

Easter in a Day
The Challenge of Easter
Why did Jesus have to die?

Before I start my talk I want to give credit to my sources. Much of what I'm going to talk about in the next few minutes, especially the historical perspective comes from a series of on-line articles written by Rev Dr Mark D Roberts under the title "Why did Jesus have to die – The Death of Jesus in different perspectives: Roman, Jewish, Jesus and Christian" If you are interested I can give you the website details. Also a couple of very useful books are "The Day Christ Died" by Jim Bishop and "Six Hours One Friday" by Max Lucado.

Where should we start in our efforts to discover why Jesus had to die? I propose to begin with some basic historical facts, facts that are affirmed by almost every historian and Biblical scholar, even those who approach this question from a highly critical and skeptical starting point.

So what are the facts: -

1. Jesus was crucified. There were many ways in the first century for a criminal to be put to death, including stoning, beheading, being torn apart by beasts etc. Yet all of the earliest sources attest to the crucifixion of Jesus. These sources include, in addition to the New Testament writings, the Jewish historian Josephus writing in AD 95 and the Roman historian Tacitus writing in AD 109.

2. Jesus was crucified during the governorship and under the authority of Pontius Pilate. Again, this basic fact is confirmed in Josephus and Tacitus in addition to the New Testament.

3 Jesus was crucified in Jerusalem, on or near the Jewish feast of Passover. Again all four gospels agree on these basic facts and there is every reason to believe that they are accurate, although the precise timing of Jesus death in relationship to the Passover is harder to pin down by outside sources.

4. Pilate placed a sign on Jesus' cross that read "The King of the Jews". This fact is found in all four gospels as well as in some later non-canonical gospels. This "title" helps to explain the nature of the charges against Jesus.

Let's carry on with some history, I'm a bit of a history buff and I think it helps to set things in a historical perspective – what led up to the events of the first Easter and what was going on at the time.

Lets look first at the Romans.

In the time that we are considering Palestine was a remote part of the Roman Empire, a very remote and unsubstantial part. In fact it wasn't even a province in its own right, it was a sub province under Syria. The Jews were a troublesome lot and the Romans had been forced to give in to the Jews on several matters in order to get any sort of peace at all. The main problems had been around what the 10 Commandments and the Jews called "graven images". One Roman leader had caused a riot by having his troops march into Jerusalem with their banners flying – banners which carried the likeness of the Emperor. In order to keep the peace and unlike any other part of the Roman Empire, the Romans concealed their banners in Palestine. Another cause of

contention was the Roman coinage, which again carried the image of Caesar. I have read that the Romans minted special coins for use in Palestine without the picture of Caesar but this doesn't concur with the story of Jesus asking "whose image is this on the coin" in one of the Biblical stories.

So into this troubled, remote province we inject a new governor – Pontius Pilate. Unlike previous governors, when Pilate took charge he brought images of Caesar into Jerusalem in order to display them. This enraged the Jewish population who took this as a violation of their law and as an insult. Multitudes of people travelled to Caesarea in order to ask Pilate to remove the images. At first he refused and then as the petitioners persisted he was prepared to kill them. But when they showed themselves willing to die rather than have their laws violated, Pilate finally relented. However Josephus tells us of another occasion when Pilate he offended Jewish sensibilities, on this occasion he did not show mercy and those who protested were slaughtered by soldiers under Pilate's command.

The New Testament confirms this picture of a cruel Pilate. In Luke 13:1 we read "*At that very time there were some present who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices*". We don't know anything else about this incident but it appears that for some reason Pilate had killed on Galileans who had come to Jerusalem in order to offer sacrifices to God at the temple. Not only did Pilate have them killed but also he had their blood mingled with the blood of the animals they had sacrificed. Talk about adding insult to injury!

There are many other instances recorded complaints of Pilate's cruelty and harshness and in the end because the complaints had reached Rome he was removed from office by Vitellius who was his boss and the governor of Syria.

Pilate's ultimate responsibility was to oversee Judean affairs, to squash outright rebellion, to keep the tax money flowing to Rome and, in general, to preserve the fragile peace of the region. And it is this, this peace, which seemed to be at risk when Jesus came to Jerusalem around the feast of the Passover.

Now I want to spend a couple of minutes looking at "The Roman Practice of Crucifixion".

Why was crucifixion so horrible? For one thing, the victim experienced some of the most extreme pain that a person can experience and the duration of suffering often lasted several days. But, even beyond personal suffering, the crucified person experienced extreme shame in a world that valued honor supremely. Contrary to most portrayals of Jesus' death, those sentenced to crucifixion were naked when attached to the cross, in full view of the masses.

