

The King on Trial - Matthew 27:11-26

Date: 26 March 2023, 5th Sunday in Lent

Location: St George's Battery Point

Series: Matthew's Passion

Texts: Proverbs 6:16-19; Romans 5.6-11; Matthew 27:11-26

Several weeks ago we looked at Jesus' agony in the Garden of Gethsemane. "Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will." In this wrestling in prayer, Jesus shows us how to be truly human, as he succeeds where Adam failed. Today we leave the garden and Jesus' betrayal and arrest and jump forward to his trial before Pilate in Matthew 26.11-26. Although it is Jesus who stands before Pilate, as we read Matthew's Gospel, it becomes clear that in fact it is humanity who is on trial. If trials are about discerning the truth, here we see humanity laid bare and it is not pretty. The trial ends in a grotesque and manifest miscarriage of justice - a guilty man is set free, and in his place an innocent man goes to his death. And yet in this exchange, Jesus for Barabbas, we see the clearest picture of what Jesus' death accomplishes. He dies in the place of guilty humanity, that we might be forgiven and set free. My hope this morning is that as we meditate on those two points Humanity on Trial, and the Great Exchange, we will both see more of ourselves, and more of Christ's immeasurable love for us, and that is something we all need, whether you've been a Christian for decades or if you're with us exploring faith.

Humanity on Trial

I have suggested that Matthew's account of Jesus' trial in fact puts humanity in the dock. How is this the case? Each of the characters we meet in these pages are not inhuman monsters, but all too human. Their words and actions betray the dark side of human nature. They hold a mirror to us in which we see ourselves.

The Jewish Leaders

In 26.57-68, Jesus is interrogated by the Sanhedrin, the Jewish ruling council. Verse 59 reads:

The chief priests and the whole Sanhedrin were looking for false evidence against Jesus so that they could put him to death. **60** But they did not find any, though many false witnesses came forward.

The Jewish leaders have made up their mind, Jesus is guilty. He must be eliminated. But they have to find some charge. Nothing will stick, because Jesus is innocent. He has done nothing wrong. So they have to resort to falsehood.

In 27.18 we read that

[Pilate] knew it was out of self-interest that they had handed Jesus over to him.

The word translated “self-interest” is the Greek word for envy. Envy was the motive. What is envy? It’s wanting what someone else has, and then because you don’t have it, wishing that the thing they have be destroyed and they be hurt because they have it and you don’t. It’s covetousness, resentment and malice, all rolled into one. Why did they envy Jesus? Just 5 days earlier Jesus had entered Jerusalem as king to the shouts of the crowd. The first question the chief priests and elders ask him is “by whose authority are you doing these things?”¹ What follows is a contest for authority that Jesus wins every time. The Jewish leaders hate Jesus’ popularity with the people. They hate that he possesses an effortless authority that they so clearly lack. They’re proud and at the same time insecure, and Jesus is a threat to their position and power. So they strike out against him.

I find it so interesting that the motive of envy is named here. If we cast our minds back to the opening chapters of the Bible, what is the first sin that we see after Adam and Eve are cast out of the garden? It is Cain murdering his brother Abel. And why does he murder his brother? Out of envy. He was angry that God accepted Abel’s sacrifice and not his own.

Envy. That resenting that another has what you do not, and hating them and God for it. It’s a cause of conflict and violence between the haves and have nots that plays out over and over again. Jacob and Esau, Rachel and Leah, Joseph and his brothers, David and Saul, Jesus and the Jewish leaders. We may not resort to violence or orchestrate false witnesses, but are there not times when we resent others for what they have, and even when we are angry at God for withholding something we feel we’re entitled to?

Pilate

Turning to Pilate we see another cluster of vices. He knows Jesus is innocent. He tries all sorts of things to avoid taking responsibility for what happens to Jesus. Luke records that he sent him to Herod for trial. Herod sends him back. He then tries to free Jesus through the custom of releasing a prisoner during the feast. But the crowd call for Barabbas to be released and Jesus to be crucified. In verse 24 we read,

When Pilate saw that he was getting nowhere, but that instead an uproar was starting, he took water and washed his hands in front of the crowd. ‘I am innocent of this man’s blood,’ he said. ‘It is your responsibility!’

