

'Let him be crucified'

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Preacher: Donald Smith

[0:00] Well, you don't really need to have any interest in history to know something about the Roman Empire. It's our second history start of the day, isn't it? It's like Christmas come early for Callum.

There have been a handful of empires, some of their true history, that have covered more land at their most expansive, but none of which have endured for so long and have had such a lasting impact as Rome. It is unsurprising, isn't it, given such a legacy that the kind of the figureheads of Roman history are the men who held the most power. Julius Caesar, Augustus, Nero, Marcus Aurelius, Constantine the Great, names that most people will recognize, even if they couldn't give you a detailed biography. But when it comes to fame, there is, isn't there, there's one Roman official who stands at least on a par with even the very greatest emperors that Rome ever produced. But Pontius Pilate was a small-time governor of a far-flung Roman province, and yet he is, without doubt, one of the most famous men in the whole history of that vast empire.

Arguably one of the most famous men in the history of the world, full stop. And it's all because of what happens over the course of a few hours on a single Friday morning.

The events of one morning have left his name etched in the history books forever, but not necessarily for goods.

[2:00] Last week, if you were here with us, you'll hopefully remember that we saw the chief priests and the scribes sort of erect a kangaroo court in order to declare Jesus deserving of death.

But the religious leaders of Israel at the time were desperate to see an end to Jesus. So as they kind of erected this court, they had only one end in mind, and that was murdering him.

And so they duly found the only truly innocent man guilty and handed down the death penalty. For the chief priests, it was almost job done.

They just had one more hurdle to overcome, because they didn't actually have the authority to execute this innocent man.

Under Roman occupation, the only person in Judah with the authority to actually condemn Jesus to death was the Roman governor, who was at that time a certain man called Pilate.

[3:08] That is where we left kind of Matthew's eyewitness testimony last week. The chief priests having dragged Jesus bound before Pilate so that he would deliver Jesus to the death everyone knew he did not deserve.

As we come to this next part of the story, this next part of history, we're going to take this passage sort of from two different angles.

We'll begin by seeing what is kind of happening on the surface, looking at Pilate and the crowds.

Then we'll just go back briefly at the end, briefly but perhaps more importantly, and see what is happening just beneath the surface, the whole way through this narrative.

So two kind of runs through, beginning with what we see on the surface, our first point this evening, the fearful and the fickle crucify their king. As the chief priests brought accusation after accusation against Jesus before Pilate, the Roman governor was amazed at what he was hearing, or more specifically, wasn't he?

He was amazed at what he was not hearing. Because for all the accusations that came forward, no defense was ever offered by Jesus. Pilate, no doubt, would have found Jesus' lack of response startling in any circumstance.

[4:32] But a big part of Pilate's amazement was, no doubt comes from what he knows to be true. Just look there at verse 18 of our passage this evening.

This, I think, is really important for understanding Pilate's action throughout this passage. Verse 18, He knew that it was out of envy that the chief priests had delivered Jesus up.

Pilate knows the man before him is not guilty. Pilate's not unsure. He's not kind of on the fence. He's not dithering. He knows Jesus is innocent.

But he also knows that if he releases Jesus, the chief priests and the scribes are going to cause chaos in his province.

And so Pilate desperately goes searching for an escape route. There are two choices before him, it seems. Side with the chief priests against Jesus and condemn an innocent man to death.

[5:40] Or side with Jesus and enrage the chief priests and scribes and so risk losing everything, his position, his power, his prestige. It would all be on the line. Those are the two paths that seem to be before Pilate's.

And he does not like the look of either one of them. So he spends the next ten verses or so desperately trying to find a fence in the middle that he can go and sit on.

He begins by offering the crowd a prisoner for free. It was the custom at Passover, we read in that first verse there, for the governor to release someone they had in custody. And so here's Pilate's golden opportunity to wriggle out of this tight spot.

He makes a deliberate selection. I don't know if you notice there verse 15, at the feast the governor was custom to release to the crowd any prisoner whom they wanted. Pilate doesn't give him the option of any prisoner they want, does he?

He comes with a deliberate choice of two. You can have Barabbas, a notorious criminal. Right, notorious there kind of meaning, it's almost actually a pause, it's like excellent, outstanding, the best of the best, as good a criminal as criminals get.

[6:49] Or you can have Jesus. There's no mistaking really what Pilate is hoping will happen. If I give them the choice between an innocent Jesus and a man everyone knows is very guilty, surely they'll take Jesus off my hands and I can sleep well tonight.

But the plan falls through because the fickle crowd are persuaded by Jesus' enemies to ask for Barabbas instead.

These were people who a week earlier, less than a week earlier, had hailed Jesus' arrival into Jerusalem as that of their coming King. Days later, they are crying out for His crucifixion.