The Romans made every effort to crucify people in public places, such as along major thoroughfares. The point was to augment the dishonor and suffering of the one being killed, not to mention his family and colleagues. (It seems, by the way, that the Romans did not crucify women.) As the Roman rhetorician Quintilian explained, "Whenever we crucify the guilty, the most crowded roads are chosen, where most people can see and be moved by this fear. For penalties relate not so much to retribution as to their exemplary effect"

You may remember the scene of mass crucifixion from the movie *Spartacus*. It depicts something that actually happened. When Spartacus led a rebellion against Rome in 73-71 B.C., the Romans finally prevailed. They crucified 6,000 men, stringing them along the Via Appia for 120 miles, from Rome to Capua.

“Watch someone get crucified for challenging our authority,” the Romans believed, “and you’ll be unlikely to challenge our authority yourself.” If you’ve seen *The Passion of the Christ*, you can certainly understand Roman logic here.

As I said, Rome reserved crucifixion for the worst of criminals, especially for those who stirred up rebellion against the state. Because the point of crucifixion, beyond punishment, was deterrence, crosses were placed in public places so people would learn to fear the wrath of Rome. When Jews challenged Roman authority, they, like others rebels against Rome, were crucified if caught.

One reason that I have gone on so much about crucifixion is that the four gospel writers do not dwell on it. They do not explain it. They do not tell us how horrible and degrading and painful and disgusting it was. Why do they not describe it in more detail – I believe that they do not describe it for two reasons; **first** because the people for whom they were writing, the people of the time in which they were writing fully knew and understood exactly what crucifixion entailed and **second** because no matter how Jesus was put to death – be it by crucifixion or by any other method He was killed as a traitor and a rebel by the authorities of the day because the authorities feared him and feared that He would cause the people to rise up against them. Also I think that in the present age we have sanitised death, we have removed ourselves from it as much as possible and we need to be reminded of what a horrible and painful price our Saviour paid. And here I want to emphasise my belief that Jesus died on that cross. HE WAS DEAD – don’t be fooled by any of the so-called “swoon” theories. After a scourging and beating that would have killed a normal man and then crucifixion and having a spear thrust into His side as well HE WAS DEAD!

In Summary from a Roman perspective, why did Jesus have to die?

- Because he disturbed Roman order.
- Because he spoke seditiously of a coming kingdom other than that of Caesar.
- Because he allowed himself to be called “King of the Jews.”
- Because he made a nuisance of himself at the wrong time (Passover), in the wrong place (Jerusalem), in the presence of the wrong people (Pilate and the temple leadership under his command).
- Because his crucifixion would be a powerful deterrent that might keep other Jews from following in his footsteps.

Now let’s turn our attention to the Jews.

Stew talked this morning of the prophecies in the Book of Isaiah. Jonathan has spoken in his sermon series at St Augustine’s recently about the book of Job and how Job called out for a Saviour, for an intercessor, for someone to act as a go-between between him and God.

The Jews had been longing for a Saviour to deliver them from a long series of calamities and oppressors. In fact for about the last 500 years or so before the birth of Jesus they had had no word from God, no prophets had spoken.

But what were the Jews expecting. They were expecting a conquering hero who would lead a rebellion which would throw off the yoke of oppression, defeat the Romans, drive the Romans out of Palestine and restore Israel to the glory somewhat like that which it had enjoyed in the days of Solomon. They were expecting a Messiah and most of them are still waiting!

Although the majority of Jews in Jerusalem may *not* have wanted Jesus to die, or may have had no opinion either way, some of the most influential Jews did see Jesus' death as necessary. All four New Testament gospels testify to the key role of the "chief priests" and other Jewish leaders in the effort to have Jesus crucified. The chief priests included the high priest Caiaphas, who was appointed by Pilate, and other priests who provided leadership, not only for the temple, but also for all religious and civic affairs in Jerusalem.

So, why did leading Jews in Jerusalem believe it was necessary for Jesus to die? Part of the answer to this question comes from the Gospel of John, in a scene where a group of Jewish leaders was debating the problem of Jesus' problematic popularity. *"If we let him go on like this," they said, "everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and destroy both our holy place and our nation"* (John 11:48). Jesus was stirring up the people with his message of God's kingdom and with his mighty deeds, and he wasn't the first to walk down this perilous road. Others had done so before him and the result hadn't been good for the Jews. Inevitably the Romans swept into Judea with their armies, slaughtering some, crucifying others, and taking still others into slavery. They had no hesitation about destroying an entire city if only some its residents had challenged Roman authority. So it would be logical for Jewish leaders to fear that Jesus might indeed bring down Roman wrath upon both the temple and the nation.

