

The Judge, judged in our place

Series: Seven Signs in John
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Text: John 18-19

When I was at school one of the things that ignited my passion for Ancient History was studying ancient Greek drama. I particularly remember a play called *The Wasps* by the comic playwright Aristophanes. He had a flair for the absurd. In one scene to prevent his father from sitting on a jury a son, Bdelycleon, sets up a mock court in their house. A case is brought before the old man: one dog accuses another of stealing a cheese. Witnesses for the defence include a bowl, a cheese-grater, a pestle and a pot. It sounds farcical, which of course it is, but it was also a very witty parody of some of the pressing political issues of late 5th century Athens.

It's still the same today – often the very best comedy is able to give an insight into the absurdities and foibles of life. One of the main weapons in the comic author's arsenal is irony – where the reader or the audience is able to see a significance in the words and actions of the characters which they themselves are unable to see.

When we come to John's passion narrative – his account of Jesus' arrest, trial and execution – all these elements are present. Given the subject, it's a dark irony, but I don't know whether you felt it as we read it – but it seems that despite outward appearances, it's not Jesus who is on trial, but all the other players – the Jewish leaders, the crowd, Pilate – and dare I say it – even us as spectators.

This Good Friday, as we reflect on John's account of Jesus' passion, we're going to explore its ironies, its moments of double significance. We'll look at 2 points. The Judge judges the world and yet at the same time, in the greatest of divine ironies, The Judge is judged in our place.

1. The Judge judges the world

Back in John chapter 5, Jesus said that *the Father judges no one but has given authority to the Son*, to him, Jesus, to judge.¹ In chapter 9 Jesus said, "*For **judgment** I have come into this world, so that the blind will see and those who see will become blind.*"² And in chapter 12 he says, "*Now is the time for **judgment** on this world; now the prince of this world will be driven*

¹ John 5.22, 27

² John 9.39

out.”³

As soon as I say that this is what Jesus came to do most of us, I imagine, might have a sharp intake of breath. We don't want to hear about judgement. Isn't Jesus all about God's love and forgiveness? Doesn't Jesus say, "*Judge not, lest ye be judged*"? But we forget that Jesus immediately follows this up by saying, "*For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.*"⁴ And that is exactly what is going on here in Jesus' trial. It's a case of giving people enough rope. Jesus simply speaks the truth: It's everyone else's own words which condemn them.

Take the **Jewish leaders**. They're plotting murder, yet they won't go into the Pilate's palace for fear of becoming defiled. They never produce any evidence against Jesus. The fact of his guilt is just assumed. At last they do produce a charge: that Jesus claimed equality with God, and so must die. But the whole of the rest of the Gospel has been a demonstration in word and deed that Jesus is indeed the Son of God, with whom the Father shares all things, including his divinity. To put it bluntly, they charge God of blasphemy! And so they call for the release of a guilty man and the death of an innocent. They use Pilate's own fears of political instability to manipulate him. In naming Caesar as their king, they are the one's guilty of treason. They reject their rightful king, God's chosen Messiah, Jesus.

What about **Pilate**? For the Jews the question was all about who is God. For Pilate the question is about who is king. He asks Jesus, "Are you the king of the Jews?" Jesus' response probes Pilate's motives. "Is that your own idea, or did others talk to you about me?" Does Pilate really care about who Jesus is, or is he more interested in political expediency?

He shoots back. *'Am I a Jew? Your own people and chief priests handed you over to me. What is it you have done?'*

Jesus said, 'My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jewish leaders. But now my kingdom is from another place.' Jesus is a king, the king. But his kingdom is not like the kingdoms of this world that maintain their power by force and violence. His law is love and his gospel is peace.

37 *'You are a king, then!' said Pilate.*

³ John 12.30

⁴ Matthew 7.1-2

Jesus answered, 'You say that I am a king. In fact, the reason I was born and came into the world is to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me.'

38 *'What is truth?' retorted Pilate.*

It's an enigmatic and cynical statement. And yet, Pilate's "What is truth?" sounds incredibly contemporary, in a world of fake news, and polarisation where everything is politicised. There is no truth with a capital T, just what you can impose on others if you're in power.

As things progress, truth and with it justice becomes the slave to Realpolitik. Pilate says to the Jews that Jesus is innocent. But he pokes the bear and asks if they want him to release "the king of the Jews"? The irony abounds as Jesus again and again is named as king. But the crowd shout for Barabbas, someone who really had raised the sword against Rome, whose name literally is "Son of the Father".

Pilate has Jesus' flogged. There is a mock enthronement ceremony where Jesus is crowned with thorns and clothed in a purple robe. The soldier hail him, again and again, "King of the Jews". Jesus had said if anyone slaps you turn the other cheek, and here they strike him again and again.

Pilate brings Jesus out bloodied, crowned, clothed in purple with the words, "Here is the man!" And as he stands we see man's inhumanity to man in all of our savage cruelty. We hear the Jewish leaders shouting, "Crucify! Crucify!"

They insist to Pilate, *'We have a law, and according to that law he must die, because he claimed to be the Son of God.'* It's a term that terrifies Pilate. Only Roman emperors use that title Son of God. He returns to Jesus.

"Do you refuse to speak to me?" Pilate said. 'Don't you realise I have power either to free you or to crucify you?'

