Crucial Issues:

1. Why the cross was necessary

a sermon preached on Palm Sunday 1989

(Mark 8:27-34 and Isaiah 52:13-53:12)

Symbols are often much more powerful than words. They can, for instance, awaken feelings of intense patriotic loyalty. That's why every country has its national flag and every regiment its badge. Symbols can foster feelings of confidence and familiarity too. That's why every business has its logo or trademark. And of course, symbols can sometimes awaken feelings of hatred, as the Nazi swastika once did. But I suppose, supremely, symbols have proven their power to stimulate religious devotion. Just consider the fanaticism associated with the crescent moon of Islam or the star of David.

Well, as we approach Easter, I want us to reflect on the significance of what I reckon must be regarded as the most passionately emotive religious symbol of all. Among all the insignia and emblems the world has ever known, I don't believe there is a more compelling or poignant example than the symbol which for two millennia has united the Christian church: **the cross**.

All the more remarkable has its influence been when you consider that, originally, the world regarded the cross as a mark of shame and ignominy. Archaeologists excavating Rome discovered some years ago a piece of early juvenile graffiti inscribed on the wall of a first-century school that illustrates this point very well. It depicts in crude caricature, on one side, a man with the head of a donkey stretched out on a cross and, on the other side, a young boy with his arm raised in salute. Underneath is the sneering caption: 'Alexamenos (clearly a pupil at the school) worships his god!' That is the earliest crucifix that historians have discovered. Not an object of veneration, but a cartoon of contempt.

For the world of Jesus' own day saw nothing admirable in a cross. The emotions it awoke were wholly negative: for the Roman, repulsion and disgust; for the Jew, execration and damnation. The physical pain involved was appalling, draining the life from the body over days by a process of slow torture. The personal humiliation involved was outrageous, for the crucified man hung naked before the obscene mockery of the mob. And the public disgrace involved was incomparable, for this barbaric treatment was deemed appropriate only for slaves and the most despicable of criminals. It was a means of execution reserved for those regarded as the absolute dregs of society. Yet this symbol of universal loathing somehow was transformed in the early years of the Christian era into a badge of honour: it shaped Christian architecture; it adorned Christian necks; it inspired Christian poetry; and it fired Christian preaching.

> 'God forbid that I should glory except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ.'
> (the Apostle Paul in Galatians 6:14)

Even in our English vocabulary, there is an indirect witness to the extraordinary impact of the cross on our culture. According to the Oxford Dictionary, the adjective 'crucial' means 'of decisive or critical significance'. It derives of course from the Latin word 'crux', meaning 'a cross'.

How is it that such an unlikely symbol has become invested with such profound importance and emotional power? What is it about the cross which make it so 'crucial'? Well, it's that question that I want us to consider together. And the answer, I suggest to you, is to be found, not in any mystical properties associated with the geometry of the cross, nor in any of the pious superstitions that have clustered around 'the sign of the cross'. No, the symbol of the cross exercises the extraordinary influence it does upon our imaginations because two thousand years ago something 'of decisive and critical significance' – something 'crucial' – happened on it.

Jesus then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again.
(Mark 8:31)

I want you to particularly notice the word '*must*' that occurs twice in that verse. Jesus speaks as if there was some inexorable necessity determining this matter. In fact, so depressingly fatalistic is he about his coming death that Peter tries to shake him out of this morbid anticipation.

Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him.
(Mark 8:32)

It was an understandable enough reaction. Haven't we all tried to jolly along a friend when we sense he or she is bowed down by some grim foreboding. In Peter's ears, Jesus' premonitions of imminent doom are completely incompatible with the messianic identity he had just a moment before confirmed. '*You are the Christ!*' Peter had confessed (Mark 8:29). How could the Messiah be troubled by thoughts of pain and death? But Jesus' reaction to Peter's well-intentioned rebuke is to turn upon his disciple with uncharacteristic venom.

He rebuked Peter. 'Get behind me Satan! You do not have in mind the things of God.'
(Mark 8:33)

Was the issue then so serious? Clearly it was! When Jesus said, *'the Son of Man must suffer',* he was not expressing the hopelessness of a depressive who confidently expects the worst, but the determination of a visionary who senses he has an absolutely essential mission to fulfil - something 'crucial' – something of such divinely ordained significance that any influence that weakens his resolve in regard to it amounts to demonic temptation. As innocent as Peter's well-meaning attempts at dissuasion may seem, they have to be uncompromisingly repudiated. His sufferings were a 'must' – a goal he 'had to' fulfil.

