Jesus: Pierced but Unbroken
John 19:31-42

Back in April, the journal *Nature* ran some articles on *the* most cited scientific papers. And maybe unsurprisingly, for papers published in the 21st century, research on AI topped the list. Maybe much more surprisingly, at least if you're not a professor of Chemistry, is that *the* most cited paper of all time was published in 1951 and carries the exciting title, 'Protein measurement with the folic phenol reagent.' Which I'm sure is a gripper to read.

But why cite anything? I mean, when you're writing a paper, or your thesis, why footnote someone else's work, or if you've published on it before, your own work?

And the answer is, it's this previous research that gives the basis for what you're claiming about your current research. That you're not just conjuring this out of thin air. That there's a foundation, a body of knowledge that makes this credible.

So look at v35 of today's passage. John's describing the events surrounding Jesus' death, and then he says, 'He who saw it has borne witness - his testimony is true, and he knows that he is telling the truth.' And it's like he's just inserted a citation, a footnote: why can you trust what I'm writing to you? Because we have eyewitness testimony. In fact, just like how those of you in research might reference your own work, this eyewitness John is talking about is almost certainly John himself.

And yet, as you look at what he's telling us, it's not just the facts, is it? He's telling us the facts for a reason. So this morning, I'd like us to consider three of them. Firstly, that this is truth to be believed; secondly, it's truth to be received, and thirdly, it's truth to be lived.

Truth to be Believed
Verse 35 again, 'He who saw it has borne witness - his testimony is true, and he knows that he is telling the truth - *that you may believe*.'

Now, if you were to pick up a newspaper - if you remember what one of those was - what does it have inside it? There's news - this is what happened. There are opinion pieces - someone views on what's happening. And there are the agony aunt columns, or the life style sections - you've got a problem, well here's how to fix it.

Yet when John tells us what happened at the cross, he's going beyond just the facts, or the news isn't he? But he's also not just giving us his opinion, or his advice on how to live. He gives us the facts and then says, 'that you may believe.'

Which means, if you're a Christian he wants to strengthen your faith, but if you're not yet a christian, he wants to challenge your beliefs and help you change them.

And there lies a problem, doesn't it? Because today, people don't like other people trying to change people's beliefs - whether in school, on campus, or in the workplace. Because to do so is to suggest that your views are right and someone else's are wrong. And you're welcome to your beliefs, you can believe whatever you want, maybe, but you've got to keep those beliefs private.

But that's intellectually unsustainable, isn't it? Because what is that? It's also a belief, about how people should behave, about what's acceptable or not. In fact, it's saying, 'I can talk about my beliefs - that you've got to keep yours private - but you can't talk about yours.' Which is also to impose your beliefs on someone else.

So far from John's approach - challenging and trying to persuade - being troubling, in reality it's the intellectually consistent and morally transparent thing to do.

But of course, talk of morality is also troubling isn't it? Because the secular view is, it's not just wrong to try and persuade other people of your beliefs, because you think you're right and they're wrong, it's that you're also saying you're *better* than everyone else. Which is the fundamental problem with religion. But look at history - you religious people are not better than everyone else,. What you are is hypocrites.

Ok, but did you notice what John's doing here? It's almost as if he's trying to get us to see the gulf that lies between Jesus and religious hypocrisy.

Verse 31, 'Since it was the day of Preparation, and so that the bodies would not remain on the cross on the Sabbath (for that Sabbath was a high day), the Jews asked Pilate that their legs might be broken and that they might be taken away.'

So it's Friday, and tomorrow is Saturday, the Sabbath. But not just any Sabbath, it's the Passover itself. And normally, the Romans would leave the victims of crucifixion on their crosses until they died - but that could take days.

And the religious leaders don't want that. And the reason they don't want that is that in the Law it says, 'If a man has committed a crime punishable by death and he is put to death, and you hang him on a tree, his body shall not remain all night on the tree, but you shall bury him the same day, for a hanged man is cursed by God' (Deut 21:22-23).

And if that was true of any day, how much more true should it be of this day, with a holy day, the Passover sabbath, approaching. 'So let's get this place cleaned up.' So 'Pilate do what you have to do to speed up death. Have your soldiers break their legs to stop them pushing up and filling their lungs with air.'

But do you see the irony of that? They want to obey the small print of the law - while all the time they've just condemned an innocent man to death. So Jesus is not the instigator of religious hypocrisy, he's a victim of it.

So as John gives us the facts to strengthen or to change our beliefs, he's not trying to manipulate or promote self-righteousness. He's telling us the facts because they have the power to change our lives.

Truth to be Received

And in the New Testament, the writers use a word to describe the facts - and it's a word they've borrowed - and borrowed it from the first century equivalent of newspapers. And it's the word gospel - literally *good* news. Because if your king defeats his enemies or the army wins a decisive battle, it's gospel.

