

**‘JESUS THE MIDDLE MAN’
GOOD FRIDAY MESSAGE
LUKE 22:66-23:56**

[St Mark’s Northbridge - Friday, April 15, 2022 - 8am & 10am]

Intro

- a long reading today divided into three parts
- and rather than a sermon, three shorter reflections from me- one on each of the sections we read
- and with each reflection will come a question I’d like you to consider- which you can see on the outline
- follow the readings in the Bible as well

Reflection # 1: Jesus in the Middle of a Political Tussle

Luke 22:66-23:25

Luke, the gospel writer, has already told an intriguing and unsettling story about the life of Jesus. But whereas Luke gave 18 chapters to the first 33 years of Jesus’ life, he gives his last 6 chapters to just telling the story of Jesus’ last few weeks on the earth. This alone tells you something about the importance of Easter. And in the section we’re reading today, Luke focusses in on the day of Jesus’ death- the day we recall and remember every year on Good Friday. When 22:66 says ‘at daybreak’ Luke is marking the beginning of that day- the day many Christians would say is more important than any other in the history of the world!

And what we find in Luke’s gospel, as this day breaks, is that Jesus is in the middle of a political tussle. And not really one of his own making.

It begins with the leaders of his own people. The Council of chief priests and teachers of the law meets at dawn and they interrogate Jesus, having arrested him late the night before. And they really have just one question for Jesus- 22:67: ‘If you are the Messiah, tell us.’ This is them cutting to the chase. And, of course, if Jesus says yes to this, he’s toast. Because the Messiah was the word the Jews used to refer to the king God promised to send them. The Messiah would rule over his people and draw many non-Jews under his reign as well. He would bring justice and peace to the whole world. He would be a king like none before him. This was at the heart of what the Jews longed for in their future, fuelled by many promises God made in Old Testament times. And so to pretend to be the Messiah was the ultimate sacrilege. And these Jewish leaders were

absolutely sure that ‘pretending’ was the only possibility when it came to Jesus. After all he was just an inauspicious carpenter’s son from Nazareth who’d collected a ragtag crew of supporters and had wandered around Judea for a few years doing a few tricks. So they thought. And that’s why that morning in their council this was their question for Jesus. Is this what you are actually claiming? That you’re the Messiah?

Jesus’ answer shows he knew their hearts. Which might go some of the way to answering their question! But he knew that they’d already made up their mind about him. Like many people today, I guess. No amount of evidence will persuade a person who’s already formed a firm conclusion. But nevertheless, Jesus does say that he will soon be seated at the right hand of the mighty God- 22:69. I guess that’ll do it! Jesus claims not just to be the Messiah, but the right hand man of God himself, the one who shares in God’s authority and God’s worship!

But he still hasn’t used the words they really need to hear. So they ask again- are you the Son of God- another way of referring to the Messiah. Jesus replies with a few words that are at the same time elusive and crystal clear: ‘you say that I am’.

And so the Jewish leaders bundle him off to Pilate. He was the governor in those parts, appointed by the Roman Empire. And in the first few verses of chapter 23 we hear how Pilate listened to the charges the Jewish leaders brought against Jesus. And Pilate too wants to cut to the chase. 23:3.

[Read 23:3]

Well, it doesn’t take Pilate long to form the view that Jesus is not the political operative or insurrectionist that the Jewish leaders want to make him out to be. And he simply says, verse 4, that he finds no basis for a charge against him. But since Jesus is from Galilee he sends him off to Herod- the man in charge of the Galilean jurisdiction.

Herod is delighted to see Jesus. He’s heard of his reputation for doing miracles and so he hopes Jesus might do one for him. The whole episode seems like sport to Herod. He wants to have some fun with Jesus. But unfortunately for him, Jesus’ opponents were in no mood for fun. 23:10 puts it like this.

[Read 23:10]

So Herod had to content himself with just a little bit more fun- fun for Herod but not for Jesus- and he dressed him up in a mock-royal robe and packed him back off to Pilate.

And at the end of that section we just read, Pilate reiterates again on multiple occasions that Jesus is not guilty of these crimes. He seems to have some insight into the purity of Jesus’ life and character. As Bill Shorten said this week when defending Anthony

Albanese in the context of his gaffe about the national cash and unemployment rates- Shorten said: 'The last person who never made a mistake- we are celebrating Easter- was 2000 years ago'. {True that.}

In fact, Pilate makes several attempts to secure Jesus' release. But the crowds of people who are now feverishly doing the bidding of the Jewish leaders, continue to insist on his crucifixion. And ultimately, the greatest persistence here is the persistence of Pilate's weakness. He bends to the corrupt will of the crowd. He releases Barabbas the murderer to his freedom. But he hands the author of life over to death.

What do you make of Jesus' "kingship"?

