

*In the cross of Christ excess in men is met by excess in God,
excess of evil is mastered by excess of love.*

Louis Bourdaloue

St George's atonement
pilgrimage salvation
Oberammergau
August passion play
Christ Love cross

I know not for sure...how it is that you are sweeter in the heart of one who loves you in the form of flesh than as the word... It is sweeter to view you as dying on the tree, than as holding sway over the angels in Heaven, to see you as a man bearing every aspect of human nature to the end, than as God manifesting divine nature, to see you as the dying Redeemer than as the visible Creator.

Ludolph of Saxony



OBERAMMERGAU 2010



**3 SERMONS LOOKING AT THE
MEANING OF CHRIST'S CROSS**

INTRODUCTION

In August 2010 St George's Church, Newbury led a group of 35 people, not all from St George's, on a pilgrimage to Southern Germany for the Oberammergau Passion Play. For all of us it was both a holiday and a pilgrimage, staying for the first week at the superb Hotel Rieser in Pertisau, Austria. Each day there was an act of worship of one sort or another and roughly at the beginning, middle and end of the pilgrimage we held a Eucharist together. The Roman Catholic parish church of Pertisau generously allowed us to hold our first two Eucharists in their beautiful church.

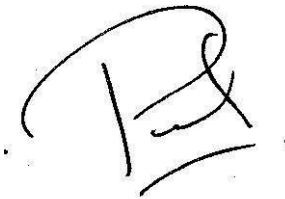
I had been asked to prepare a few talks or homilies to help us all in our focus and preparation for the passion play. There has been for me over recent years a sense of confusion and unfinished business when it comes to making sense of and articulating something of the theological meaning of Christ's death. Here was my opportunity to do a wee bit of prayerful studying, both to sort out for myself what I believe about the cross, and hopefully at the same time to offer something to our pilgrims in the lead up to seeing the play.

The following is basically the text of my three homilies given at each of the Eucharist services. Readings, hymns, and on each occasion, a piece of art were chosen to tie in with the focus of each homily. A number of our pilgrims asked afterwards for copies of the text and this booklet seemed the sensible way to provide that and expand its availability to the wider St George's congregation.

Last but not least, in my search around for appropriate hymns it became apparent that although we have beautiful hymns praising God for our salvation through Christ's cross, most are one-dimensional in their explanation of the meaning of the cross. So, in for a penny in for a pound, I've also been working on my own hymn in praise of our salvation.

I wanted a hymn that taught and celebrated most of the major ways that the church has understood salvation through the centuries, a hymn that understands that the work of salvation is Trinitarian, that sees the resurrection as an integral part, and finally that acknowledges that God's work of salvation remains a beautiful mystery beyond our comprehension. So an impossible task! Nonetheless, my work-in-progress is at the back of this booklet; it still also lacks a tune...

Anyway, I hope that amongst my struggle with many words and pictures you will find something for yourself that feeds or deepens your appreciation of God's work of salvation in your life.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Paul Cowan', with a large, sweeping initial 'P'.

Paul Cowan
September 2010

OBERAMMERGAU SERMON 1 – PENAL SUBSTITUTION

Let me begin with two questions, an easy one, and then a much harder one. The first question is this, why are we here? What draws people from across the world to Oberammergau at this time?

Fundamentally, we are all drawn here to various degrees by the event of Christ's death on a cross. And of course, the cross is a universally known symbol throughout the world.

But here's the more difficult question, even for those of us steeped in Christianity and travelling to Oberammergau. What does the cross mean? What's it about? I suspect that if we went around and were each asked to sum up the meaning of the cross in a minute, many of us would struggle. Why are we drawn or attracted to this gruesome torture and death? You and I must be pretty sick individuals to be glorying in this! Yet, here we are.

I have to say that the, 'what does it mean' question plagues me. I'm awkward with it and I struggle to answer it. The cross is at the centre of our faith, and yet if I'm confronted with this question I struggle for a coherent answer. I was pretty much asked this very question when interviewed for the St George's job, and I made a hash of it. I feel like I sailed through much of the interview and presentation, but stumbled when trying to express my understanding of salvation.

The problem is that the Bible doesn't give us a full and coherent answer and our ancient Creed uses less than one sentence in explanation of the cross - 'for our sake, and for our salvation'. So I've set myself something of a challenge on this pilgrimage.

I'm hoping to lay a personal ghost to rest and in front of all of you! I'm going to preach three homilies focussed on Christ and the cross and to do at least some justice to its meaning. And for today's homily 'justice' is a key word. But I'll come back to that.