In the midst of this debate about the problem of Jesus, John records the counsel of the high priest, Caiaphas: "You know nothing at all! You do not understand that it is better for you to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed" (John 11:50). Caiaphas was also afraid of Roman reprisals if a rebellion broke out.

When Caiaphas and his cohort finally captured Jesus and brought him to Pilate so that he might be crucified, their accusations touched upon several ways he was endangering the Jewish people. *"We found this man perverting our nation," they said, "forbidding us to pay taxes to the emperor, and saying that he himself is the Messiah, a king"* (Luke 23:2). When Pilate was underwhelmed, they added, *"He stirs up the people by teaching throughout all Judea, from Galilee where he began even to this place"* (Luke 23:5). In other words, Jesus was both undermining orderly Roman rule (forbidding taxes, claiming to be king, stirring up the people) and seducing the Jewish people to abandon the religious commitments of the Pharisees (keeping the Sabbath, offering sacrifices in the temple, separating themselves from "sinners").

Lets sum up the story from the Jews point of view

1. Only a tiny percentage of Jews in Jerusalem were actually involved in the effort to persuade Pilate to execute Jesus. "A great number" of those in Jerusalem at the time of Jesus' death were horrified by what had happened to him (Luke 23:27).

2. Some of the leading Jews in Jerusalem, including Caiaphas, the High Priest, sought to have Jesus crucified. Evidence for this comes not only from all four New Testament gospels, but also from the Jewish historian Josephus.
3. By stirring up the people, Jesus was threatening the peace and life of the Jewish people, thus increasing the likelihood that Rome would destroy both Jerusalem and the temple. The death of Jesus would be preferable to the destruction of the nation.
4. The Jewish leaders believed that Jesus “seduced Israel and led them astray from God”. His message and ministry lessened the people’s commitment to living out their Judaism in the way approved of by the Jewish leaders.
5. Jesus interrupted the orderly system of sacrifices in the Jerusalem temple, speaking against the temple and its leaders, thus opposing not only the core of Judaism, but God himself. Jesus’ quotation from Jeremiah 7 (“den of robbers”) combined with other things he had said during his ministry clarified his condemnation of the temple – a blasphemous offense. Moreover, he insisted that God was on his side, thus adding blasphemy to blasphemy.
6. Jesus presented himself as the Messiah, the one anointed by God to bring divine salvation to Israel. But he failed to do what the Messiah was supposed to do, notably, lead a successful revolt against Rome.
7. The efforts of Jewish leaders to silence Jesus by physical violence were consistent with what other Jewish leaders did in similar situations. Caiaphas and company did exactly what Jewish leaders in their position thought they had to do when someone insulted or threatened the temple.

Now I want to look at things from Jesus’ perspective.

According to the New Testament gospels, Jesus fully appreciated that He would be tortured and killed. Yet He spoke of His death, not merely as something that would happen but as something that must happen. So, for example in Mark 8 we read “*Then He began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes and be killed and after 3 days rise again*” (Mk 8:31). On numerous occasions Jesus predicted His pending death in Jerusalem (Mk 9:31 and 10:33-34) yet He did nothing to prevent it. In fact, His actions in Jerusalem – cleansing the temple, failing to flee from those who sought to arrest Him - if anything, propelled Him to the cross.

There are lots of sayings of Jesus that show that He understood His mission here on earth, I’ll mention just a few of them.

Obedience to the Father’s Will.

In the Gospel of John Jesus makes it clear that he is choosing to die. Nobody is forcing him to do it:

“For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it

down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father.” (John 10:17-18)

Here, alongside Jesus’ claim that he freely gives up his life, is the observation that he has “*received this command from [his] Father.*” So, one major reason Jesus believed that he must be killed is that he also believed this to be the will of his Heavenly Father.

Drinking the cup

In the OT the metaphor of the cup is used to represent all the things that will fill our life. Our life can be filled with blessing or salvation or with wrath and terror. Frequently the cup stands for God’s judgement and wrath.

Jesus uses “the cup” in reference to his crucifixion in the Garden of Gethsemane, when he prays, “*Abba, Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me; yet not what I want, but what you want*” (Mark 14:36). Nevertheless, in the Garden Jesus chose to drink the cup, to take upon himself the judgment of God, so that God’s salvation might be poured out upon humankind. His death was necessary, Jesus believed, not only because the Father willed it, but also because in this way he would fulfill his calling as Israel’s Messiah and, indeed, the world’s Savior.