So it's not a list of tasks you've got to do, or even advice to heed or a path to follow. It's the announcement of what someone else has done. And it's good… because it's going to impact your life for good.

And yet, what John describes here doesn't look good, does it. In fact, it has bad news stamped all over it. Verses 32-34: 'So the soldiers came and broke the legs of the first, and of the other who had been crucified with him. But when they came to Jesus and saw that he was already dead, they did not break his legs. But one of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, and at once there came out blood and water.'

And there's debate over the medical explanation of what happens here. In extremis, has fluid collected around Jesus' heart, and when the soldier shoves in his spear first you get the blood from the heart and then that fluid? Or is this blood and fluid that has collected around his lungs?

In a sense, it doesn't matter, does it - that's not John's point. Charles Dickens begins *A Christmas Carol* by writing, 'Marley was dead: to begin with. There is no doubt whatever about that…. This must be distinctly understood, or nothing wonderful can come of the story I am going to relate.'

And John wants us to understand: Jesus is dead - that there is no doubt whatever about that - and the solider has just confirmed it - and he wants you to see it and believe it - or nothing wonderful can come of it.

Because in the chapters that follow, John's going to tell us this once dead Jesus is alive again. And yet, this is more than just setting the stage for the resurrection, isn't it. Look again at what John writes, v35-36, I'm telling you you this, 'that you also may believe. <u>*For*</u> these things took place that the Scripture might be fulfilled.'

In other words, there's a reason why Jesus' legs were *not* being broken. And there's a reason why his side *was* pierced and blood and water flowed out. That these events are telling us something, because they're the fulfilment of Scriptures that tell us something.

And the first Scripture is v36, "Not one of his bones will be broken." And John is quoting Exodus 12:46, and how when the Israeltites are to take a lamb at Passover and sacrifice it, they're not to break any of its bones. And you might read that and go, 'but that's go nothing to do with Jesus - it's about a sacrificial lamb.'

But remember how John begins this gospel? With John the Baptist saying of Jesus, "Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29). And this is happening at Passover - when the people remembered the first Passover, and God rescuing his people from slavery in Egypt. And how they sacrificed a lamb, painting its blood over their doorways, so that when the angel of God's wrath passed over, they were protected. The lamb's life for their life.

And so John is saying, can you see how Jesus is the ultimate Passover lamb? His bones unbroken and his blood shed, his life given in your place, to protect you from God's wrath against sin, and to free you from slavery to sin.

Because the religious leaders were right, weren't they - in part. The one hung upon the tree was cursed by God. But as Paul writes to the Galatians, that's because he was taking the curse for us: 'Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, "Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree"' (Gal 3:13).

And when you see that, when you believe that, John is saying, you'll never doubt his love for you. You'll never have to live in that nagging fear, 'have I done enough to be forgiven? Have I done enough to atone for my sins?' And you'll never have to beat yourself up when you fail yet again. You just need to look at him, pierced but unbroken, your Passover lamb sacrificed for you, to take away your sin. Believe that and receive that, John is saying.

But then there's the second Scripture, v37, "They will look on him whom they have pierced." And John's taken that from Zechariah 12:10. But if you look at it in it's original setting, notice the use of pronouns: "When they look on *me*, on *him* whom they have pierced." So who's the him? Is it God who's pierced or is it someone else? Well, it must be someone else, because Zechariah immediately goes on to say, 'They shall mourn for him, as one mourns for an only child, and weep bitterly over him, as one weeps over a firstborn.' But if it's someone else, then why does God say 'it's me'?

But that's the wonder John wants you to see and believe, isn't it. That this one hanging upon the cross, pierced by nails and spear, is God himself, God the One and Only Son, absorbing in himself the curse we deserve.

And yet, when a New Testament writer quotes the Old, he wants you to see the quote in its context. And read on a few verses and Zechariah says, "On that day [the day when they look on the one pierced] there shall be a fountain opened for the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem, to cleanse them from sin and uncleanness" (13:1).

In Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, Macbeth murders King Duncan in his sleep. But from then on his conscience plagues him, crying out to him 'you have murdered sleep, and now you will never sleep.' And as he looks at his blood stained hands, Macbeth says, 'Will all great Neptune's ocean wash this blood clean from my hand?' His wife, Lady Macbeth, dismisses such talk as weakness. Until her own conscience starts plaguing her, and she paces the floor at night, constantly washing her hands, crying out 'all the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand.'

Now, if you were their therapist, what would you say to them? Because what are they experiencing? It's guilt isn't it? And what can cleanse a guilty conscience when all the world's water and the sweetest of perfumes can't do it?

Ah, our modern culture might say, guilt is just a social construct. It's just the way society has trained you to think to keep you in check. As Freud put it, guilt is just 'the secret agent of public order'.

But you know that's not true. Because you and I are not Macbeth, and yet, aren't there days when you feel grubby, or dirty, or slimed by what you've done that you shouldn't have done or left undone that you should have done? Because deep on the inside you know there's this law written: 'Don't do this…' But we go and do it anyway. So where are Lord and Lady Macbeth to go? Where are you and I to go?