I'm going to look at three of the classic ways of understanding the cross, on each occasion using different passages of scripture, different hymns, and on each occasion with the help of a piece of art that is trying to tell us something of the meaning of Christ's death. And I hope that in the process, these homilies will help to deepen your journey to the cross at Oberammergau and beyond it.

Understanding the cross wasn't a problem for me in the past. I'm the son of a Christian missionary doctor, and the message of the cross and salvation was clear and straightforward. Here it is. God is both fully loving and fully just, and totally separate from sin. From Adam to the present day we are all sinners, and that is the reason, the cause of our separation from our loving Creator. Union with God, to be one with God again requires that sin be dealt with. Something or someone needs to be punished. In legal terms, if the law has been broken, justice requires that someone be punished, that wrongdoing is atoned for.

The justice of the spiritual realm requires punishment by death for our sins. And only someone both human and divine can both owe the debt as a human and pay the debt as God. God's Son, although totally innocent, voluntarily takes the punishment for our sins upon himself.

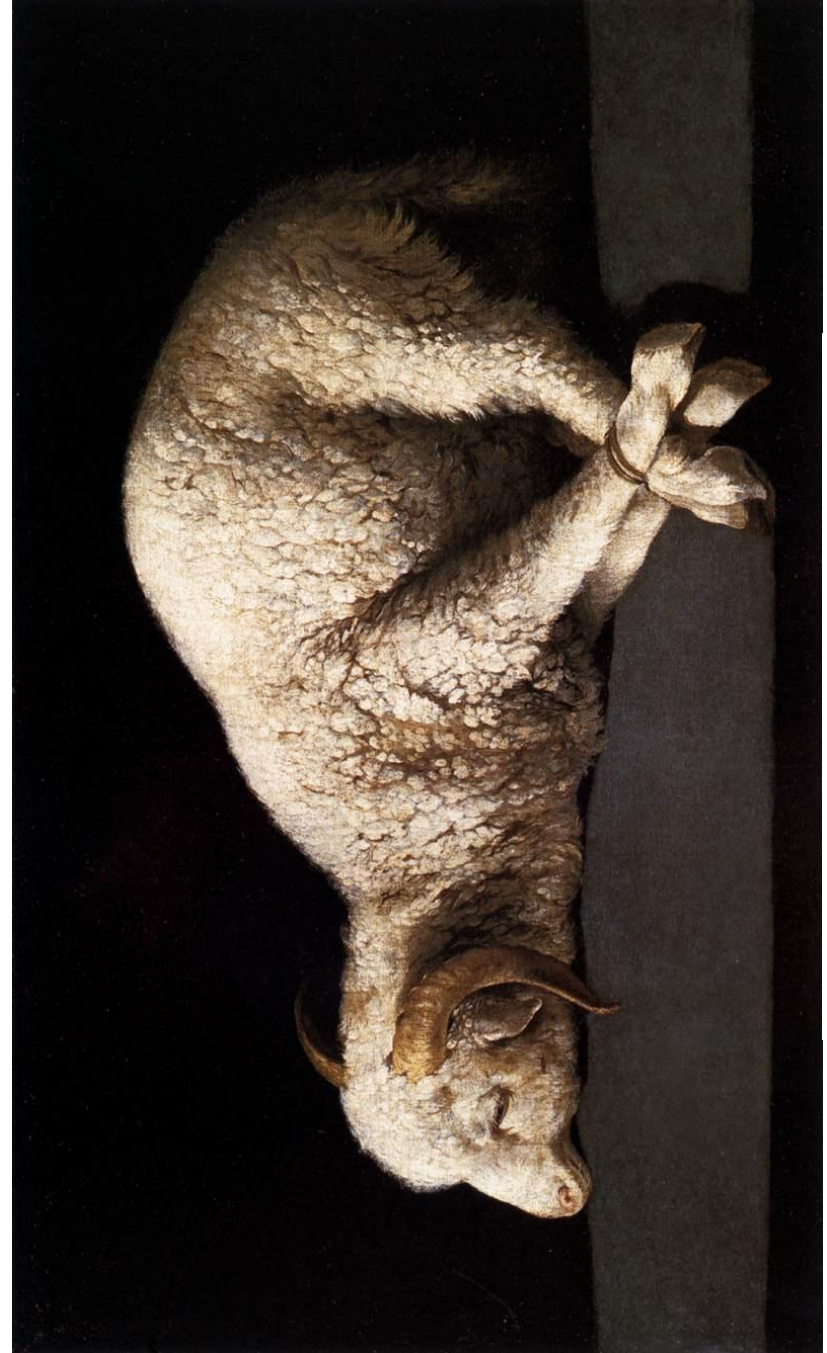
Throughout the Old Testament the problem of sin and separation from God was dealt with by meting out punishment through sacrifice of animals on the altar, the sacrificial lamb, and the scapegoat sent off into the wilderness. In Exodus, it was the blood of a sacrificed lamb daubed on the door posts that ensured that God's Spirit passed over their homes without meting out death on those living there. The blood was painted on the door frame and the animal was cooked and eaten. The Passover Lamb ensured that the Hebrews escaped from their slavery to the Egyptians.