Jesus answered, 'You would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above.'

Therefore the one who handed me over to you is guilty of a greater sin.'

Pilate begins to see just how fragile his grip on power is. Three times he has declared Jesus to be innocent. He is in a position where he has the power to do what is right, however difficult, but he is moved by fear. The Jewish leaders keep shouting, *'If you let this man go, you are no friend of Caesar. Anyone who claims to be a king opposes Caesar.'*

Again he brings Jesus out. Again he names him king. But now the crowd join in.

“Crucify him!”

And so Pilate caves in and hands Jesus over. Truth is malleable, a servant of expediency. He sits on the judges seat, only to commit judicial murder.

Pilate represents the people of this world, and the Jewish leaders, God’s chosen people. Both in their own way demonstrate universal human failings. Pride, which will condemn no matter how innocent the one who challenges our position and authority. And Fear, which makes a person shrink from standing on the side of truth, and so will let evil be done and even join in to save one’s own skin. In both cases, the self is at the centre. And so the capacity to see the truth and judge rightly is skewed. Theologian Karl Barth wrote, “that in its root and origin sin is the arrogance in which a man wants to be his own and his neighbour’s judge.”⁵

In contrast, Jesus says, “By myself I can do nothing; I judge only as I hear, and my judgment is just, for I seek not to please myself but him who sent me.”

Jesus may be in the dock, but in his trial we see humanity unmasked for who we really are. Those who murder God for blasphemy, and kill our King for treason. Since the garden the story of the human race has been one of rebellion against our Maker.

2. The Judge, judged in our place

The irony continues. The high priest had said that it would be better that one man will die so that the nation will not be destroyed. And here that man dies, not only for the nation but also for all the scattered children of God.⁶

Jesus is tried and condemned on political grounds. He is a rival king to Caesar. But He is *the* King. The one who truly bears that ancient Jewish title, Son of God. Crowned with thorns. Paid homage as he is mocked. Enthroned for all to see upon the cross. Above him hangs the title, “King of the Jews.” In Latin, Greek and Aramaic, just so everyone is clear. And Pilate at last stands on the truth, “What I have written I have written.”

As readers of John’s gospel, we know that the crucifixion is in fact the hour when Jesus’ glory is on display. Back in chapter 3 Jesus said, “Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, so that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life in him.”⁷ And then in chapter 12 he said, “I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.”⁸ Now he is lifted up,

⁵ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics IV.1* S59 p231

⁶ John 12.51-53, 18.14

⁷ John 3.14-15

⁸ John 12.32

nails holding him to the cross.

In John 4 Jesus had said that he gives living water which a person can drink and never thirst. Indeed, it is the water of eternal life. In chapter 7 he had said, “Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, rivers of living water will flow from within them.”⁹ Now he says “I thirst”.¹⁰ But he does so knowing all had been completed. He now drinks the cup of the Father’s judgement of which the prophets of old had spoken.

The letter to the Hebrews explores at length the theme that Jesus is the high priest who presents his own blood to atone for our sins.

But in John Jesus is clearly portrayed as the Judge. Now, on the cross he stands for us where we rightly should be: accused, condemned, judged, executed. He is not here as some innocent 3rd party. No he stands there freely in obedience to his Father’s will, drinking the cup of suffering, for us, that we might go free.

The beautiful irony is that as humanity’s representatives stand exposed and condemned as they condemn the King, so also in the heavenly court the Judge himself is judged, in our place. Condemned so that the guilty might be pardoned, dying that we might have life.

Karl Barth writes:

“The mystery of this passion, of the torture, crucifixion and death of this one Jew which took place at that place and time at the hands of the Romans, is to be found in the person and mission of the One who suffered there and was crucified and died. His person: it is the eternal God Himself who has given Himself in His Son to be man, and as man to take upon Himself this human passion. His mission: it is the Judge who in this passion takes the place of those who ought to be judged, who in this passion allows Himself to be judged in their place.”¹¹

That it is God himself who in Christ is judged in our place must mean, then, that our situation must be very grave indeed. Barth continues.

“Where the intervention of God in person is needed, everything is obviously lost without that intervention, and man can do nothing to help himself. That God has

⁹ John 4.13-14, 7.37-38

¹⁰ Psalm 69.21

¹¹ CD IV.1 S59 p 246

intervened in person is the good news of Good Friday. For in the suffering and dying of Jesus Christ He has done this in the event in which He, the Judge, delivers himself up to be judged.”¹²

So it is that when Jesus says, “it is finished”, he has drunk the cup of the Father’s wrath to the very dregs. The verdict of condemnation has been given. The executioner’s blade has fallen. But upon him, so that we might not perish! And so his mission is accomplished. His life given for the world, the Good Shepherd laying down his life for the sheep, that we might have life, that all who believe in him might become children of God. It is finished. Judgement is done. All that remains for you and for me is life in Jesus name. Will you come to him?

Having seen his passion will you pass judgement upon him? Will you seek to be your own and your neighbour’s judge? Or will you turn to him as the Judge judged in your place and entrust your life to him? You will find yourself exposed yes, but so too restored, made new, given life, forgiven and brought into communion with the Father for eternity.

¹² CD IV.1 S59 p251