So here's my first question for you today. What do you make of Jesus' kingship? Because this seems to be the key thing Luke himself wants us to think about as we read these verses. The main question Jesus is asked here, is whether he really is the king of the Jews- the Messiah. And the way people respond to him in these verses reflects their conclusions about that question. So it's right that we think about it too.

Do you think Jesus is the Messiah? The king God promised to send? The king who will one day envelope the world in God's justice and peace? The king who even now offers to his people a way of life modelled on his life that's full of joy and hope? Do you think in the way Jesus lived his life prior to this point- the powerful things he did, the authoritative way he spoke, the uncommon love he showed to people- do you think we find enough evidence to support the conclusion that Jesus really might be who he said he was? Do you think even in these verses there might be evidence that Jesus is the King the Jews firmly believed he wasn't?

And what if he is? What would that mean? What would it look like for you to live not as an independent human, making all your own decisions and forming all your own values, but to live instead as someone who is ruled- to live by adopting the king's values, listening to the king's commands, and embracing the king's character?

In 2 Corinthians 5:15, the apostle Paul writes these words: 'he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again.'

Reflection # 2: Jesus in the Middle of Two Criminals

Luke 23:26-43

Now there's no more political tussle. Jesus' fate has been sealed. And he is led away to be crucified.

Some of his female disciples follow on the road out to the site of execution and they wail in grief. Jesus' responds to them very starkly and tells them that there are worse days to come.

And then they nail Jesus to the cross. And on either side of him are two criminals executed on the same day.

And while Jesus hangs there, struggling for breath, he prays for his enemies. Then some of the onlookers throw their insults in his direction. Then the soldiers tease him. Then the criminals talk about him. And then eventually one of the criminals talks to him- seeking mercy. And Jesus surprises him, and no doubt those listening in, by promising him entrance into heaven.

Interestingly, some of the notes we saw struck in our first reading today are struck again here. People are still talking about Jesus' claim to kingship- the crowds and the soldiers mock him with that claim, as does the notice which hangs above his head. But the criminal who seeks Jesus' help acknowledges with all sincerity that Jesus does preside over a kingdom. And it's a kingdom he wants to be part of.

And Jesus' innocence is underlined again here too. Once more, it's the humble criminal who reminds us of this- when he tells the other criminal that they're getting their just desserts- unlike the man on the middle cross who he knows has done nothing wrong. It seems the criminal knew, even before this moment, the reputation Jesus had for purity.

What do you make of Jesus' words?

But the key question I want to ask you with this section is this: 'What do you make of Jesus' words?' Jesus speaks on three occasions here and each time what he says is incredibly arresting.

In verses 28-31 he speaks very straight to the women who are mourning his impending death. And he tells them to weep instead for themselves and their children because there will be times to come when those who hate Jesus will pour their hate out on those who follow him. In these words, Jesus offers a loving warning.

And then he speaks again in verse 34. This time to God. It's a prayer. And he prays for the people who are in the process of taking his life. He prays that God would forgive them. And we mustn't race over that verse as if it makes perfect sense. Because it doesn't. This is a man who has been relentlessly pursued by his enemies for years. They have finally got him where they want him and they have done their worst. And he uses some of his last ounces of energy, some of his last drawn breaths, to plead with God on their behalf that they might not be held to account for their folly and sin. It's shocking. In these words, Jesus seeks an astounding forgiveness.

And then he speaks a third time in verse 43. This time to respond to one of society's worst- a man who had spent his life in crime, but a man who in one final burst of clarity had come to see that he was about to face God the judge, and who knew his biggest problem wasn't the death he was about to die, and who desperately, but with all sincerity, cried out to Jesus for help, believing, in fact, that Jesus could give him exactly what he needed. And without an interview to establish how earnest he was, and without requiring any information on the man's credentials, and without that criminal ever having been baptised, or attending church, or reading a Bible, Jesus speaks these words of simple reassurance- 'Truly, I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise.'

And I ask you, 'what do you make of these words', because they are words we too need to hear. No matter how upstanding you may think your life has been, none of us meet the standard of God's own perfection. We all fall short. We have all, in small or large ways, turned our backs on the God who made us and have sought independence of him, the kind of autonomy that breaks his heart. And so we need the forgiveness of Jesus for his enemies. And we need the reassurance of Jesus that we will, one day, be with him in paradise. In fact, we need nothing in this life more than we need exactly that. And all who come to Jesus like that criminal did that Friday morning, desperately but sincerely, receive the forgiveness and reassurance they seek.

The apostle Paul writes in Colossians 2:13-14, and he says what every Christian knows to be true: 'He forgave us all our sins, having canceled the charge of our legal indebtedness, which stood against us and condemned us; he has taken it away, nailing it to the cross.'

