whom he sent me drink it:"  
 Jeremiah is being given a prophecy of God's judgement on the nations.  
 When the prophet speaks, things will happen

because the prophet speaks God's words.  
And the cup is the wrath of God poured out in judgement.

Here is Isaiah 51:17

"Awake, awake!

Rise up O Jerusalem,

you who have drunk from the hand of the Lord the cup of his wrath.

You who have drained to the dregs  
the goblet that makes people stagger."

What's going on in this passage?

Israel has been sent into exile.

She has faced God's judgement.

And God is about to proclaim to her  
that her judgement is over.

Again the cup is the wrath of God poured out in judgement.

So turning back to our passage for today,

why does Jesus use a metaphor

instead of talking about the cross directly?

Because he's directing our attention away from the merely physical  
towards what is happening spiritually.

I don't know if any of you saw the movie, "The Passion of the Christ".

It was as Hollywood movies about the Bible go,

pretty faithful to the Scriptures.

But if there's a criticism of it,

it focuses on the physical gore of what happened to Jesus  
when the Bible account doesn't do that.

There's certainly enough physical pain and torture there.

But the Bible if anything underplays that

because it has a bigger story to tell.

What's happening spiritually?

The wrath of God for the sins of the world is being poured out on Jesus.

That's the cup.

And that's what Jesus is very intentionally drinking.

That's what the Father gave his son to drink.

The cross is God's plan to save the world from his wrath at human sin.

But if the cross is the Father's plan,

Jesus is driving the plan forward.

I know that Jesus prayed in the Garden,

Lk 24:42 "Father, if you are willing take this cup from me;  
yet not my will but yours be done."

And some people would see a tension

between Jesus' steadfast resolve to drink the cup in John,  
and his pleading for another way in Luke.

But it's really not that difficult to understand.

You can be both determined to do the will of your Father  
because you love him,

and pleading for another way

because what you have to do is so terrible.

That makes sense to me.

So what we have in John is Jesus' determination in the foreground.

If you want his anguish, you need to read a different gospel.

So how do we see Jesus driving things forward?

Well we already mentioned Jesus chose a place Judas was familiar with  
because Jesus had often been there with his disciples.

And then the detachment of soldiers turns up to arrest Jesus,  
and 18:4 "Jesus, knowing all that was going to happen to him,  
went out and asked them,

'Who is it you want?'"

Jesus is the one man welcoming committee  
for those who are going to arrest him.

And John underlines for us

that Jesus did this in full knowledge of what was coming up.

He's driving the Father's plan forward  
being full appraised of that plan.

What's missing from this account?

Surely the most iconic moment of the betrayal

Judas' kiss.

It's the ultimate betrayal

to use a gesture of affection as a sign to send someone to their death.

But John doesn't relate it because he's focused not on betrayal  
but on Jesus driving things forward.

18:4-5 "'Who is it you want?'

'Jesus of Nazareth,' they replied.

'I am he,' Jesus said.

And Judas the traitor was standing there with them.

When Jesus said, 'I am he',

they drew back and fell to the ground."

Now John doesn't give us any explanation

of them drawing back and falling to the ground.

You'd have to say that it's not a natural reaction.

Even if they were a bit stunned at Jesus' revealing himself,

I would expect a gruff,

"Well that makes our job easy, doesn't it boys?"

Come a long Jesus of Nazareth,

the high priest wants to have a word with you."

Maybe if they were a completely leaderless bunch,

they might draw back.

But to fall to the ground?

I can only put it down to some sort of recognition of Jesus' divinity.

It's just not appropriate for the creature to arrest the creator.

Of course Jesus' captors aren't going to recognise him as creator.

But sometimes your gut reaction is better than what you understand.

In any case,

it just serves to underline how Jesus had to drive things forward.

Would they have even got around to arresting him,

if Jesus hadn't asked them a second time,

"Who is it that you want?"

"Jesus of Nazareth," they said.

18:8 Jesus answered, "I told you before that I am he.

If you are looking for me then let these men go."

He really has to insist on them arresting him.  
And he also insists of the disciples being set free.  
Only Jesus needs to die for the sins of the world.  
One perfect sacrifice is enough.  
And it happens according to Jesus' direction.  
Jesus is arrested.  
The disciples go free.

What are we to make of Jesus driving the Father's plan?  
First and foremost,  
it's telling us something about Jesus' relationship with the Father.  
It doesn't matter how terrible the Father's plan is for Jesus,  
how excruciatingly painful,  
how much Jesus will be devastated by his abandonment,  
he still loves the Father so much,  
that he drives the Father's plan forward.  
We worship a God of self sacrificial love.  
The love of Jesus for his Father is a demonstration of the love of God.

