

Trial and crucifixion

Matthew 27:11-56

The death of Jesus is without doubt the most famous death in all history. This evening we are going to look at Jesus' trial and execution as recorded by Matthew.

The Roman trial (11-31)

If you are into reading novels, the trial of Jesus does not read like a trial. It did not even look like a trial as we see them today. It was held on a raised platform outside the official residence of the Roman prefect Pilate, with a crowd of spectators looking on and indeed playing a critical role.

Nor does it have the feel of a trial. It has the feel of a political intrigue. The 1st century Jewish historian Josephus sums up the events leading to Jesus' death like this:

“When Pilate heard him accused by the most highly respected men amongst us, he condemned him to be crucified.”

Matthew's account of Jesus' trial and crucifixion agree with Josephus that Jesus was

executed because the religious establishment in Jerusalem persuaded the Roman prefect Pilate to have Jesus executed. But if that is all there was to it, then how has this death become the most famous death in all history? Indeed, why are we here today? There has to be more to it. Please look at this with me as we follow Matthew 27: 11-55

A king's silence (11-14)

One of the key moments in his trial comes in verse 11 when Pilate asks Jesus:

“Are you the king of the Jews?”

Pilate is just repeating the accusation made by the Jewish leaders, but it is a clever accusation. On the one hand, Jesus had more than once admitted that he was the Messiah, both by word and by deed. Just 4 days previously, Jesus had ridden into Jerusalem on a donkey and quite deliberately enacted an OT picture of the king promised so long before.

On the other hand, Pilate was using the term king to mean an earthly ruler, a threat to the power of the Roman Empire.

So, when Jesus says “Yes, it is as you say”, he forces Pilate to think. Was Jesus just another Jewish freedom-fighter?

Most of the time, when people were in front of Pilate on trial for their lives, they would have had a lot to say for themselves. That is why Pilate is astonished (verse 14) that Jesus says nothing in the face of his accusers.

A woman’s dream (19)

Pilate’s wife Claudia had had a dream about Jesus the night before. It would seem that she on some occasion had heard Jesus and could not get him out of her mind this Passover. She tried to influence her husband by sending him a message early in the morning, no doubt at a time when she would normally be in bed. But Pilate thought that there were more important factors than his wife’s dreams, so he paid no attention.

A criminal’s release (15-18, 20-21, 26)

There was a local custom that Pilate would release a prisoner each year at Passover, in an attempt to please the Jews, who hated him.

Pilate therefore saw a way out of a tricky situation by offering the people a choice; either he would release Barabbas, a notable prisoner and no doubt a Zealot who had been arrested along with 2 others by the Roman security forces for committing murder in an attempted coup. But his plan didn’t work because the people chose to set Barabbas free.

It’s an amazing moment.

The one who refused to take up arms as a freedom fighter will be crucified on the cross of Barabbas the freedom fighter. Not only that, but Barabbas had a first name which the early church felt was irreverent and therefore avoided in view of what happened. His full name was Jesus Barabbas, Jesus son of Abbas. You couldn’t have a criminal with the same name as Jesus! But you could – that is surely a profound Biblical truth that Jesus came to identify with sinners. Two men with the same name; one saw his mission as being to kill and destroy, the other came to love and to suffer. People were called to make a decision and still

are. On that Good Friday the one ended up on the cross intended for the other, the guilty man walked free. An amazing picture of what the cross of Christ means; Jesus took Barabbas' place; and he took ours too.

A crowd's choice (21-23)

"Crucify him" the crowd kept shouting. No longer was it just the religious leaders, it was the people. Matthew uses the same word he had used for the crowd which welcomed Jesus on Palm Sunday less than a week before. No doubt many of them were the same people who had cried "Hosanna".

A governor's weakness (11-26)

It is quite clear from the Gospel accounts that Pilate realised that Jesus was innocent. He saw no reason why Jesus should die. He wanted to release Jesus, but did not know how. In John's account there is a shout from the crowd which really shakes him:

"If you let this man go, you are not Caesar's friend. Anyone who claims to be a king opposes Caesar."

Reluctantly, Pilate realised that it was either Jesus or his career that had to be sacrificed. So he signed the death warrant and washed his hands of the matter. It was the action of a weak man.

A people's guilt (25)

It must have been the heat of the moment which made the people shout:

"Let his blood be on us and on our children!"

This verse has been grossly misunderstood. It has been used as an excuse to justify anti-Semitism. But Matthew is simply recording the words of a "rent-a-crowd" mob. He does not say that the Jews killed Jesus and there is no trace of hatred towards those who nailed Jesus to the cross.

On a legal level it was the Romans who pronounced the death sentence.

But on a deeper level we are all involved. It was the refusal of the human heart to accept Jesus as king which led to his death. The Bible makes it clear that we all refuse to accept Jesus as king, because every time we think and act

selfishly we make ourselves king. That is what sin is all about.

Kendrick song

Was it your face that I saw in the crowd?

Was it your fist I saw raised?

Was it your voice I heard scream for his blood?

Your mouth that was twisted with rage?