It’s a scene which has entered into our language. To wash your hands of something is to do what Pilate does, to refuse to take responsibility for something, to say “it’s no longer my problem, I want no part in this.” And yet at the same time, it carries with it the sense of a failure to take responsibility for something which you jolly well should have.

¹ Matthew 21.23

Before we too quickly point the finger at Pilate, we must remember that he was caught on the horns of a dilemma. To keep the peace, or to deliver a just verdict. Pilate was the prefect of Judea, the head of the occupying Roman administration. He did not enjoy a good relationship with the Jews. He had brought imperial standards with the image of the emperor into Jerusalem. This had caused a riot because pious Jews could not stand to see such an idolatrous image. He had also seized money from the temple treasury to build an aqueduct. Luke records that he had slaughtered a number of Galileans in the act of sacrificing Passover lambs.² He was eventually recalled to explain to the emperor why his soldiers had massacred Samaritans at a religious gathering.

So why did Pilate not show a strong hand against the Jewish authorities in Jesus' trial? The answer it seems lies in shifting imperial politics. Early in Pilate's tenure as prefect the emperor Tiberius was in semi retirement, and the de facto emperor was the praetorian prefect Sejanus who hated the Jews. By the time of Jesus' trial, Sejanus had been executed and Tiberius was back in Rome, writing to his provincial governors that they treated his Jewish subjects with fairness. Pilate was on notice, and the Jewish leaders used this to their advantage.³ While the charge for which they condemned Jesus was blasphemy, the charge they brought to Pilate was treason. Jesus was, "the king of the Jews," potentially rejecting Tiberius' kingship.

Upon investigation, Pilate finds Jesus innocent of treason. But the Jewish leaders are insistent, Jesus must go. They stir up the crowd to shout for Barabbas's freedom and Jesus' crucifixion. "Why? What crime has he committed?" John records that the Jewish leaders kept shouting, "If you let this man go, you are no friend of Caesar. Anyone who claims to be a king opposes Caesar."⁴ Pilate caves in. Afraid for his own political skin, he chooses to satisfy the mob, over delivering a just and true verdict. While he washes his hands, and says, "I am innocent of this man's blood. It is your responsibility!" The opposite is actually true. He is the only one with the authority to execute capital punishment. Fear. Cowardice. Self preservation. Ambition. Expediency. Rationalising away choosing wickedness over justice. Are these not things we do too? We can give all sorts of reasons to justify not doing what we know we should. These are the sins of omission, a failure to take responsibility to do what is right.

² Luke 13.1-2

³ Cf. Paul Barnett, *Jesus and the Rise of Early Christianity*, IVP, 1999: 145-147

⁴ John 19.12

The Crowd

The confession for the service of morning prayer invites us to reflect on the fact that we have left undone what we ought to have done, and we have done what we ought not to have done. If Pilate and the Jewish leaders give a window into sins of omission and commission, the actions of the Crowd invite us to reflect on our collective capacity for evil. This was the same crowd that shouted praise as Jesus entered Jerusalem as king just 5 days earlier. Now they shout “Crucify him!”. How did they change so quickly?

In verse 20 we read,

But the chief priests and the elders persuaded the crowd to ask for Barabbas and to have Jesus executed.

The crowd are manipulated by the Jewish leaders to condemn the innocent and embrace the guilty, to reject truth and embrace falsehood. When Pilate tries to point out that Jesus is innocent, instead of responding to his question, they just shout all the louder - “Crucify him!” The trial has descended into a lynch mob. Pilate washes his hands and they take ownership of this judicial murder. “His blood is on us and on our children.”⁵

This statement has shamefully been used by Christians through the centuries as a justification for ugly and violent anti-semitism. This is indefensible and a gross failure. The way to avoid this anti-semitic prejudice however is not to pretend that the Jews were innocent, but rather to recognise that others shared in Christ’s death. Matthew makes it clear that the Jewish leaders *and* Pilate were responsible for Jesus’ death, *and* the crowd, *and* the Roman soldiers, Jews *and* Gentiles. If we were in their place, we would have done the same. Indeed, if Christ died for the sins of the whole world, then we share in that responsibility. We may try to wash our hands, but our attempt will be as futile as Pilate’s. *It was my sin that held him there*, as the song goes. More on that shortly.