Then comes the New Testament, the new story of God's relationship to creation. Jesus Christ becomes our Passover Lamb, sacrificed that we might escape the slavery of our own sin.

Let's have a look at Zurbaran's picture of 'The Bound Lamb'. This of course isn't simply a still life picture of bound lamb. It's lying on a stone altar and is symbolically depicting Christ, our Passover Lamb.

With that image before us, let's have our first reading.

Reading (Isaiah 53: 4 – 12)



Francisco de Zurbaran (1598-1664)
'The Bound Lamb' (*Agnus Dei*)

John the Baptist, when he first saw Jesus, cried out ‘Behold, the Lamb of God which takes away the sin of the world’. After the Eucharistic Prayer we say together what is known as the Agnus Dei - *‘Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world, have mercy on us.’*

For me, there is no liturgy of our Eucharist that holds more honesty about our human condition and the wreckage of our sin, that holds more lament and more ache, and yet at the same time holds hope in the One, God’s Son who takes away the sin of the world. And for me, that is the sin of the whole world, not just the few through the centuries who become Christians... Universal Salvation¹.

In the middle of the Eucharist, we have the Words of Institution, where I will echo Christ’s words at the last supper.

Reading (Matthew 26: 26 – 30)

‘This is my body given for you’.

‘This is my blood shed for you, for the forgiveness of sins.’

Christ is making himself our Passover Lamb at the Last Supper. The Lamb whose blood is poured out for our redemption and whose body is eaten and nourishes our souls.

Anyway, this understanding of the cross we technically call ‘Penal Substitution’. It’s a powerful, clear and very emotive message. When you look at Christ on the cross, and when we get to the Passion play, see and understand how much God loves you; that Christ is up there for you, in your place, so that you might be redeemed, forgiven, freed from your sin.

Penal Substitution is an understanding of the cross that takes sin very seriously. At our next service we’ll come back to this understanding of the cross and we’ll move beyond it, because it’s certainly not the only way to understand salvation, and it’s as problematic as it is valuable.

But for now, I’d encourage you simply to value the understanding of Christ as our Passover Lamb, sacrificed by God the Father who takes sin that seriously, and loves you and me that much.

Amen

Hymns for this service:

O Lord my God, when I in awesome wonder

In Christ alone

Brother sister let me serve you

Ah Holy Jesus how hast Thou offended

¹ Have a look at these Biblical pointers to Universal Salvation, Ephesians 1:10, Colossians 1:15-20, 1 John 2:2, 1 Timothy 4:10-11

OBERAMMERGAU 2 – RANSOM

We continue our reflections on Christ's cross and the meaning that it holds for us. My last homily focussed on Christ as our Passover Lamb, sacrificed for our sins, in our place, for our redemption. In this homily, I'm going to have a more critical look at Penal Substitution and then move on to another way of understanding Christ's death. Throughout my childhood and well into adulthood this was the only way that I was given to understand Christ's death. It wasn't until I got to Theological College that I came to appreciate that there are a number of ways of understanding the cross.

The cross and salvation are God's action, doing something that we are incapable of as humans. The Bible gives us some pointers, some metaphors to help us understand what it going on.

Penal Substitution is a legal metaphor. But it's as problematic as it is valuable, and some people can't stand it! Ultimately, this understanding of salvation sanctions violence. Here's how one clergyman and commentator put it: "penal Substitution is pretty repulsive as well as nonsensical. Why should God forgive us through punishing someone else? It was worse than illogical. It was insane. It makes God sound like a psychopath. If any human being behaved like this, we'd say they were a monster."²

And the leading evangelical leader and preacher Steve Chalke has only in very recent times come to the same conclusion. He wrote that it presents us with "a vengeful father, punishing his Son for an offence he has not even committed.

