

He was crucified, died and rose again...

Life can be amazing. When we open our eyes and look around us, in the words of the song, we think to ourselves what a wonderful world. Even in the midst of pain and difficulty, there are so many good things to give thanks for and to enjoy. But even on the best of days, when life is going as well as it can, when we have enough and we are content, even on those best days, there are shadows in our lives. There are the shadows of the darkness within us. The universal human tendency to mess things up. Our pride and selfishness, our greed and fear and regrets. Those shadows build over the course of a lifetime. They grow into heavy burdens.

There's a shadow too at the darkness at the end of the journey. What the Bible calls the shadow of death. The knowledge that this beautiful life we enjoy, the person we have become is finite. The pandemic has reminded us that our hold on this life is fragile. Can this life be all there is? What lies beyond that final shadow?

Welcome to the third in this series of short films exploring the great story of Christian faith in the Apostles' Creed. I'm Steven, the Bishop of Oxford. Thank you for taking this journey with us and daring to begin or to begin again the great adventure of Christian faith.

We looked first at what it means to place our faith and trust in Almighty God, the Father, creator of Heaven and Earth. Next, we focused on what it means to say, I believe in Jesus Christ, his only son, our Lord. And we continue our focus on Jesus today.

If you've read any of the Gospels, you will know that all of them focus a lot of time and space on the final days of Jesus' life, leading to the cross. And each gospel makes a remarkable claim, that Jesus Christ rose from the dead on the third day, and appeared to his disciples and still lives. And all of this is summed up in the next lines of the Creed:

Jesus Christ suffered under Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor, was crucified, died and was buried. He descended to the dead. On the third day, he rose again; he ascended into heaven.

What do these central events mean for Christians, and for the world? What do they mean for that darkness within us, and the shadows cast by death?

According to the Gospels, Jesus shared a special meal with his disciples on the night before he died. Before the meal in an upper room, Jesus kneels and washes their feet. He shows his friends that depth of his love and he shows us how we are to be with one another as servants and friends.

Then during the meal, Jesus gives his friends the way to understand his death and resurrection. He takes a loaf of bread, give thanks, breaks it, and gives it to them. Jesus says, 'This is my body, that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.' Then he takes a cup of wine and says, 'This cup is the New Covenant in my blood. Do this in remembrance of me.'

Jesus here gives his death on the cross a powerful meaning. Jesus goes to his death willingly - he offers his life. Jesus' body is broken, and his life is poured out for us, for the forgiveness of sins, so that the darkness within us can be overcome, so that we can be made new. Jesus died on the cross but God raised him to life. The shadow of death is overcome not just for Jesus, the son of God, but for everyone who follows Jesus. There is new, rich, eternal life like the best wine offered to all.

And Jesus sets this common meal at the very centre of the life of the church. We gather physically or virtually around a table. We take bread and wine. We remember the life-saving, life-giving death of Jesus, and the wonderful truth that God raised Jesus from the dead, and that Jesus is alive. We receive the bread, the Body of Christ. This bread strengthens us for the next part of our journey.

We receive the wine, the blood of Christ, remembering Christ's sacrifice for our sins, but also the rich new wine of life in God's Kingdom. And as we gather around the table of the Lord, we are formed by God into the body of Christ in the world, the Church, and we are sent out Sunday by Sunday, to be the hands and feet and lips and hearts and minds of Christ in every place where we live and work.

At the moment, much of our worship is virtual. We receive Holy Communion spiritually, but not physically. Soon that physical worship will be restored, and we will treasure the privilege of receiving the bread and the wine once again, with all that the sacrament, the sign of God's great love, means to us. When we come to Christ, there is a new beginning. We place our faith and trust in Jesus. That's a very powerful thing. The darkness within us is turned to light. The burdens we carry from our past sins and the hurts others have done to us roll away. Baptism is such a powerful symbol of being washed from head to foot on the outside as a sign of being washed completely on the inside and made new, of going down into the water to die with Christ and rising up to new life with Christ. Here and for eternity. We cannot earn these gifts of forgiveness and eternal life. They are offered to us freely by God, and we can never fully understand them with our minds. We receive them in faith and trust. As we receive them, again and again, so our lives make sense and God gives us strength to live for others, not for ourselves.

We're halfway through this short introduction to Christian faith now. Halfway through Matthew's Gospel on the journey, Jesus gives this beautiful invitation to everybody.

'Come to me, all that are weary and carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.'

So hear that same invitation today. Think about the darkness within and the shadow cast by death. Come to Christ, crucified and risen. And find rest for your souls.