Well, in his first letter, John writes, 'The blood of Jesus his son cleanses us from every sin.' (1 John 1:9). Because when you look on the one who was pierced, and you see the blood and water flow, you know, John is saying, that God has opened a fountain to cleanse you. And the Macbeths are right, nothing you can do can wash you clean, but Christ can, because he's paid the price of guilt

and sin and shame for you. You *can* know you're clean. So, John says, look upon him, believe, and receive.

But if you read the commentaries, scholars point out that there's another fountain opened in the Old Testament - and it's also linked to Passover. You see, when God delivers his people from slavery, they get to the desert, and what do they need? Water. And what can't they find? Water. So what do they start doing? Complaining: "Give us water to drink!" So God says to Moses, "Behold, I will stand before you there on the rock at Horeb, and you shall strike the rock, and water shall come out of it, and the people will drink" (Ex 17:6). Which Moses does, and water comes out, and the people drink. But ask yourself, as Moses strikes that rock, what - or who - is he striking? Because God has said he is standing on the rock. So, in a sense, Moses strikes God, and water flows, and a grumbling people drink. And Paul reads that and says, 'They drank from the spiritual Rock that followed them, and the Rock was Christ.' (1 Cor 10:4)

So it's not just that we sin and those sins need atoning for. It's not just that we know guilt and our guilt needs cleansing. It's that we're thirsty, for meaning and security and significance, and when life is not going the way we want we can grumble. And John is saying, but look at him. Look at him struck for you. Look at him pierced for you. That's how much he loves you. That's how much he cares for you. So come and have your thirst quenched in him.

And as you do - what Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus tell us is - it will change you. Because it'll give you a courage and a purpose to live for.

Truth to be Lived

Verse 38-39: 'After these things Joseph of Arimathea, who was a disciple of Jesus, but secretly for fear of the Jews, asked Pilate that he might take away the body of Jesus, and Pilate gave him permission. So he came and took away his body. Nicodemus also, who earlier had come to Jesus by night, came bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about seventy-five pounds in weight.'

So here are two well-respected, well-connected, intelligent men, - people like you - and they're coming out of hiding. Joseph's clearly already a believer - but he's kept his head down out of fear of what his colleagues might think. And 'Nicodemus also', as John puts it, previously only visited Jesus at night, probably because he didn't want to be seen going there in the day.

But now, Joseph is willing to risk everything - the censure and social ostracism of his Jewish colleagues, and the suspicion and rebuke of Rome. And Nicodemus is willing to come out of the shadows and not just identify with Jesus, but source and pay for somewhere around 33kg of expensive spices.

Why? Why side now with a dead man who's died accursed by God and condemned as an outlaw? I mean, what's the point of doing that now?

It's why some commentators suggest they're driven by disgust. They've watched the way their fellow leaders have manipulated and orchestrated Jesus' death and they want nothing to do with it. And their moral revulsion stirs up their moral courage.

Except, John's presenting them to us as men who have seen and believed. So what have they seen and believed?

Well, go back to Nicodemus' night time encounter with Jesus, when Jesus tells him, 'you must be born again' - that natural birth into the people of Israel - the birth of blood and race is not enough, instead what you need is to be born again of water and the Spirit.

So maybe Nicodemus has watched Jesus die, and be pierced, and he's seen this flow of blood and water, and that conversation is flooding back to him. Or maybe it's something else Jesus said to him that night, that 'As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.' (John 3:14-15)

And in the desert, in judgement for the people's sin, God had sent a plague of snakes into the camp. But as people are dying of snake bites, he tells Moses to make a bronze serpent, and stick it on a pole, that whoever is bitten but looks at that serpent will live. In other words - it was looking at the image of the very thing that was killing them, that saved them. And Jesus is saying to Nicodemus - 'I will be lifted up like that serpent. I will become the thing that's killing you, the thing you need healing from and saving from. I'll become the curse, I'll become sin for you.'

And as Nicodemus sees Jesus lifted up on the cross, maybe it's that conversation that comes flooding back to him: 'He's taking the wrath of God for my sin. He's taking the punishment I deserve. He's taking the curse that was mine to bear.'

Whatever it was, these two men have seen something and believed something and it changes them. It gives them a courage to come out of the shadows and to side with Jesus. And it can do the same for you. Because when you know that is how much he loves you, it gives you an inner confidence, because what does it matter what anyone else says about you?

But it also opens their pockets in generous giving. And they take Jesus body - and the one who began life wrapped in cloths and laid in a manger, ends life wrapped in clothes and laid in a tomb. And when you see him emptying himself and pouring himself out in service for you, it'll change you, and you'll want to pour yourself out in service for him and others.

So, see the Passover lamb pierced for you. Believe, receive, and live - out of the shadows, with an open heart and an open hand.