The Serving Son of Man

On several occasions Jesus speaks of himself as the Son of Man. And once again he says things that would have been confusing and troubling to his disciples. Earlier in Mark, Jesus said that his mission as the Son of Man involves suffering and dying (Mark 8:31; 10:33-34). When he said this in Mark 8, Peter actually began to rebuke him, presumably because he thought Jesus was speaking nonsense (8:32).

A Ransom for Many

Jesus said “*For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many*” (Mark 10:45). This idea of the serving Son of Man was radically inconsistent with first-century Jewish expectations. But even more shocking was Jesus’ revelation that he, as the Son of Man, was going to give his life “a ransom for many”.

The Last Supper

I think that Jesus’ understanding of the purpose of his death is revealed most clearly in the event we call The Last Supper: Jesus’ final meal with his disciples before he is betrayed and crucified.

In the Gospel of Mark, this final meal occurs on the occasion of the Passover, the Jewish feast that commemorates the Exodus, when God delivered the Jews from bondage in Egypt. Here is Mark’s description of the key moments of this feast:

While they were eating, he took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to them, and said, “Take; this is my body.” Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, and all of them drank from it. He said to them, “This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many. Truly I tell you, I will never again drink of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God.” (Mark 14:22-25)

It’s all too easy for us as Christians to miss the potential scandal of Jesus’ action. He and his followers are remembering God’s salvation of Israel from Egypt, not to mention God’s faithfulness to his people throughout the ages. Jesus, as host of the meal, makes a most unexpected pair of assertions and changes the focus of the Passover celebration. “*This is my body*” and “*This is my blood of the covenant.*” Until that moment in history, the Passover was primarily about God and secondarily about Israel. But now

Jesus, an apparently faithful Jewish man leading a celebration of the Passover, says in so many words: "In fact, this is all about me!" Astounding! Shocking!

If you have a hard time relating to the apparent offense of these statements, suppose that this Sunday we celebrate communion at St Augustine's, instead of saying to the people, "This is the body of Christ, broken for you," Jonathan were to say, "This is my body, the body of Jonathan Gibson. Here is God's salvation, in me." Blasphemy, you say! Indeed! His future as pastor in the Anglican Church would suddenly be in jeopardy, I can assure you.

Yet this is more or less like what Jesus was doing with the Passover. Either he was struck by a fit of megalomania, or he was somehow telling the startling truth of his life and mission. Even as Passover was all about **God's** salvation of Israel, now that salvation was being embodied in Jesus himself.

The Blood of the New Covenant

As the Last Supper draws to a close, Jesus refers to the cup of wine as "*my blood of the covenant,*" This is an allusion to the story in Exodus 24, where the people of Israel endorsed God's covenant. Then Moses, having sacrificed many animals, "*took the blood and dashed it on the people, and said, 'See the blood of the covenant that the LORD has made with you in accordance with all these words'*" (24:7-8). The new covenant will also be ratified with blood, but in this case with the spilled blood of Jesus, who, like the lambs sacrificed in the first Passover, will give his life so that God's people might be spared.

To sum up the meaning of Jesus' actions and words in the Lord's Supper, it's as if he were saying:

- Even as God once saved his people from slavery in Egypt, so God is now saving his people from slavery to sin through me.
- Even as the blood of lambs once enabled death to "pass over" Israel, so my blood will lead to the forgiveness of sin.
- Even as the first covenant was sealed with sacrificial blood, so the new covenant will be sealed through my blood, poured out for many. "*I am choosing the way of death*", Jesus says, "*so that the new life of the new covenant may come. My sacrifice will overcome the problem of sin, so that God's kingdom may be established in all its fullness.*"

Summing Up

As we have seen, Jesus not only predicted his death, but also spoke of it as being necessary (e.g. Mark 8:31).

Here's a summary of our findings:

Jesus believed that his death was the will of his Heavenly Father, so he - chose to obey the Father's will (John 10:17-18; Mark 14:36)

Jesus believed it was his calling to "drink the cup" of God's judgment, taking upon himself the righteous judgment of God upon the sin of Israel (and, indeed, all humanity) (Mark 10:38; 14:36).