But of course it doesn't stop there.  
Jesus driving the Father's plan forward  
is also an expression of his love for us.  
Nothing and no one forced Jesus to go to the cross.  
He had to work hard to make it happen.  
They wouldn't have arrested him  
unless he asked them to do it twice.  
Why did he work so hard to make it happen?  
Well it was out of love for us.  
Jesus knew that we needed forgiveness.  
Just the night before he had said at the last supper,  
"This is my body given for you."  
He's working hard to give us what we most needed.  
How much does Jesus love you?  
Well enough so that if it looks like they are struggling to arrest him  
so that they can crucify him,

he will make sure it happens  
 because he's that committed to dying for you.  
 Does it move you,  
 that the cross wasn't something that happened to Jesus,  
 it was something that Jesus made happen  
 because he loves you?  
 It should move you.

The cross is God's plan to save the world  
 and Jesus drives that plan forward because he loves you.

Unfortunately, that's not the only picture that our passage gives us.  
 The cross is God's plan to save the world  
 and Peter resists God's plan.

18:10 "Then Simon Peter, who had a sword,  
 drew it and struck the High Priest's servant,  
 cutting off his right ear.

(The servant's name was Malchus.)"

Just like earlier in the passage,  
 when Judas' kiss is left out of the account,  
 something is left out here too.

It's Jesus' healing of the servant's ear.

A touching display of love

for one who was determined to join the mob baying for Jesus' blood.

Why does John leave it out?

Because he's not at this moment focused on Jesus' compassion.

He's focused on Peter's resistance to the Father's plan.

Jesus is doing everything to drive the Father's plan forwards.

Jesus is determined,

moving towards the cross.

Peter is doing what he can to resist the cross.

He doesn't want Jesus to get arrested.

And even against a crowd of soldiers and officials,

he's willing to put in a bit of futile resistance.

Never let it be said that Peter went down without a fight!

What can we say about Peter?

Well it's not that he doesn't want his sins forgiven.

It's just that he hasn't got his head around the Father's plan.

This isn't Peter's first time resisting the Father's plan.

Some time earlier, Jesus had been explaining to his disciples that he must go to the cross.

And Peter took Jesus aside and began to rebuke him.

Peter just didn't like the sound of his Lord being crucified.

And he couldn't quite cope with the idea

that Jesus might know better than him what the best thing would be.

Peter goes about things the way we do them in this world.

When someone comes to arrest a person you love

who is innocent of any wrong doing,

what do you do?

You try to defend the person you love.

If you just sat there passively

and let them lead your loved one away,

then you don't really love them very much, do you?

From a human perspective, Peter's reaction is pretty understandable.

It's not worthy of our condemnation.

I doubt very much

whether we would have done any better put in the same position.

In fact we might have done worse.

We might have looked on in horror as Jesus was arrested,

not celebrated that he was drinking the cup the Father gave him,

and not even said anything about what was happening.

I think Peter is the best of the disciples.

The others didn't understand the Father's plan either.

They just didn't have the courage to draw their swords,

or the foresight to carry a sword,

or the willingness to stand up and be counted.

At least Peter is standing up.

At this point.

Though as we read on in the chapter,

he stops standing up after this.  
 Perhaps he is so shocked that Jesus won't resist arrest  
 that he caves in and disowns Jesus later.

What should we take from Peter's story?  
 The most important take away is that God's plans are not derailed  
 by his servants failing to understand them.  
 The cross is God's plan to save the world  
 and Peter resists God's plan.  
 He does his level best to stuff it up.  
 And does that throw Jesus off?  
 Not at all.  
 He sets Peter straight with a single sentence  
 and continues on driving the Father's plan forward.

Did you know that you cannot stuff up God's plans?  
 Peter couldn't stuff them up and you can't either.  
 That may be really quite comforting to you.  
 When you think of some of the really dumb things  
 that Christian people do in God's name,  
 it really is quite a comfort  
 that none of our stupidity stuffs up God's plans.  
 Did you know that there were monks in the early church  
 who thought they could serve God better  
 if they chopped out their tongues?  
 I'm not sure how they thought  
 they would be better able  
 to proclaim the good news of the saviour without a tongue.  
 But there you go.  
 Christians sometimes do the dumbest things.  
 And did it stuff up God's plans to save a people for himself?  
 Not at all.  
 Did you know that some Christians today  
 think that they are serving God  
 by getting themselves nailed to a cross on Good Friday,

so they can experience some of what Jesus experienced?

Um, Jesus was nailed to the cross so we didn't have to be.

He gave his life for us.

That was kind of the point of it.

But does it derail God's plans

if some Christians get themselves nailed to a cross?

No it doesn't.

You think of all the stupid

and frankly sinful things Christians have done in history.

Collaborated with Apartheid in South Africa.

Formed the German Christian Movement

to combine the insights of Christianity and Nazism

in Germany in the 1930s.

The appalling way the Russian Orthodox Patriarch

has lined up with Putin in the current conflict.

Christians do some really very stupid things.

Does it derail God's plans to save a people for himself?

No it doesn't.

Peter couldn't derail God's plans and you can't either.

The cross is God's plan to save the world

and Jesus drives that plan forward.

He loves the Father and he loves you.

The cross is God's plan to save the world

and Peter tries to derail that plan.

But Peter can't derail God's plans and neither can you.