

...was crucified, died, and was buried

Why is it that the Christians celebrate the death of their founder? Other religious movements may mark the occasion, may use it as a cause to celebrate their founder's life, work, and principles. But they don't usually celebrate the event the way the Christian Church does. The very means of Jesus' death, the cross, the Roman equivalent of the gallows and just as disreputable in its day, has become the Church's trademark! Why is that? It is because of what Christians believe was actually happening on that cross. And what was happening? Jesus was doing three things:

1. Jesus displayed God's love

John's Gospel puts it like this: "Having loved his own who were in the world, he now showed them the full extent of his love." (John 13: 2) Jesus was God's own Son, begotten before all eternity, willingly offering his life for his followers. And what a sacrifice it was. Nailing a person up on a cross does not kill them. In the Philippines they nail a man to a cross every year. The victim suffers hunger and thirst (especially in the unsheltered heat of a Mediterranean afternoon) He is the object of the spleen and mockery of all who pass by. He is left to die of exposure. And if he survives, his end is hastened by the breaking of his limbs, which results in very gradual strangulation, as the weight of the body puts unsupportable strain on the neck. For a Jew, like Jesus, there was also the knowledge that the law put a curse on everyone who hung from a tree. The rabbis interpreted this as applying to crucifixion, as those suffering both fates were usually criminals and the cross was fashioned from a tree. In modern terms, anyone crucified could know for a certainty they were going to hell! Jesus went through all that for us! A more graphic display of love can hardly be imagined. As Jesus said, "Greater love has no-one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends."

2. Jesus defeated God's enemies

This is the marvellous paradox of the cross. It appears to be the moment of Jesus' complete and utter defeat, but it is in fact the moment of decisive victory. Most wars have a moment of "decisive victory", when the fortunes of the war are turned irreversibly, so that from that time on the outcome of the conflict is inevitable. Rarely can this be seen at the time. This perspective is only available with hindsight. In World War II the decisive point is usually reckoned to be the Allied victory at El Alamein in Egypt. Up to that point, the Allies were on the defensive. The Axis powers were in control. After El Alamein, the Allies were pursuing and the Axis powers retreating. Germany may well have won a few victories after this point. But they were the exceptions, and they never again looked like winning the war. The war was by no means ended. The battle of El Alamein took place in 1942. The war had still three years to run. But the decisive battle had been fought. It was all over bar the "mopping up operations".

Jesus' death on the cross was the decisive victory over the forces of evil. Up until that point, they had humankind in their grasp. All had sinned, and so all deserved to be punished. And there was no way humankind could get itself out of the mess. So all the world was in the power of the evil one. But Jesus, the only perfect man, took the punishment for sin. He died as the only possible acceptable sacrifice. He took the place of sinful humankind, so God could forgive us and cleanse us from all that was wrong, and make us the kind of people He wants us to be. Jesus provided the way out of the clutches of the evil one for all who will believe in Him and follow Him. He

thus won the victory over the powers of evil, through his death on the cross. As St. Paul put it: “God made you alive with Christ. 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.” (Colossians 2: 13-15) Christ cancelled the legal written against us, by paying the penalty in our place, and disarmed and defeated the powers of evil by removing the source of their power over human beings. So Jesus was able to make a public spectacle of those powers. Roman Emperors, when they had won a victory, brought the prisoners back to Rome, where they were led through the streets in a humiliating manner, to emphasize the power of the Emperor. This was known as “triumphing”. This *Jesus* did on the cross. His enemies did not triumph over him. *He* triumphed over *them*. That is why the church celebrates this event.

3. Jesus was drawing all people

Jesus said: “I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.” (John 12: 32). And immediately afterwards, John comments: “he said this to show the kind of death he was to die”. It is Jesus’ death itself that attracts people! It shows God’s love in all its amazing extent. It shows God’s victory over the forces of evil. And it abolishes the distinctions between peoples. In the Old Covenant between God and Israel, those who wanted to enjoy God’s blessings had to become part of the community of Israel. There were clear dividing lines between Jews and Gentiles. And there was no doubt who were the second-class citizens in God’s kingdom. But by dying on the cross and fulfilling the Law’s demands for all who believe in Him and follow Him, Jesus made it possible for *all* people of *all* nations to come to God on equal terms, without having to earn their place by observing every stipulation of the Law of Moses. They would still have to live lives worthy of Christ, of course. But they come to God on the same basis as all others. *All* are sinners, *all* need Jesus to save them (no-one can do it for themselves), and *all* can know their sins are forgiven through Jesus’ death on the cross

Jesus still draws all people to himself. The call comes to each one of us. How will we respond? He gave so much for us. He asks us to give our lives – all we have and all we are to Him. Will we do it?