Reflection # 3: Jesus in the Middle of History

Luke 23:44-56

The thing that strikes me most about these final paragraphs for today, is the range of different ways that people react to Jesus' death.

There's the centurion who is so struck by what takes place when Jesus dies that he has an epiphany about the kind of man Jesus is. So much so that this Roman official praises the God of the Jews. And he too acknowledges Jesus' innocence. And not just his innocence, but the goodness of the man, and the uniqueness of the way he died. The word he chooses is "righteous". 'Surely this was a righteous man.'

Then there are the witnesses who see what takes place here and beat their breasts in distress. Powerless to change what happens before their eyes, they leave disconsolately.

But then there are his followers- both men and women. They don't walk away with heads bowed. Rather, it seems they stand there watching until the very end. And afterwards, the women amongst them honour him by preparing his body respectfully for burial. As you know, they needn't have bothered. But nevertheless, their action is beautiful and full of love.

And then there's Joseph. He was actually a member of the Jewish Council we heard about in the very first verses we read today- the Council that decided Jesus' fate. But, as we learn here, he was a conscientious objector to that decision. And he expresses his objection here, by paying Jesus the great respect of taking responsibility for his body and burying it in a tomb. Fascinatingly, Luke tells us the reason why he didn't agree with the decision the Council made, and the reason why he chooses instead to show courageous loyalty to Jesus. Unlike his fellow Jewish leaders, Joseph of Arimathea was a true seeker of the kingdom. Verse 51. He was 'waiting for the kingdom of God'. There's that word again! Perhaps Joseph had his suspicions that Jesus really was the Messiah- God's king? Perhaps Joseph liked what he saw in Jesus kingship- compassion, truth, integrity, justice, authority drenched in love? Perhaps Joseph saw in Jesus everything he'd been waiting for?

But you know what? Of all the different reactions to Jesus' death that Luke records, the most interesting by far are the reactions of God himself. Let me read you verses 44-45 once more.

[Read 23:44-45]

Darkness. Imagine that. Just consider what it would be like on a perfectly sunny day like today to be half way through our service and to notice that it was suddenly dark outside. And not dark like when a huge thunderstorm is brewing. But dark like the dead of night. That's the darkness that came over that country for three hours that day. It was dark because the sun stopped shining. Who has the power to pull that off? Only the one who made the sun, I would say. This was God- signifying in the most memorable way that this was a moment of deep darkness in the history of the world.

But at the same time as the darkness- the pitch black which everyone would have noticed- there is also a tear in a curtain in a pitch-black building that no-one would have seen at the time, but which someone would have noticed at 3pm when the sun came back on. And what they would have noticed was something that they would've then told others- quickly and with wide eyes. And news of what had happened would have spread amongst the Jews like wildfire. Because this wasn't a tear in some random window curtain. This was a tear in the curtain. This was the curtain that separated what they called the 'Most Holy Place' from the rest of the temple¹. The Most Holy Place was

¹ See Exodus 35:12.

where God's presence was believed to dwell. And that curtain signified what every Jewish man, woman, and child understood so well. That the Most Holy Place was no place for an everyday Israelite to go. You could learn about God at the temple. You could have priests offer sacrifices for you. You could perhaps pray to God. But you couldn't be with him. The curtain made that clear.

But on that Friday, everything changed. God put a tear in that curtain to send a message. The way to be with him was now open. By his death on the cross Jesus had done something that made a permanent and irreversible change to the whole way God wanted to be known and related to². And if you'd like to understand more about that, then you'll have to come back to church on Sunday. And I hope you will.

What do you make of Jesus' significance?

But I finish this morning with my third and final question for today: 'What do you make of Jesus' significance?'. Do you think it's possible that Jesus is actually the man in the middle of human history? And I don't just mean the man who caused us to move from BC to AD. I mean the one upon whom all of history hinges. The one upon whom our lives turn- yours and mine.

Is it possible that what you conclude about Jesus' kingship, and whether you seek Jesus' forgiveness- is it possible that they're the things that more significantly shape what your life is like now than anything else, and that they're the things which determine whether or not you'll one day enter paradise? What you conclude about Jesus' kingship, and whether you seek Jesus' forgiveness. Those things. My earnest prayer desire is that every one of you listening to this today will believe that to be true.

In Romans 5:18 the apostle Paul writes this: 'just as one trespass resulted in condemnation for all people' – he's talking about the sin of Adam in the garden of Eden, 'so also one righteous act resulted in justification and life for all people.' One righteous act. He means the death of Jesus. Standing there in the middle of human history with the power to make all who come to him righteous as he is righteous. One righteous act- with the power to give life- true life- to all who seek it.

What do you make of Jesus significance? How you answer that question matters more than any other question you'll ever be asked. And how you answer that question changes everything.

[Read 23:40-45]

² See Hebrews 9:8.