LENT 3

'Christ himself carried our sins in his body to the cross, so that we might die to sin and live for righteousness.' 1Peter 2.

It's a very strange thing to say - and a difficult idea to explain to anyone, but at the centre of the Christian doctrine of the cross lies this idea that in some way Christ has made atonement for our sins. 'Atonement' is a beautiful word - literally it means a state of oneness with another person.

At assembly in school last week I was trying to explain what happens when a relationship becomes broken, and what must happen before that relationship is renewed again. "How many children have upset your mother this week?" I asked. Almost every child had! "And what do you have to do to be in favour again?" I asked. "Say sorry" said a lad with a glum look on his face. "Yes", I said, thinking to myself that I was making good progress here. "And then what happens?" I asked, "When you have confessed your wickedness and repented of your sins, what then?" "You get punished" was the bland reply.

This reply completely threw me. Now I had somehow to convince them that God was not like that. If we confess our sins to God, we are told that he will be gracious to us and forgive us and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. St. Peter said in today's NT lesson "Christ himself carried our sins in his body to the cross, so that we might die to sin and live for righteousness." Yes that's the teaching of the church - but what happens when we keep on sinning? How many times will God go on forgiving us?

I decided that this was too deep for a school assembly so we sang a hymn and went home.
But I thought afterwards, it is difficult to grasp. In human terms when commit an offence against some other person or against society we know that if we are found out we will be punished. Like the boy said - "after confession we are punished" - but with God we are in some way 'loved out of our sin'. The love of God is like a purifying fire. It is by the love of God as it is demonstrated in the death of Jesus on the cross that we are healed. St. Paul said that God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, no longer holding men's misdeeds against them, and that he has entrusted us with the message of reconciliation. So I can say that in spite of my sins; in spite of my failings and my weakness, God loves me - full stop.

It sounds almost arrogant to say so, but it is - it must be true. If the death of Christ means anything at all it must mean that God loves me. This is a truth which lies at the very heart of the Christian message; the good news that God loves each one of us. In Romans 8, St. Paul wrote, "Nothing can separate us from the love of God".

When Peter made the astonishing claim to Jesus - "you are the Christ, the son of the living God", it was much more than an emotional 'over the top' outburst. Peter had been with Jesus for over two years. He had witnessed the humility and love of Jesus. How many times I wonder did Peter fail Jesus? How many times in the ordinary daily course did Peter give Jesus just cause to be annoyed or

disappointed in him? Certainly when it came to the crux - literally the cross, Peter refused to admit that he even knew Jesus. And so, Peter more than anyone, knew the unconditional love of Jesus. Peter denied Jesus three times and yet Jesus, when in the resurrection body he prepared breakfast for the disciples on the beach, he asked Peter three times, "Simon son of John, do you love me more than all else." Lord, Peter said the third time, "you know that I love you." And Jesus said "Then feed my sheep."

Peter knew , perhaps before any of the others, about this unconditional love which Jesus gave to people. This could not be earned. This could never be deserved. It was never cheap - but it was free.

Almighty God, whose most dear son went not up to joy but first he suffered pain, and entered not into glory before he was crucified: mercifully grant that we, walking in the way of the cross, may find it non other than the way of life and peace, through Jesus Christ our Lord.
AMEN.