For the moment, consider the crowd. Do we not see in our age of fake news people manipulated by leaders to condone injustice? To reject the truth and embrace falsehood? Do we not see crowds shouting to cancel those they disagree with, online and in person, rather than listening to argument and weighing evidence? Groupthink is as much a problem for the left as for the right, because it’s a human problem. We all want to fit in. It’s so easy to go along with those around us. The great good of community can so often be corrupted to become a source of bullying, persecution, exclusion, moral and spiritual blindness. We all know this from the playground, to the office, to the family.

⁵ Matthew 27.25

The offence against God

In the Jewish leaders, Pilate and the crowd we see a mirror of how we fail to love our neighbours as ourselves. Here that harm is directed at Jesus. In his interrogation, Jesus says this to the high priest:

from now on you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven.⁶

The Son of Man is Jesus' favourite way to refer to himself. These words refer to the prophet Daniel's vision of one like a Son of Man being led into God's presence and being given his authority and power such that all peoples worship him. The high priest calls this blasphemy - that Jesus should claim equality with God. But this is exactly who Jesus is - God come in the flesh. And so we see that all the wickedness of men directed at Jesus in his trial gives us a picture of sin itself. It is not only an offence against our neighbour it is an offence against God himself.

In preparing this sermon I stumbled across these verses in Proverbs 6. They are a remarkable summary of just what we see in Jesus' trial.

There are six things the LORD hates,
seven that are detestable to him:

17 haughty eyes,

a lying tongue,

hands that shed innocent blood,

18 a heart that devises wicked schemes,

feet that are quick to rush into evil,

19 a false witness who pours out lies

and a person who stirs up conflict in the community.⁷

The poet does not mince his words. God hates sin. It is detestable to him. He is implacably opposed to it, even as we see in Jesus' trial the sin and wickedness of humanity is an assault on our Creator himself. Our problem as human beings is not that we have low self esteem. It's not that we're victims who need to be freed from structural injustice. It's not that we're oppressors. It's not that we're self righteous and proud. It's not that we do the wrong thing and harm ourselves and our neighbours. All these may be true, but they don't go deep enough. Our problem is that we raise our hand against God himself. If after committing adultery and murder David can say to God, "against you, you only have I sinned, and done what is evil in your sight, so that you are right in your verdict,"⁸ how much more you and I?

⁶ Matthew 26.64

⁷ Proverbs 6.16-19

⁸ Psalm 51.4

The exchange

Jesus' trial shows a mirror to humanity in all our depravity. The truth is we all stand in the place of Barabbas. Guilty as charged. And it's only as we own this fact that we will come to experience the sweetness of his trial, what C.S. Lewis calls the deeper magic. For what is the outcome of Jesus' trial? He, the innocent, is condemned, and Barabbas, the guilty, is freed. He dies. Barabbas lives. This is the great exchange. Barabbas stands for all of us. Jesus takes our place. He is condemned. We go free. He dies. We live. As Paul writes, *God demonstrates his own love for us in this: while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.*⁹

There is a great irony that Matthew's text brings out in Barabbas' name. In verse 16 Barabbas is named Jesus Barabbas. If you're reading your Bible you'll see there is a footnote that says that most manuscripts don't have the name Jesus there, just Barabbas. The 3rd century scholar Origen writes that many copies of Matthew don't have the name Jesus, and he thinks this is right because "in the whole range of the scriptures we know that no one who is a sinner is called Jesus."¹⁰ On the basis of Origen's comment, modern translators think it likely that the name Jesus Barabbas was in the original text and that other ancient scribes agreed with Origen and so left out Jesus out of reverence for Christ. If modern translators are right, Barabbas' name reinforces Jesus' identification with us as sinners. But in any case, Barabbas means "son of the father". And this is what the great exchange accomplishes for us. Jesus takes our place and dies our death, so that we receive his life and become sons of our Father in heaven.

The question for each of us is, will we own the fact that we stand with Barabbas? Guilty before our judge? Until we do that, we will not receive the infinite benefits of the great exchange. We have an opportunity to do so each week in the confession. To come on bended knee. To acknowledge that we have not loved God or our neighbour, that we have raised our hand against heaven, and that our only plea is that Jesus has taken our place. But in so doing to take hold of Christ and to receive the forgiveness and life he freely gives.

⁹ Romans 6.8

¹⁰ Bruce Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament 2nd Edition*, German Bible Society, 1994: 56