Where did this sense of necessity in Jesus' mind derive from? I want to suggest to you that the gospels provide us with a number of clues that conclusively answer that question for us. Here is the first:

Jesus took the Twelve aside and told them, 'We are going up to Jerusalem, and everything that is written by the prophets about the Son of Man will be fulfilled. He will be handed over to the Gentiles. They will mock him, insult him, spit on him, flog him and kill him. On the third day he will rise again.
(Luke 18:31-33)

This is the record of another occasion when Jesus tried to communicate to the reluctant ears of his disciples the tragic events that would soon engulf him. But this time he adds an explanatory detail which he did not make explicit on the earlier occasion (also recorded by Luke in 9:22): *'everything that is written by the prophets will be fulfilled'*. Here then is the source of Jesus' certainty on this matter. The 'must' is the 'must' of prophecy. Jesus was convinced that the Bible predicts that he would suffer.

But which prophecy in particular is he talking about? In Jesus' day, messianic expectations based on the Old Testament scriptures were very popular among the Jews. But suffering did not feature at all in them. On the contrary, this 'Son of Man' that Jesus alludes to is drawn from the book of Daniel, where he is quite clearly a figure of heavenly glory and universal dominion. He sits on a throne; he certainly does not hang on a cross! So where did Jesus get the idea of a *suffering* Messiah from? Turn on a little in Luke's gospel, and we find a second clue.

It is written: 'And he was numbered with the transgressors; and I tell you that this must be fulfilled in me. Yes, what is written about me is reaching its fulfilment.'
(Luke 22:37)

This time the scene is the Upper Room where Jesus has just shared the Last Supper with his disciples. It is the very night of his betrayal. A grim sense of approaching crisis – violent crisis – fills the air. Jesus is even telling his disciples they might need to defend themselves with swords! Suddenly, almost as an aside, Jesus allows a great beam of illumination to fall on his own self-understanding at this critical point in his life. Do you notice the reappearance of that emphatic '*must*'? And the allusion once again to the Old Testament prophets? But this time he identifies the prophecy he has in mind.

He poured out his life unto death,
and he was numbered with the transgressors.
For he bore the sin of many,
And made intercession for the transgressors.
(Isaiah 53:12)

Here is the key we need to unlock the thoughts of Jesus as this vital moment. Here is the Old Testament passage that informed his conviction that suffering was necessary to the accomplishment of his messianic mission.

If the disciples had had the wit to realise it (which, in the intensity of their emotional turmoil that night in the Upper Room, they certainly did not) Jesus' citation of Isaiah 53 constituted a theological bombshell of nuclear proportions. For that chapter was not regarded by most Jews of the period as a messianic prophecy at all. It is part of a cycle of songs which surround a most mysterious figure in the latter part of Isaiah: the prophet designates him simply as '*the servant*'. In the earlier songs, 'the servant' seems to be a collective metaphor for 'Israel', the people of God (see for example Isaiah 44:1-2). But as the cycle of songs proceeds, it becomes increasingly apparent that Israel had failed to fulfil the 'servant' role for which she was chosen. What is God's solution to this? Well, about half way through the cycle of songs, the prophet begins to glimpse another 'servant' figure, complementary but different, for this 'servant' is yet to come, and is no longer a corporate metaphor but a distinct individual. His mission

will be to bring Israel back to God: to reconstruct the people of God in his own person so they become the 'servant' people they were always meant to be. But not just the Jews – interestingly the prophet anticipates that this new initiative from God will include all the nations of the earth.

And now the Lord says –
he who formed me in the womb to be his servant
to bring Jacob back to him
and gather Israel to himself,
for I am honoured in the eyes of the Lord
and God has been my strength –
he says:
'It is too small a thing for you to be my servant
to restore the tribes of Jacob
and bring back those of Israel I have kept.
I will make you a light to the Gentiles,
that you may bring my salvation
to the ends of the earth.
(Isaiah 49:5-6)

Now of course the unspoken question that permeates these chapters of Isaiah is who is this mysterious 'servant' and how does he achieve this remarkable rehabilitation of a sinful, fallen world? And that is where Isaiah 53, which is the fourth and final song in the cycle, fits in. In its lyrical poetry, God reveals that the 'servant' will accomplish his remarkable redemptive mission in a startling and unprecedented manner – through suffering.

The fourth song actually begins at Isaiah 52:13 and is comprised of five equal stanzas. In a way that is not unusual in Hebrew poetry, the prophet has constructed the song so that the climax occurs in the central (third) stanza.

Stanzas 1 and 5, and stanzas 2 and 4, each form a pair, supporting this central climax. Stanzas 2/4 mainly focus on the 'servant' as the world sees him, so disfigured by his suffering that he is '*despised and rejected by men*' (53:3). Their verdict is that he must have done something exceptionally wicked to deserve such punishment: '*we considered him stricken by God*'. But therein lies the irony, for *'he had done no violence, nor was any deceit found in his mouth*' (53:9). This man's sufferings were completely undeserved: '*he was oppressed … led like a lamb to the slaughter*' (53:7). An innocent man then who is executed like a common criminal by an act of monstrous injustice. It all seems like a pathetic waste of a life.