They knew something of who Jesus was as they laid before the palm branches on the way to Jerusalem. They knew something about Jesus, but their grasp was so shallow that a few poisonous words was all it took for them to turn their back on Him.

And the poisonous words were perhaps particularly persuasive because of where they were coming from. People who they should have been able to trust and rely on, chief priests who were educated and respectable.

[8:22] It seemed like a credible source. But any voice that turns you against Jesus is a voice that you need to run from.

I remember just kind of coming to a lay-by here for a moment of application. We had the joy this morning of witnessing a couple of baptisms. Josh, Josh, I don't know if you're here tonight, I can't see you, but Josh, hi Josh.

It's an absolute joy, isn't it, to welcome these young men into our church family here. We've had the joy of witnessing others, haven't we, over our previous months and years, coming to profess their faith, coming to be baptized.

That is a wonderful thing, and it fills us with great joy. But let me just say to you, to those of you who are in the early years of your faith, watch out who you listen to.

Be very, very careful about the voices you heed, because there will be respectable, educated voices who will seek to persuade you to think that Jesus is not who he says he is.

[9:35] You'll hear those voices anywhere, in person, online, through books or podcasts. Not everyone in the world wants your faith in Jesus to be stronger. And I think it's in those early years that it's most important to heed, as strong as it might feel in the moment.

A flourishing faith can still be a fragile faith, can't it? Like the kind of shoot of a young plant that races towards the sky in the early days of spring.

It is real growth, isn't it, but strength takes time. So, be careful. Stay away. Stay away from winds of false doctrine.

When people come to persuade you, like these chief priests, that Jesus is not who he says he is, run. Run. Don't give them an audience, don't heed their voice, but run to safety.

Come to your church family here, who have just promised to nurture and pray for you in your faith. Join yourself to mature believers whose life you can see.

[10:47] Not those hidden behind the screen, but people where you can taste and see the fruit of your faith. Stay close to them, and stay even closer to God's word. There's an amazing contrast in these verses.

There's the really respectable, kind of well-read, educated chief priests. They're trying to persuade the people to kill Jesus. Meanwhile, the Gentile wife is trying to persuade the governor to spare his life.

Different voices coming from very different people. But what is at the heart of those voices? One is speaking against Jesus out of jealousy. They want followers for themselves, not followers for Jesus. The other is speaking for Jesus, I think we can say, through God's revelation. She's had a dream. Throughout Matthew, God has spoken through dreams.

That is not a mode of revelation we should expect God to speak through now, but that was how God spoke to certain people through Matthew's gospel. That this is how God speaks to us now.

[11:56] So who should Pilate and the crowds be listening to? Not envious lies, but the ones speaking for Jesus from God's word.

That is who to listen to. That is always who to listen to. But neither the crowd nor Pilate do that. Instead, the fickle crowd turn on the Messiah and fearful Pilate crucifies the king.

Oh, and the crowd called for Barabbas. Pilate again turns left and right, desperate to find an escape route. They ask for Barabbas. Pilate goes again, what then shall I do with Jesus? Do you want me to release him too?

Crucify him. Crucify him. Pilate feels the walls closing in.

Why? Why? What evil has he done? It's telling, isn't it? They give no answer to the question.

[13:02] They just shout all the louder, crucify him. Pilate is out of options.

He was desperate to let this man go. They are desperate to see him hung in a tree. Pilate's escape routes have closed, so where does he turn now?

I don't know if when you were younger you ever played kind of pig in the middle. We'd kind of often play it with football. You'd maybe have a circle. Someone in the middle of the circle would have to kind of chase after the ball as you passed it amongst you.

What happened when someone had been in the middle for much longer than they wanted to be? When they'd spent five minutes running after the ball to no avail as it got knocked from one end to the other?

They'd remove themselves from the circle, wouldn't they? Find the nearest tree, turn around, put their back onto it, thump onto the ground and say, I'm not playing anymore. Verse 24.

[14:06] So when Pilate saw that he was gaining nothing, but rather that a riot was beginning, he took water and washed his hands before the crowd saying, I am innocent of this man's blood.

See to it yourselves. I'm not playing anymore. I can't win. I'm out. Crack on yourselves.

And do you see why he gives up? He saw that he was gaining nothing and a riot was beginning. He knew Jesus was innocent. He wanted to release Jesus, but as soon as he saw that that might cause disruption to his little kingdom, he bowed out.

As soon as he saw that edging towards Jesus' side was going to cause him problems, he threw in the towel. To put it bluntly, he valued peace with people more than he valued peace with God.

Maybe you are here this evening on the cusp of the Christian faith and you find yourself reckoning with the cost. Maybe there are people in your life persuading you not to give your life to Jesus, not to come to church, not to be a Christian.

[15:40] Maybe you fear that you will not have the peace with people that you once had if you come and bow before King Jesus. Let me say to you, if that is you, that might well be true.

