Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ,

Symbols are very powerful things. For example, all around the world, Golden Arches means you have found a MacDonalds! And when you see an eight-sided red sign beside the road? That always means stop. And of course, the symbol that brings us so much joy today is the one with three curves that means WiFi!

Well, behind me on the wall is perhaps the symbol that most people associate with Christianity – it is the cross. If people know anything about Christianity, it will be that Jesus was nailed to, and died on, a cross. And the day of the year that is most associated with the cross is today – Good Friday.

So, this raises some questions that we want to reflect on this Good Friday morning.

1. The first is **why the cross**? Why did Jesus die this way and not another?
2. And the second is **Why *three* crosses**? All four Gospels tell us that Jesus was crucified with two criminals; one on each side of Him. Why?
3. And finally, as we tie our answers together, **What is the Three Cross Gospel**?
4. So our first question is: **Why the cross**? What is the significance of Jesus dying on a cross?
   1. Well, the first thing we should note is that there is **nothing special about the particular cross that Jesus died on**.
      1. And the reason we note this is because of the fire in the Cathedral of Notre Dame this past week. You see, one of the things that the Cathedral was famous for was that it displayed what it claims is the actual crown of thorns that Jesus wore on the cross and a piece of the actual cross that Jesus died on.
      2. According to Roman Catholic tradition, Constantine, the first Christian Emperor of Rome, in AD 327, ordered the then Bishop of Jerusalem to tear down the temple of Venus that had been built on the site of Calvary and to build a Basilica there instead. And during the excavations, builders found three crosses. The problem was, though, that they all looked the same. But the solution was obvious: A woman who is now known as St Helena brought a dying woman to the place so that she could touch each of the crosses. And after touching one of them, she was instantly healed, which was a sure sign that *that* cross was the cross of Jesus.
      3. So this is why you can find what are claimed to be pieces of the actual cross of Jesus in churches all around the world. And Roman Catholics will make pilgrimages to these churches and bow down before ‘the pieces of the cross’ and touch and kiss them if they can. And of course they believe that those ‘cross pieces’ have healing powers.
      4. What many commentators have observed though is that there seem to be enough pieces of the cross of Jesus to rebuild Noah’s Ark! And yet, each person who was to be crucified had to carry his own cross out to the place of crucifixion!
      5. Congregation, Jesus was not crucified on a cross so that we could hunt down the left over pieces and worship them. **John 4:24** tells us that God seeks those who worship Him in Spirit and in truth. We are to worship not the cross but the one who was crucified on the cross!
   2. And the reason why this is so is made very plain for us in a passage like **Galatians 3:10-13** (p. 973). Let’s turn there together and walk through the point made there:
      1. In v10 we read, “*For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse, for it is written: ‘Cursed is everyone who does not abide by all things written in the book of the law, and do them.’*”
         1. What this verse is saying is that if we do not keep every one of God’s commandments *perfectly*, we are under a curse. If we do not always and perfectly love God with all of our heart, mind, and strength; if we do not always and perfectly love our neighbour as ourselves, we deserve death and eternal damnation in hell.
         2. So that means that you and me and everyone else deserves this curse: Just one angry thought, one lie or half truth, one moment of irritation, one word of gossip, one act of selfishness, one moment of envy, one missed prayer opportunity, one lustful thought, one moment of distraction during worship, just one bit of disobedience, makes us deserve God’s curse.
      2. And that is what **vv11-12** explain: “*Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law*.” To be worthy of heaven, you must be justified, which means without sin and perfectly obedient. And we simply cannot be justified by trying to keep God’s law. So if our keeping God’s law perfectly was our only hope for heaven, we would be without hope.
      3. But look now at **v13**: “*Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us.*”
         1. Instead of us being cursed and receiving the punishment that the curse deserves, Christ took the curse on Himself and received our punishment. Someone had to pay the price for our law-breaking and Christ chose to do it.
      4. And **the rest of v13** tells us *how* He did it: “*For it is written: "Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree."*”
         1. Those words are a quote from **Deuteronomy 21**. According to the Law for Israel, the body of a person who was executed for a capital offense was to be hung on a tree for “*A hanged man is cursed by God*.”
         2. So that is why Jesus had to die on the cross. We deserve God’s curse but Jesus chose to endure our curse Himself. And to do that the law required Him to die the death of a cursed one – His body had to hang on a tree. The cross was necessary so that instead of God’s curse falling on you and me, it fell on Jesus.
      5. And that is why the end of **v11** says, “*The righteous shall live by faith*.” We cannot earn heaven by keeping God’s law perfectly. What we have to do is **believe** that Jesus took our place on the cross. This is why the cross is described as the place of the glorious exchange. He takes our sins; we receive His sinlessness. He takes our guilt; we receive His perfect obedience. And we receive this by faith, as we believe that He did this for us.
      6. Do you believe this? Do you believe that Jesus did this for you? I hope you do. It is your only hope for eternal life!
5. So Jesus had to die on the cross so that He could take the curse of God from us. Well, that brings us to the next question which is **Why *Three* Crosses**? Why does each Gospel tell us that Jesus was crucified with two others?
   1. Well, our answer to that question begins as we think about what those two others were. Boys and girls, can one of you tell us what the two men crucified with Jesus were? We are told in v32 – they were **criminals**.
      1. And what are criminals? Criminals are people who break the law. And we have just seen from Galatians 3 that in God’s eyes, every human being is a law-breaker. Just one sinful thought or word or deed makes us a law-breaker.