Why does God allow it to happen? Stanzas 1/5 provide the divine perspective. '*See, my servant, will be raised and highly exalted'* (52:13). Where the world sees only ignominy, God perceives a precious and beautiful sign of hope in a morally barren world: '*a tender shoot, a root out of dry ground'* (53:2). He whom the world sees as contemptible, God sees as the only attractive object in the entire universe! So we ask again, Why? And the prophet replies: '*Yet it was the Lord's will to crush him and cause him to suffer*' (53:10). What an extraordinary thing to say! God's will for injustice to triumph? Can Isaiah be

serious? Indeed he is, for these sufferings, ignominious and contemptible though they appear, are sufferings with a divine purpose. They are essential to the mysterious mission of the 'servant'; for '*the Lord makes his life a guilt offering'* (53:10).

The idea of atonement through sacrifice was one which the Jews had been taught well through the rituals laid down in the law of Moses. The blood on the altar was a powerful symbol both of the seriousness of sin and the cost of forgiveness. But what the prophet is talking about here is utterly unprecedented – for he speaks not of an altar but a scaffold, and not of an animal but of a *human* sacrifice – an innocent man whose surrendered life God would accept as a '*guilt offering'* for the sin of the world. As a result, '*my righteous servant will justify many and he will bear their iniquities … for he bore the sin of many and made intercession for the transgressors'* (53:11-12). Out of his apparent failure would come an extraordinary vindication; '*he will see his offspring and prolong his days … after the suffering of his soul, he will see the light of life and be satisfied … therefore I will give him a portion among the great … because he poured out his life unto death, and was numbered with the transgressors*' (53:10-12).

Here then is the very verse to which Jesus directed his disciples in the bleak atmosphere of the Upper Room the night before he died. Here is the scripture which *'must'* be fulfilled and which underlay his insistence that his sufferings were essential to his messianic mission.

It must be admitted that not all scholars accept that the suffering servant depicted in Isaiah 53 had this major effect on Jesus' self-understanding. In particular, Morna Hooker, a Cambridge theologian, has questioned it in her book, *Jesus and the Servant* (SPCK 1959*).* However, it seems to me that, at least for anyone who accepts that the New Testament gospels provide a trustworthy account of Jesus' words, the case is unanswerable. If we are in any doubt about the significance of Jesus' citation of Isaiah 53 reported in Luke 22, then an earlier statement recorded in Mark surely puts the matter beyond dispute:

The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.
(Mark 10:45)

The allusions here to Isaiah's *'servant'* who '*pours out his life unto death'* and so '*justifies many'* are so obvious one could almost believe that Jesus had the text of Isaiah 53 in his mind's eye as he speaks. Certainly the apostle Peter did, when many years later he sought to interpret the significance of Jesus sufferings for believers in the early church.

Christ suffered for you … He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth. When they hurled insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats… He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree … by his wounds you have been healed - for you were like sheep going astray, but now you have returned to the Shepherd.
(1 Peter 2:21-25)

Like his Master before him, Peter points back to the words of Isaiah 53 as the clue to understanding Jesus' death. But you notice, he focusses on that climactic central stanza, for there we find, not the

'servant' as the world sees him, nor even the 'servant' as God sees him – Isaiah 53:4-6 shows us the 'servant' as the believing people of God see him. Let me reproduce it for you here:

Surely he took up our infirmities
and carried our sorrows,
yet we considered him stricken by God,
smitten by him and afflicted.
But he was pierced for our transgressions,
he was crushed for our iniquities;
the punishment that brought us peace was upon him,
and by his wounds we are healed.
We all, like sheep, have gone astray,
each of us has turned to his own way;
and the Lord has laid on him
the iniquity of us all.
(Isaiah 53:4-6)

Notice the first-person pronouns. Some at least of those who initially '*found no beauty or majesty to attract us to him'* (53:2) eventually come to understand, testifying '*he was pierced for our transgressions'* (53:5). That's why Isaiah asks the question: '*Who has believed our message?'* (53:1) For, although there are many who see no significance in this grotesque figure of suffering, there are others '*to whom the arm of the Lord is revealed'* (53:1). By some strange divinely-given intuition, they discern the divine logic in it all. There are two key components to this revelation:

First, they confess their complicity in the universal moral anarchy of the human race: '*each of us has turned to his own way*'. Like rebellious adolescents, we have resented the moral direction of our divine parent. Like Frank Sinatra, we have preferred to do it 'my way'! We thought by this means we would become free, but instead we have simply become lost, like errant sheep on a remote hillside.