The fact is that the cross isn't a form of cosmic child abuse. Understandably, both people inside and outside of the Church have found this twisted version of events morally dubious, and a huge barrier to faith."

And in the words of Piers Nash-Williams on Good Friday last year, 'at the cross we do not see God's wrath, but rather humanity's.'

The problem is that Steve Chalke has gone from one extreme to the other. Penal Substitution is to be criticised if it's the only way we have of understanding the cross and if we take it literally. But rejecting it outright isn't reasonable either. It's one of the ways that the Bible helps us to understand salvation. The crucial point is that we value it as a metaphor; and a metaphor is a pointer on the way, not the full picture. So I would encourage you to value this legal metaphor, not to reject its value and meaning, but neither to make it the be all and end all.

Right, let's move on. Our next metaphor is financial rather than legal.

Reading (1 Timothy 2: 1 – 6)

In our reading we hear Jesus talked of as our mediator and ransom. In Romans 6 Paul talks of us as slaves to sin who are set free by God. So salvation can be talked about in terms of a ransom that is paid; that we have been bought back; that Christ has paid for our freedom from sin with his own blood. Jesus himself talked in these terms.

Let's stand to hear it from our gospel reading.

Mark 10: 35 – 45

² Jeffrey John, Holy Week on Radio Four, 2008

But this understanding of salvation begs some questions. Does God require payment for our sins? And who is this ransom paid to? Paid to the devil? A popular view amongst the church fathers was the understanding that humanity's freedom was brought back from the devil, paid for by Christ's death on the cross. The cross and salvation are rightly seen as a victory over the forces of evil.

Gregory the Great developed the idea that the devil was fooled by this transaction. Here's the thinking behind it. The devil had acquired the rights over fallen humanity, which God was obliged to respect. The only way for the devil to be defeated was if he exceeded his authority and was thus obliged to forfeit his rights. Gregory suggested that the devil was fooled by God incarnate, sinless God hidden in human form, and that in the death of Christ, the devil overstepped his authority. Gregory likened this to a fish that takes the bait but doesn't see the hook hidden inside – the humanity of Jesus being the bait and his hidden divinity, the hook. All this may seem very archaic to you and me, but there are some important messages to value within it:

- it takes seriously the creation account that says that something went badly wrong at the start, at the tree in the garden;
- that there is an all pervasive power about sin and evil that affects each and every one of us;
- that God's nature does not change;
- that God does not kill his Son;
- that the cross is about a victory over evil and oppression;

- that Christ chooses not to fight with humanity's captor, but that Christ's victory came through identification with our human condition, through love, through surrender and through death at the hands of evil.

Here when we look at the cross of Christ, that seemingly awful defeat and end, there lies the great spiritual paradox and truth. We're looking at the greatest of victories, but not won through power, domination or violence.

This understanding of salvation comes through strongly in C.S. Lewis's 'The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe'.
(reading from pp. 140 & 147)

Let's have a look at our next piece of artwork. This time it's a photograph of a 10th century cross in County Louth in Ireland. It depicts the Last Judgement and, although a little hard to see in this photocopy, under the feet of the risen and victorious Jesus there is the devil still trying to tip and cheat the scales, the weighing of souls, in his own favour.

One key thing that comes out of our reading from C S Lewis and from this sculpted cross is the centrality of the resurrection to salvation. It's a victory over death as well as over evil.

So that's our financial metaphor for understanding the cross. Like our legal metaphor I'd really encourage you to value it as another lens through which you see the cross and what it means to us. But like penal substitution it's problematic if it's taken literally, or as the only way to understand salvation.



Detail from the 10th century Muiredach cross in Co. Louth.
This side of the cross depicts the Last Judgment.

The idea of paying and fooling the devil seriously lost favour during the Enlightenment of the 17th and 18th century.

- It was all too mythological and it left too many questions.
- Does the devil really exist in this very real personified way?
- How is it that God almighty, creator of all things, can be indebted?
- Why pay the devil if you are God?
- Did or would God ever give the devil the right to hold His entire creation captive?
- And anyway, guilt can't be passed on like a financial debt.

But this understanding of the cross is far from finished with. The Enlightenment period arrogantly thought that we could overcome everything through our intellect, science and reason.

Then in the 20th century came two world wars and we saw again something of the devastating power and pervasiveness of evil that wasn't going to be conquered through science and reason. And then came Sigmund Freud and psychoanalysis and we came to realise the power of our internal subconscious forces that are no respecter of reason. Influences such as these have made it respectable to talk again about the 'forces of evil', and rather abused as a term by George Bush with his 'axis of evil'.

And in Christian circles, maybe without the images of devil, bait and hooks, we've come again to value, see and understand that in Christ's cross, a victory does take place, and that it is a victory for our sake and for our salvation that somehow sets us free, opening up new possibilities for how to live our lives.

And how to live our lives will be the focus of my last talk. But for now I'd encourage you to value, dwell on and celebrate the Cross, as a victory over evil, Christ's ransomed body, for your freedom from the slavery of sin.

Christ has liberated you! Alleluia!

Hymns for this service:
All heaven declares
The price is paid
Sing, my tongue, the glorious battle
My Lord what love is this

OBERAMMERGAU 3 – EXEMPLAR AND PARTICIPATION

So, we've looked and talked of Christ's death on the cross as a sacrifice for our sins, and as a ransom paid that frees us that is a victory over the powers of evil, and now also we're about to see the Passion played out in Oberammergau.

Very soon we return home, but before that one last look at the theology of the cross. We're going to look now at the cross not as some cosmic event that changes God's relationship with us, nor as something that defeats the power of evil, but rather we end by considering how the cross might change us, and how we might participate in God's work of salvation.

I mentioned in my last talk the Enlightenment period of the 17th & 18th century, and how the academics of the day rejected what they saw as being the irrational and superstitious belief of God sacrificing his Son, or of a ransom being paid to conquer evil. They wanted an understanding of Jesus' life and death that was fully rational and scientific. The focus was on Christ's humanity rather than his divinity. They argued that what made Jesus' life and death such an inspiring example to us all was that, like us, he was fully human. For them Christ's death wasn't about changing God or evil, but about changing us.

This way of understanding the cross and salvation gets called the Exemplar model. And it's this model and variations on it that tends to be the one most favoured amongst those of a more liberal persuasion within the church to this day.

Jesus is our wonderful and perfect example of love and obedience to be copied and to follow; fully human, fully dependent on God, and freely choosing the journey to Golgotha.

By his life and death we are inspired to love our enemies, to forgive, to repent, to improve our lives and to love everyone. Salvation comes through following our great exemplar.

Let's have our first reading (*Philippians 2: 1 – 12*)

These beautiful words are clearly a call to follow the example of Christ, and to be transformed by doing so. Salvation isn't only about what God does, or what happens to evil, out there in some other spiritual realm. The cross is, but isn't only, where we see the nature of God stripped bare in total love and surrender, and humanity's hate and depravity on full view. Jesus on the cross is also calling out to you and me in an inspiring but also terrifyingly shocking way. Jesus walks willingly to the cross and his death and there says this - 'Follow me'.

Let's stand for the gospel (*Mark 8: 34 – 37*)

For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.

This is a shocking call; the opposite of a 'call to arms'. God's kingdom is not one that can ever dawn through coercion and force, which are always self-defeating in the end, but rather through vulnerability and self-sacrifice. It's on the basis of this teaching of Jesus that so many early Christians chose torture and death rather than denying their faith. Indeed some went as far as to see martyrdom as the ultimate act of faith, following Christ.

To this day there our contemporary Christian brothers and sisters who are tortured and killed because they choose to follow Christ. For them our readings today are surely a great inspiration and strength.

Not just because they are following Jesus' call, but also because Good Friday is intrinsically tied to Easter Sunday. The cross and our sufferings are a tragic event without the Resurrection.

The Resurrection shows us that God is bigger than human suffering and bigger than death. The Resurrection, as much as the cross, encourages us to see and live our lives differently. Christ's cross and resurrection have always been a great source of strength and hope to those who suffer physically and for those terminally ill. In looking at a crucifix they see Jesus, who was fully human and who can fully identify with their suffering. The cancer patient might find themselves praying with Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, '*not my will, but Yours be done,*' even if it leads to an untimely death like Christ's.

Along with 'Exemplar' my other key word for this talk is 'Participation'. Salvation isn't just something that happened 2,000 years ago as our legal and financial metaphors might suggest. Salvation is also a process - a journey that I am on, you are on, the world is on. Some of Jesus' parables, particularly the parables about the kingdom, point to this continuing process and growth, the mustard seed, the yeast, the wheat and weeds that are left to grow. You and I are born again and are also in the process of being born again.

The same Jesus Christ who died on the cross all those years ago is also our companion on the way today. As he walked on the road to Emmaus with those disillusioned followers and broke bread with them, so also today, here and now, we will share bread, his bread, his life feeding our lives, and then at the end we are sent out into the world, to '*go in peace to love and serve the Lord*'. This is a call to participate in the work of salvation, by our love and service of each other, and by our love and service of the world.

Let's now look at our final picture. This is one that is I suspect more familiar. It's Stanley Spencer's *Christ Carrying the Cross*. What I like about the picture is the way that it brings Christ and his cross into the present-day ordinariness of our lives. It's still Jesus who carries the cross, and yet he is almost unseen amongst the crowd. The figures carrying the ladders suggest that sense of participation, helpers in the work of salvation without ever actually taking Jesus' place.

But now, as with our last two talks, it's only right that I highlight the limits of this exemplar understanding of salvation.

I suppose the obvious and fundamental problem is that it doesn't deal adequately with sin - my sins, your sins. As much as you and I choose to follow, come all this way across Europe to be re-inspired, again and again and again we fail to fully follow, to live the life and death that Jesus did. You and I need redemption, over and beyond ourselves. I have tried hard enough and failed more than enough to know that an inspiring example alone, even when it's Jesus, isn't enough to transform me. I need to be saved from myself, and Jesus of Nazareth only as a fellow human being is not enough to save me. There lies the major problem with the exemplar model. But, as with our legal and financial metaphors, it's only a problem if you make it the be all and end all of your way of understanding the cross.



Stanley Spencer (1891-1959)
Christ Carrying the Cross

I think Stanley Spencer's picture is quite clever, because it has something of an exemplar and participation focus to it. The local community are part of the journey with local workmen carrying ladders and yet it still portrays the redemptive work as God's; it is still Jesus almost hidden, there amongst the crowd who is the one carrying the cross.

You've all generously put up with me talking way too much in my attempts to broaden yours' and my understanding and appreciation of the meaning of Christ's death. I feel, for myself, that I've laid a few ghosts and points of confusion to rest. Together we've looked at Christ's death and what it means in a variety of ways over the past 10 days; as a sacrifice, a ransom, victory over evil, and today as an example to follow and a work to participate in.

My namesake, the Apostle Paul, states to the Corinthians that Christ crucified is a stumbling block to the Jews and foolishness to Gentiles. Well, I believe that Christ crucified is a mystery to us all. And, do you know, I'm finding that to be okay, and I hope you are too.

Christ crucified continues to hold the world's fascination, not only because it is central to our salvation but also, I believe, because it speaks to our deepest need to be saved from our suffering; and yet at the same time it remains a mystery to us.

As I journey on in my faith and my yearning to be one with God, I have found that much has been deconstructing of my childhood teachings. More and more of my faith is becoming based on an acceptance of mystery. And yet the diet seems to get fuller and richer.

As part of my preparation for these talks, I had a look through some of my theological commentaries. On the subject of 'Atonement', after a plethora of words explaining the theories developed through the last two millennia by Christendom's greatest thinkers I was heartened by this final sentence; *'It should be added finally that there has never been any official formulation in orthodox Christianity of the mystery of the Lord's redemptive work...'*

Jesus Christ continues to be the sweetest of mysteries. I hope and pray for each of you, that the journey of Christ's life, death and resurrection continues to grow within you and with and in those you endeavour to love and serve.

Amen

Hymns for this service:

Praise to the holiest in the height
From heaven You came
Will You come and follow me
I the Lord of sea and sky

A HYMN OF SALVATION (A WORK IN PROGRESS...)

Lord God and Father to us all,
Ancient Love that has no limits
who gave his Son for me.
God's sacrificial lamb, who takes my place,
an altar for a throne, poured out for my salvation.
Your cross means this and so much more to me

*Praise be to Christ our Lord,
For the mystery of your Cross [and resurrection]
beyond my comprehension
speaking to my heart
and calling me home*

Lord Jesus Christ, my ransomed saviour,
whom you paid I do not know,
with your body two in nature.
It was the price that set me free,
and broke the powers that held all captive.
Your cross means this and so much more to me

God the Holy Spirit, ever present in each moment,
today draws pilgrims to this cross,
where Jesus Christ our great exemplar
to willing hearts these words still spoken,
'Take up your cross and follow me'
Your cross means this and so much more to me