If Pilate had responded to Jesus rightly, he would have had a riot on his hands. If you give your life to Jesus, there might well be people in your life who once you enjoyed peace with, that you no longer will.

That might not be the case at all, but it could well be. And now we long for peace and unity. Division is something that deeply pains us to see, but the reality is, there might be a point for many of us, like there was for Pilate, where we have to choose between peace with people and peace with God. Do not make the same mistake that Pilate did. What might feel more comfortable today could leave you in anguish for eternity.

That is not a price worth paying. Maybe you're here this evening and you have already paid that price.

[17:12] And the lack of peace, maybe the pain of broken relationships is all too familiar. I'm not going to try and mitigate that pain. And I pray that those relationships are restored.

But let me just assure you this evening that the price, as painful as it might be, is truly worth paying. Because you have gained Jesus. The restored relationship you have with your Creator and your Savior immeasurably outweighs the value of every other relationship we have.

Precious as they are. It outweighs all of them put together. We should treasure peace with God more than peace with every single person on this planet.

Peace with people is good, but not at the cost of peace with God. But it was a cost that Pilate was not willing to pay.

[18:29] He wanted to keep the peace in the present. And so because he was fearful of the consequences of taking Jesus' side, and because the crowd were fickle and were persuaded to turn on Jesus, both, all of them together, rejected Jesus, turned on Him, and crucified Him.

They ended up with blood on their hands. The crowd know it. Unbelievably, and at verse 25, they are ready to bear the blame.

His blood be on us and on our children. They know the blood they are taking on their hands. Pilate does not. He thinks he is clean.

But he too has blood on his hands. Because look there at the contrast between verse 24 and 26.

Verse 24, he convinces himself he has nothing to do with this.

He took water. He washed his hands before the crowd, saying, I am innocent of this man's blood. See it to yourselves. But what happens in verse 26? Then he, Pilate, released for them Barabbas, and having scourged Jesus, delivered Him to be crucified.

[19:50] Being scourged meant being beaten across the back with a kind of a multi-thonged whip of whip laced with bone. It would have shredded Jesus' skin.

Like grating a block of cheese. Leaving his skin hanging off his back and dripping with blood.

Having done that to Jesus, Pilate then hands Him over to be crucified.

The cruelest form of execution that a barbaric empire could muster up. That is what Pilate does to Jesus.

All while convincing himself that he has washed his hands of it all. I'm innocent. But he's not, is he? Because he has rejected the king who has come for him. But think of where Pilate has been throughout this passage, desperate to find some middle ground.

[21:00] To sit on the fence, desperate to find a way not to have to reckon with Jesus, but he cannot do it. He cannot do it, and neither can any of us. When it comes to God's king, there is no fence we can sit on.

We can either bow before him or we do not. We are either for him or against him.

You have peace with God through faith in him or you do not. There is no sliding scale of saving faith.

Neither is there a nearby tree you can go and declare yourself as a mere spectator. We have met God's chosen king throughout this gospel. Each and every one of us must decide how we are going to respond to his rule.

Are you going to bow before him? Or are you going to reject him? Those are the only two choices we have before us.

[22:15] That is it. What I wonder are you doing, even this very evening, as we sit under the word of God.

Are you bowing before his throne? Or are you turning your back in rebellion? That is the options we have before us.

But for those who do come and bow, for those who submit the loving and sacrificial rule of the crucified king, this passage offers also some of the most wonderful assurance.

Because there is something else going on just beneath the surface of these verses. We've just kind of flown over this passage once, and from the perspective of flyover, the primary players seem fairly obvious, don't they?

Pilate is kind of there speaking from his judgment seat. The chief priests are weaving in and out of the crowd. The crowd is chanting for the blood of their Messiah. Meanwhile, Jesus and Barabbas seem to just stand there like pawns, maneuvered by the main players throughout the passage.

[23:30] But there's more to this passage than meets the eye. We might see the passage that way with Jesus and Barabbas' pawns because we imagine sometimes only ourselves in the story.

And there are times in life, aren't there, where we find ourselves kind of in situations that we are powerless to affect, and so we just resign ourselves to our fate.

It's like being on a bus that's running late. You can't really do anything about it. You just sit there.

That can happen in all manner of circumstances. Sometimes we do just give up because we think it's helpless.

And that's maybe a situation we find ourselves mapping onto Jesus here. Silent before the judge because he knows the game is up. Silent before the crowd because he knows the Pharisees have changed their minds.

There's no point trying to fight back. What will happen will happen. But let me just point you back to verse 53 of chapter 26.

[24:27] When one of Jesus' disciples tries to kind of clear the root of the metaphorical fire exit with a sword, what does Jesus say?

Put your sword back in its place. For all who take the sword will perish by the sword. