

Sermon for Sunday March 24<sup>th</sup> – John 19 verses 1 – 16

Turn to John 19 – page 1027

In leading up to Good Friday and Easter Sunday we are focusing upon the trial of Jesus as recorded in the gospel of John.

Last week we looked at the first half in Chapter 18 verses 28 – 40 and before we look at the second half I will need to sum up what was covered last week.

A quick summary then.

The trial of Jesus had come about because of the religious Jewish leaders growing opposition to him. All through the gospel of John we read they were threatened by his popularity and teaching – and as far back as Chapter 11 it is recorded they decided to have him killed.

From chapter 18 onwards we read how that came to fruition.

Jesus is arrested in the garden of Gethsemane and is initially questioned in front of a Jewish religious court at night – first before someone called Annas and then before the high priest who was called Caiaphas. They decide to charge Jesus with blasphemy – falsely claiming to be God - which in Old Testament law is a crime that allows the death sentence.

But they have a problem.

The Romans are in charge of Jerusalem and they are the only ones who have the authority to enforce the death sentence.

So, very early in the morning Jesus is taken from the Jewish court to the governor of Jerusalem – Pontius Pilate – in order to persuade him to carry out the sentence on their behalf.

Jesus is presented to Pilate as someone guilty of sedition – wanting to cause an uprising or rebellion against the ruling authority. They say Jesus is calling himself a King - and therefore opposing the authority of Rome.

Pilate interrogates Jesus about this – starting with the key question:

“Are you a King”

Jesus does not deny He is a King or accept it. He is a King, but not in the sense Pilate or the Jewish leaders are using the term. He does say that that His kingdom is not of this world – and Pilate is convinced that Jesus is not a revolutionary. Maybe a religious fanatic or someone deluded – but not dangerous to Rome - and he wants to release him.

But how to spare Jesus and please the crowd at the same time?

He comes up with a plan.

It is the Jewish festival of Passover and it was an established practice to release a prisoner as a conciliatory gesture. So Pilate offers to release Jesus as this year's amnesty. He calculates that putting him alongside a convicted criminal would surely lead to Jesus being released.

So he brings out someone called Barabbas – we are told in Luke's gospel that he was guilty of insurrection and was a murderer.

Barabbas and Jesus stand before the crowd. To the shock of Pilate when he asks who should be released the name that rises up is “Barabbas” – and mingled with this is a growing chorus that Jesus should be crucified. We will come back to this at the end.

This left Pilate in a huge dilemma. The crowd are now baying for the blood of Jesus – but Pilate knows in his heart that Jesus is not deserving of death.

So, what is he to do?

Let us read what then unfolds – we will read this in two parts starting with.

READ JOHN 19 verses 1 – 11

After Barabbas is released Pilate tries something else.

Perhaps the crowd would be placated if Jesus was flogged – if the crowd saw him beaten and broken surely that would be enough to satisfy them.

A Roman flogging involved a leather whip knotted and weighted with pieces of metal or bone and many a prisoner never even survived a whipping.

The trial of Jesus revolved around what was meant by Him being a King – so the soldiers decide that he should have a crown and a robe in order to humiliate him. Pilate then returns to the crowd parading the beaten Jesus hoping that the sight of this flogged and humiliated prisoner would arouse some pity in their hearts – but no. Their response is to cry “Crucify, Crucify”.

Pilate – now desperate - once again talks with Jesus. Pilate reminds Jesus of His authority as a Roman Governor, asserting that he has the power over Jesus to either free him or crucify him.

But if he did have this authority – and he believes Jesus to be innocent - why does he not release him?

Jesus's last words to Pilate are a reminder that ultimately all authority is given by God. Jesus then stays silent and says nothing more.

Pilate still wants to release Jesus – so what happens that breaks Pilate's will and leads him to hand Jesus over to be crucified.

Let's read the conclusion of the trial:

John 19: 12 – 16.

The turning point comes in verse 12 (read it again):

"From then on, Pilate tried to set Jesus free, but the Jews kept shouting

"If you let this man go, you are no friend of Caesar's.

Anyone who claims to be a king opposes Caesar"

One interesting fact about the Roman Caesar's was that they had huge statues of themselves – larger than life images – set not primarily in Rome itself but all over their provinces they had conquered.

Why?

It was to show local people who their rulers were – so they would look at images of the emperor and say to themselves:

"He is the one who rules over us – He is the one we owe allegiance to – He is the one we must answer to".

There would have been such statues in Jerusalem.

Pilate was the governor of this province – he was in charge – his word was law – he could execute people if he wanted to and he could let them go if he wanted to.

But he had a very vulnerable point and the crowd at the climax of the trial seem to know what that was.

It was this – Pilate was very concerned about what people think of him back in Rome. He wanted to be known as a friend of Caesar because he wanted the power, privilege and status that went with being governor. The last thing Pilate wanted was that a complaint against him should be sent back to his imperial master in Rome. He knew he should set Jesus free – but his own interests and self-protection prevented him from doing so.