Second, they confess their personal interest in the substitutionary sacrifice of the suffering 'servant': '*the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all'*. He had no sin of his own to die for. Why then was he suffering? The prophet refuses to shirk the answer. The Lord placed on him the punishment for our moral anarchy.

For many people, this idea objectionable. The Oxford philosopher, A.J. Ayer, once commented that there was a strong case for considering Christianity the worst of all religions because it rests on the allied doctrines of original sin and vicarious atonement, which he said were 'intellectually contemptible and morally outrageous'.

But why are we so indignant at Isaiah's central thesis? Is it not true that we are moral anarchists? Can we deny the essential egotism that characterises our lives – that compelling desire to go my own way? Will we be surprised on the last day to be condemned as rebels? And can we suggest any other way whereby God could at one and the same time express his moral abhorrence of that sinful rebellion, as he must, and yet spare us who are guilty of it?

Forgiveness is never cheap. Ask the mother of the policeman blown to pieces by a terrorist bomb. Ask the parent of the raped teenager. Ask the victim of the concentration camp. Ask the child of the drunken father. When someone has deeply offended us by their wicked behaviour, you cannot wave the injury aside with a blasé: 'Oh, don't mention it, old chap'! No, sin hurts – and our natural response to it is one of furious indignation against those responsible. Well if sin outrages morally warped people like us, how angry do you think God is. If sin has the power to injure us in that profound way, how hurt do you think God feels?

Well I will tell you – no better than that – I will show you how angry and how hurt God is:

He was pierced for our transgressions.
He was crushed for our iniquities.

Forgiveness is never cheap – not for us, and we have very few sins to bear - but the Lord's suffering 'servant' carried the weight of the sins of the entire world. Forgiveness cost him everything.

When we look at the cross, we see God plumbing the depths of his divine heart for those inner resources of love and grace which alone could quench his righteous anger. That's what the cross means. We see there God coming to terms with our sin, absorbing its pain within the complex structure of his own divine personality. We see God experiencing that pain, accepting that pain, bearing that pain on our behalf. Of course it's mysterious. It defies every preacher's analogy and every theologian's definition. But then, the deepest truths always do. To try to compress the cross into a nice compact parcel of easily intelligible propositions is like trying to draw a map of the globe on flat paper. It's far to big to fit into the limited dimensions of our creeds and confessions. Maybe that's why we have to have a symbol? For the symbol can resonate in our hearts in a way that mere words never can. The cross perhaps by its very shape speaks of paradox and contradiction. Here divine love and divine wrath meet in passionate collision. Here God, in his grace, treats sinners as his children, because once, in his wrath, he treated his Son as a sinner.

It is an extraordinary claim, and Ayer was right, it is unique to Christianity and not surprisingly so. For if the Bible had not pointed us this way, I suggest there is not one of us who would dare to interpret the death of Jesus Christ is such an outrageous manner.

And yet, if God, the Creator of this vast universe, is righteous and holy, and if he does in his love desire to save this fallen and corrupt world of ours, can we doubt that it would demand such a monstrous cathartic synthesis of love and justice to make it possible – to satisfy the complex tensions implicit in his divine perfections?

Maybe as Pascal says: 'the heart has its reasons which reason cannot know.' The Bible's teaching on the substitutionary atonement achieved by Jesus death may bewilder us. We may find it impossible to verbalise a fully satisfactory statement of its mystery. But one thing is sure, that mystery is confirmed and actualised in Christian experience. Faith feels the truth in this matter, where our minds may have to rest content to acknowledge their limitations. As Paul observed, the cross is folly to the scholars and philosophers of this world. Maybe it can't be anything else. But to those simple and unsophisticated

souls whom God has called, this crucified God, this 'suffering servant', is indeed 'the power and wisdom of God' (1 Corinthians 1: 18-21).

I am reminded of the story of Count Nicolas von Zinzendorf, the founder of the Moravian Brethren in the 18th century. As a young man of 19 years, this aristocrat was completing his education by conducting a grand tour of the major cities of Europe. That's how he found himself in an art gallery in Dusseldorf, viewing a great painting by the Italian, Domenica Feti, entitled 'Ecce Homo' (Behold! the man!). It depicts Christ wearing the crown of thorns, and underneath there is a Latin caption which translated reads: 'This I suffered for you, what now will you do for me?' This encounter with the 'suffering servant' was the turning point in Zinzendorf's life. There and then, he committed his life to Christ. It is significant that the Christian movement he later founded took as its sign the sacrificial lamb.

Why then was the cross necessary? We have learned the answer – from the word of the prophet Isaiah and from the mouth of Jesus himself. Is there any event in the entire history of our world that is more 'crucial'?