Jesus believed that his mission as the Son of Man was to serve rather than to be served, and in fact to give his life as a "ransom for many" (Mark 10:45). Thus he combined the

Old Testament visions of the Son of Man (Daniel 7) and the suffering Servant of God (Isaiah 52-53)

Jesus believed that his death was at the center of God's plan for salvation, even as the exodus from Egypt was central to Old Testament salvation. Through his broken body and shed blood the new covenant would be inaugurated (Mark 14:22-25).

From a historical point of view, one can argue that Jesus died as the victim of Roman oppression or the machinations of Jewish leaders, or both. But from Jesus' point of view, he was no victim at all. As the Good Shepherd, he chose to "lay down [his] life for the sheep" (John 10:15). "No one takes it from me," Jesus said, "but I lay it down of my own accord" (John 10:18).

So, what about Jesus' death from OUR perspective, why did Jesus have to die?

I have spoken at some length about Jesus death from the perspective of the Romans and the Jewish leadership. They saw Jesus as a man, just a man, but a man who they perceived as a problem, a nuisance, someone who would get in the way, cause trouble maybe even a rebellion, someone who must be got rid of!

Jesus saw himself as the servant, the Son of Man, but also as the Son of God. But how do we see Jesus?. If we see him as just a man – a very good man, a very good teacher – but just as a man then our view must have some sympathy for the point of view of the Romans and the Jewish leaders. BUT if we look at Jesus as the Son of God then we must consider the reasons for Jesus death in a similar way to the way that He looked at it.

Jesus said that He must die "*as a ransom for many*" (MK10:45). He will bear the sin of many in order to bring the healing and forgiveness of God's kingdom.

The problem is SIN. God hates sin, he cannot bear to be near it, He cannot be in its presence. But God created us in His own image. We have all sinned, we are all sinners, I am a sinner, David is a sinner, Jonathan is a sinner. WE are all sinners, One of the few verses that I can remember and quote is Romans 3:23 "*For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.*" Now there is a problem, if God created us but we are all sinners how can we every hope to come into the glory of god, come into the presence of God.

Somewhere else it says "the wages of sin is death". So all sinners must die. Someone one said that sin and death can be described as eternal separation from God. Now I believe that God created me and He wants to spend eternity with me, and with you, with each of you, but, if we are all sinners then we will all surely will die and be eternally separated from God.

Someone had to die for us, pay our ransom or we will all have to die for our sins.

Jesus Christ came to earth for one reason only – to pay the penalty for my sins, to die for me – for me – for Graham so that I may have life eternal and dwell in my Father's house forever as the familiar words say.

For those of you who know the interior of Holy Nativity I can show you today to within a few feet where I was sitting during one of Canon Greene's sermons one Sunday

morning when the truth of John 3:16 finally hit me – God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son so that Graham may have eternal life.

In conclusion

Though it's true that Jesus died "because those in power ordered him killed," this answer doesn't get to deepest truth. The bottom line is this, according to the New Testament: Jesus died for all our sins, in fulfillment of God's plan for salvation. The human agents who killed Jesus, though acting freely and responsibly, were, nevertheless, unwittingly carrying out the divine plan (1 Corinthians 2:8).

Ironically, the immense impact of Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* has made it both harder and easier to accept the idea that Jesus' death was part of God's plan for salvation. The film has made it harder because it exposes us to the brutal, bloody reality of crucifixion. *The Passion of the Christ* has forced people in this day to confront the scandal of the cross. Yet this film has also made it easier for some people to see Jesus' death as an expression of God's loving plan. Almost all of those who view *The Passion* through the eyes of faith come away with a much deeper sense of God's love and grace. They don't blame the Jews for killing Christ, or Pontius Pilate, or even God. Rather, they take the blame on their own shoulders, realizing the Jesus died for their sins. Ask a Christian walking out of the movie why Jesus had to die, and he or she will almost always say, "For my sin. I put Jesus on the cross. Jesus had to die for me."

What's the result of this confession? I'll let the classic words of Isaac Watts answer this question, and conclude this discussion:

*When I survey the wondrous cross,
On which the Prince of glory died,
My richest gain I count but loss,
And pour contempt on all my pride.*

*Forbid it, Lord, that I should boast,
Save in the death of Christ my God;
All the vain things that charm me most,
I sacrifice them to his blood.*

*See, from his head, his hands, his feet,
Sorrow and love flow mingled down;
Did e'er such love and sorrow meet,
Or thorns compose so rich a crown.*

*Were the whole realm of nature mine,
That were a present far too small;
Love so amazing, so divine,
Demands my soul, my life, my all.*

I have one final question, look again at the last two lines of that song,
"Love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all."

How are you, each of you, how is each of us going to respond to the challenge of those lines, the challenge of Easter?