So he yielded to the clamouring crowd - and sent Jesus to be crucified.

What is your verdict of Pilate – how would you describe him?

(Turn to your neighbour)

(Get feedback)

In verse 8 we are told that Pilate was very afraid. Afraid of what or whom?

Did he not fear man more than God? Did he not love his reputation and his position as governor more than he loved truth and justice?

Pilate was a cruel man – he showed that when he had Jesus flogged – but also a fearful man.

That is a terrible combination for someone who has power and authority.

So – was Pilate a coward?

If the definition of a coward is "to know what is right but to be too fearful to do it" – then surely he is!

But – should we be quick to condemn Pilate?

Is it not so easy for us to fear other people more than we fear God?

Are we not tempted to put our own needs above even what we know to be right and God's will?

Maybe before we condemn Pilate we should examine our own hearts.

What about the chief priests – how do they emerge from this trial?

Let me remind you what happens when they first bring Jesus to Pilate

(Read John 18 verse 28)

It was the Passover – they must keep the Old Testament law – after all their purpose was to teach and uphold this Law.

To prevent ceremonial uncleanness they refuse to enter the Roman Palace.

But while they are doing this they were also plotting the murder of an innocent man.

Just as the actions of Pilate should cause us to examine our own hearts and motives then so should those of the chief priests.

Is not the warning to guard against wanting to be seen by everyone as outwardly good and religious – to have the appearance of righteousness – but to be inwardly disconnected from what is really just outward show.

There is a striking contrast to how the chief priests respond at the beginning of the trial to that of the end. It started with them being concerned about keeping the law of God – but look at how it finishes:

JOHN 19 verses 13 - 16

At the climax the chief priests actually declare:

"We have no King but Caesar"

That is a devastating thing for them to declare - for in saying this they were betraying everything they stood for.

The Scriptures they would have known thoroughly spoke of God only as King and pagan rulers as a pretence. Shouting this out is much more than a compromise – this is capitulation! And it is at these words that Pilate hands Jesus over to be crucified.

Here is a question – who had the power and authority as this trial is going on?

On the surface it seems to be a power battle between Pilate and the Jewish leaders – with Jesus standing helplessly between them.

Pilate has the earthly authority – but he does not get his own way.

The Jewish leaders don't have earthly authority – so they resort to manipulation and compromise to get what they want.

Yet -as Jesus is handed to be crucified are not the hearts of both Pilate and the Jewish leaders exposed. And what is revealed is cowardice – cruelty – compromise. But surely what we see is not just their hearts but the hearts of us all – for is this not the human heart!

And - is it not the power and authority with Jesus in this trial?

For what we ultimately see is not Jesus on trial before the chief priests or Pilate – but rather them on trial before Him!

Was it not Jesus who revealed what was in their hearts – showing the whole world - and for all time – what was hidden there?

Does that not show that Jesus is King - even amid the cruelty, humiliation and injustice of his trial?

As he is led away to be crucified it is a reminder of all those Old Testament prophecies that God has sent His royal Ruler to suffer.

Three things about that suffering we must not lose sight of.

(Finally Pilate handed him over to them to be crucified”  
Jesus suffered...) – To be put up.

## INNOCENTLY

It is striking in the account of the trial that three times Pilate declares that Jesus is innocent: “I find no basis for this charge against him” he tells his accusers.

After having Jesus flogged Pilate brings Jesus out – wearing a crown of thorns and dressed in a purple robe and declares “Here is the man!”

In the older translations it reads “Behold the man” – which is one I prefer and will refer to now.

As we behold Him at this point – what do we behold?

This is what John – the writer of this gospel – wants us to behold.

Jesus is the true image of God – here is the one who has brought God's wisdom and revelation into the world. He is the one who has made the invisible God visible, who is the living embodiment of God.

The fact that he has just been flogged and humiliated, the fact that all his rebel subjects can do is mock and scream for His blood does not change who Jesus is and who He reveals to us.

As Jesus stands there silent – with a crown of thorns and a red robe – what do you see?

For me – it is a picture of the living, loving God who has come in person into the world He has made but has rebelled terribly against Him.

He chose not to come as a super hero, sweeping through the rebel state with horses and chariots, defeating this rebellion in a blaze of glory.

No – instead he chose to come as a suffering servant.

The phrase “behold the man” hangs over the whole of Chapter 19 as Jesus goes to the Cross. At the outset of his gospel in Chapter 1 John declares that the “Word became flesh” – meaning Jesus is a true reflection of God – and what we see at this point is the Living, Loving, Bruised and Bleeding God.