Did you join in when they started to sing,

“Crucify, crucify him”

O I know it was you

Because I was there too

When the world said “No”

A soldier’s game (27-30)

A macabre game was sometimes played in the ancient world. At the spring festival they would dress up a prisoner as king, bow to him and grant him all his wishes for a night. In the morning they would scourge and kill him.

This was similar to what the soldiers did to Jesus. They put on him a soldier’s red cape for a royal scarlet robe (28), placed a staff in his right hand for a royal sceptre (29) and forced a

crown of thorns on his head for a royal crown (29). And so they mocked his claim to be a king.

The crucifixion (32-56)

Matthew, like the other Gospel writers, does not dwell on the physical sufferings of Jesus. The scourging or flogging (26) meant being flayed to the bone and was often so bad that it killed the victim. And crucifixion itself was such an agonising and humiliating form of torture that the Roman writer Cicero said that it should not be mentioned by Roman citizens. It was used for political rebels and violent criminals and carried out in a public place as a warning to others not to do the same. The reason for the crucifixion was usually written on a board above the victim’s head.

As Jesus hangs on the cross, the inscription above his head reads:

This is Jesus the king of the Jews

In this improbable setting we read some of the highest titles for the Christ:

- The King of the Jews (37)
- Temple-builder (40)
- Son of God (40)
- King of Israel (42)
- And again Son of God (42)

The words are used in mockery of course, as people try to degrade Jesus as much as they can. And yet it is in this awful pain and humiliation that Jesus mission as King of the Jews, temple-builder, Son of God and King of Israel is accomplished.

Crucifixion was not an unusual event under the Romans and many of the details related by Matthew would have been quite common. The condemned man was forced to carry the cross-beam of the cross, but very often would have been unable to do so, particularly if he had been tortured as Jesus already had. Golgotha was a regular place of execution, a prominent place so that everyone would get the message about what happened if you resisted the Romans. They offered Jesus wine mixed with gall, perhaps to deaden the pain, but he refused

it. And the belongings of an executed man normally passed to the execution squad, which explains why the soldiers drew lots for Jesus' clothing. Isn't it amazing that the Son of God on earth, at the moment of his death, possessed only the clothes he stood up in?

But Matthew wants us to see more than the details of a crucifixion. These verses are soaked in OT references. Just listen to these verses from Psalm 22, written by a man who feels abandoned by God:

Psalm 22:7,8,14-18

*All who see me mock me;
They hurl insults, shaking their heads;
He trusts in the Lord;
Let the Lord rescue him,
Since he delights in him.
I am poured out like water
And all my bones are out of joint.
My heart has turned to wax;
It has melted away within me
My strength is dried up like a potsherd,
And my tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth;*

*You lay me in the dust of death.
Dogs have surrounded me;
A band of evil men has encircled me,
They have pierced my hands and my feet.
I can count all my bones;
People stare and gloat over me.
They divide my garments among them
And cast lots for my clothing.*

It seems as if the whole world has turned against him, as indeed it has:

Those who passed by hurled insults at him
The chief priests mocked him: *Let him come down now from the cross and we will believe in him*

He could have come down from the cross and they would have believed – for a moment. But the great task which he came to do, to set his people free from their sin, would have remained undone. The devil had already tempted Jesus in the desert to take the easy way out. Now it must have seemed even more attractive.

Even the robbers crucified with him heaped insults on him. The rejection of Jesus by humanity is complete.

As darkness descends from noon until 3 o'clock, Jesus cries in a loud voice:

“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

The darkness was a sign from heaven to teach sinful humanity the horror of what was happening. The horror is captured in Jesus' desolate cry as the Father turns away from him and Jesus takes on himself the full curse of the sins of the whole world. Utter darkness is appropriate too because what is happening here is beyond the understanding of mere mortals. Jesus was taking our place, enduring the wrath of God that each of us deserves for our sins.

It is clear from the Gospels that Jesus does not ebb into unconsciousness. He cries in a loud voice. Luke records the words:

“Father into your hands I commit my spirit”

John the words:

“It is finished!”

Jesus then gives up his spirit, an unusual phrase by which Matthew perhaps wants us to understand a deliberate act of the will.

Matthew does not spell out to us the meaning of the events which followed Jesus' death, but they are quite clear.

Verse 51 tells us that the curtain of the temple was torn in two from the top to the bottom. The barrier which had prevented people from approaching a holy God directly was removed. There is open access to the presence of God through the death of Jesus. Anyone who trusts Jesus can approach God with confidence. And there is a remarkable example of this in our story: the centurion and those with him – the execution party. Soldiers are not easily terrified, but these men were convinced they had seen something divine.

The centurion may only have meant that Jesus was “a son of God”, but there is no doubt that Matthew intends us to see the true interpretation of what had taken place.

As we this evening go through the curtain, as it were, as we reflect on the events of that first Good Friday:

We cannot fully understand how the Son of God can die. But we can accept that God made himself so weak and vulnerable.

Let us be humble. We recognise that we are at heart rebels and do not deserve such love.

Let us be grateful. Like Barabbas we look on in amazement as Jesus, the one who has done no wrong, takes our place.

Let us worship. We can see much more clearly than the Roman centurion that Jesus was truly the Son of God.

And let us pause to reflect on the cost of forgiveness.