      2. So the first reason why there were three crosses is that these criminals represented all of sinful humanity. These two men are a powerful picture of what we all *are* – law-breakers, and what we all *deserve* – death and judgment.
   2. But the second reason that there were three crosses comes from our earlier reading in **Isaiah 53**. Isaiah 53 is a prophecy about Jesus. It was written around 700 years before Jesus was born but it contains very explicit details about Jesus’ death and resurrection. One of them is that in His death He “was *numbered with the transgressors*.” And ‘transgressor’ is another word for a law-breaker or a criminal.
      1. So if Jesus had been crucified alone, this prophecy would have been unfulfilled. But He was not crucified alone; He had a criminal on either side of Him.
      2. In fact, in the eyes of many who were there when Jesus was crucified, Jesus was also a criminal. So He truly was “*numbered with the transgressors*.” The three crosses were the perfect fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecy.
   3. But that verse in Isaiah goes on to say, “*He bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors*.” And with these words we see that more people are in view than just these two criminals; Jesus is bearing the sin of a much larger group.
      1. **Isaiah 53:5** says, “*But He was wounded for our transgressions; He was crushed for our iniquities; upon Him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with His stripes we are healed*.”
      2. Who is *our*? Who is *us*? For whom did Christ suffer and die? Well, that question is answered by **John 3:16**: “*For God so loved the world, that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life*.” Jesus bore the sins of and made intercession for all who believe that what He did on the cross, He did for them.
6. And with these words, we have begun our third and last point, which is **the three cross gospel**!
   1. Jewish and Roman history tells us that it was common for **a sign** to be placed above those crucified. And the sign would explain the charges against the criminal and they served as a warning to others not to commit the same crimes. So we can be pretty sure that above the heads of the two criminals were boards upon which was written their crimes.
      1. And both of them are described in Matthew and Mark as ‘**robbers**.’ And boys and girls, robbers does not mean those who nick a few coins or an apple. The word robbers is used to describe the men in the story of the Good Samaritan who assaulted the traveler and stole all his belongings and left him for dead. So these men were probably violent criminals.
   2. But what was written above Jesus’ head? We are told in v38 that on the sign above Him read, “*This is the King of the Jews*.” The full inscription, according to John, was: “*Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews*.” And John tells us that the words were written by Pontius Pilate. And you might remember that Pilate said, three times, that He couldn’t find Jesus guilty of any crime. But there had to be a charge board above the head of a crucified person. So Pilate wrote, “*Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews*.” And unwittingly, in writing these words, Pilate proclaims the Gospel!
      1. His name is? **Jesus**.
         1. What does Jesus mean? In Matthew 1:21, Joseph was told to give Mary’s baby the “*name Jesus because He will save His people from their sins*.”
         2. And so, by the order of the Roman Governor, it is announced and declared that the person on this cross is the one who “will save His people from their sins.”
      2. And then the sign tells us that He is from **Nazareth**.
         1. And this is a fulfillment of prophecy. **Matthew 2:23** saysthis about Jesus, “*And He went and lived in a city called Nazareth, that what was spoken by the prophets might be fulfilled: "He shall be called a Nazarene."*”
         2. You see, Nazareth was the most despised of all the cities in Israel. When Nathanael the disciple was told to come and meet Jesus of Nazareth, He said, “*Can anything good come out of Nazareth?*” And as we read in our Isaiah passage, the Messiah would “*despised and rejected by men*.” And the crucifixion of Jesus was the ultimate rejection of Jesus as the promised Messiah by the Jews.
         3. But by the order of the Roman Governor, it is announced and declared that Jesus is the prophesied Messiah!
      3. But lastly the sign tells us that Jesus of Nazareth is the **King of the Jews**.
         1. In 2 Samuel 7, God promised King David that one day a Son of his would rule as Israel’s eternal king! And so, from that day on, the people of Israel waited for this promised king.
         2. But as we have seen in our regular Sunday morning sermon series from the Gospel of John, by the time Jesus came to earth, the king the people expected was a king who would smash the Romans and make Israel great again!
         3. But Jesus came preaching repentance from sin and belief in Him for eternal life as the message of His kingdom. And now, here He was hanging on a cross, dying! What sort of a king was that?
      4. But there was one person there that day who read the sign above Jesus and believed that He was the promised Messiah. And do you know who that was? It was one of the criminals.
         1. The other one, as we see in v39, mocked Jesus. And assuming that He died without repenting and believing, the mocking criminal represents all those who reject Jesus and who will be condemned to an eternity in hell.
         2. But from v40 we read “*but the other [criminal] rebuked him, saying, ‘Do you not fear God," he said, "since you are under the same sentence? We are punished justly, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed justly, for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds. But this man has done nothing wrong*.’ *And he said, ‘Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.’ And He said to him, ‘Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise.*’”
         3. This criminal recognized that he was a guilty sinner who deserved God’s judgment. In other words, he repented of his sins. He acknowledged that he had done wrong and he freely confessed this. And He also recognized that Jesus, the one who had done nothing wrong, was his only hope for salvation. So He looked to Jesus as his *saviour*.

And right there, dear friends, you have **the simplicity of the three-cross gospel**:

On the cross in the centre is Jesus – the Saviour.

On the crosses beside Him are criminals who represent us all.

The question is: Are you like the criminal who mocked Jesus? If you are, you will get what you deserve – an eternity in hell. Or are you like the criminal who recognized his sin and believed in Jesus as His Saviour? If you are, you will get what you do *not* deserve – eternal life in heaven!

Praise God for the cross of Jesus Christ! Amen.