As the prophet Isaiah foretold about this suffering servant many years before:

“He was despised and rejected by others – a man of suffering, and familiar with pain. Like one from whom people hide their faces, He was despised and we held Him in low esteem”

Here this prophecy is being fulfilled. It tells us that God, in Christ, suffered through no fault of his own. And He is able to sympathise and strengthen us in our suffering too.

Yes – Jesus was innocent – suffering unjustly – but let us be clear that He suffered:  
INTENTIONALLY

It was always the intention of Jesus to go to the cross – it is there throughout the whole of John's gospel.

At the beginning of chapter 18 as the soldiers were looking to arrest Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane it says this:

“Jesus knowing all that was going to happen to him went and asked them

“Who is it you want”

“Jesus of Nazareth” they replied”

“I am he” Jesus said.

Do you see that he intentionally hands himself over. He knew exactly what lay ahead and he accepted and embraced it and willingly walked that road to the cross.

From a human standpoint the trial and subsequent crucifixion of Jesus was a travesty – an innocent man condemned to death and the victim of cruelty, violence and injustice.

But from a divine point of view it was the fulfilment of prophecy and the accomplishment of the will of God. That does not excuse the cowardice of Pilate- the cruelty of the soldiers – the compromise and capitulation of the chief priests. But Jesus remains the King in charge and carries his authority all the way through. Though appearances on that day were very deceptive he still was in control of his destiny.

He was not a helpless victim - but rather an active redeemer.

And if it was intentional – what was the intention?

Isaiah – again - tells us in his prophecy:

“Surely He took up our pain and bore our suffering – yet we considered Him punished by God, stricken by Him and afflicted.

But He was pierced for our transgression, He was crushed for our iniquities;  
the punishment that brought us peace was on him – and by his wounds we are healed”

Finally Jesus suffered

IN OUR PLACE

Let's go back to the point where Pilate brings out Barabbas – who the crowd shouted for to be released instead of Jesus.

Why did the crowd shout for Barabbas and not Jesus?

One reason could be that national feelings always increased during the Passover – a vote for Barabbas was a vote against the oppression of Roman rule.

Maybe the crowd were disappointed that Jesus himself had not led a popular uprising to overthrow Rome – perhaps they had hoped his triumphal entry a few days before would be the start of some Jewish liberation.

Or maybe the condemning vote says something very raw and real about our natural inclination to rebel against God's rule.

I wonder who I would have shouted for.

I have a strong suspicion I would have been swept along with everyone else.

What about you. Where would have you been in that crowd?

I want you to use your imagination and put yourself into the shoes of Barabbas at the moment he is released. He was expecting to be crucified imminently – and then suddenly he was a free man. Instead it was Jesus not him, who was led away to be hung on a Cross.

Imagine you were Barabbas and you joined the flow of the crowd on that day going to witness the Roman executions. If you were in the crowd watching and looked at Jesus between the two other condemned men – what do you think would have gone through your mind?

(Ask)

Surely, if there would have been any sense of justice you would have thought

“That should have been me”

Do we not – or should we not - all stand in the shoes of Barabbas when we look at the cross of Christ?

There is a theological phrase to describe what happened in the death of Christ on the cross and it is this - “Penal Substitution”

It seems an ugly phrase – it may well go over your head – but it does sum up a beautiful truth.

It effectively means a life in exchange for a life – a death for a death – the guilt of one being taken instead by another. At the cross we have a guilty world – of which we are all part – and a perfect innocent Jesus actually swapping places. One taking the place of the other.

On that day Barabbas – though deserving of the punishment before him and in no position to do anything about it – goes free - and Jesus – though innocent of any crime – dies in his place.

Yes, you could say Jesus is on the Cross because of cowardice, cruelty, corruption, plots, schemes, betrayals, lies and denials.

But ultimately Jesus is on a cross not only because of those things - but also because of amazing Sovereign love of God.

No one seemed to recognise it on that day – certainly not Pilate or Caiaphas who had humanly speaking put him there.

But John - along with the other gospel writers - wants us to see this.

This is what the cross means.

This is what truth is.

Truth is what Jesus is, and truth is Jesus dying for Barabbas – for the crowd that mocked him on that day – it is Jesus dying for the world.

And – thank God – the truth is Jesus dying for you and for me.

#### QUESTIONS FOR SMALL GROUPS

1. What are your insights and verdict from the trial of Jesus about:  
(A) Pontius Pilate  
(B) The Chief Priests  
(C) The Lord Jesus

What are the warnings and challenges from your insights?

2. Was Jesus led away to be crucified because of the wickedness of man?  
Was it because of the amazing sovereign love of God?

Can we hold the two together?

Are we challenged and encouraged by both?

3. Having considered the trial and subsequent crucifixion of Jesus turn to Isaiah 53 verses 1 – 9.

What strikes you about the passage and the trial as recorded by John?

Peter in his letter tells us how we should apply this as Disciples of Christ – it is in 1 Peter 2: 21 – 25.

Discuss what that means in practice for us!