

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 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 and they grow into heavy burdens.

There is the shadow too of 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 focussed on what it means to say: "I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son our Lord". 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 the final days of Jesus life leading to the cross. Each gospel makes the remarkable claim that Jesus Christ rose from the dead on the third day and appeared to his disciples and still lives.

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 the 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 the 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, gives 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 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.

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 and 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 this sacrament, this 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 burden we carry from our past sins and the hurts done to us rolls 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 of 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. 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 ourselves.

We are half way through this short introduction to Christian faith now. Half way 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".

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 soul.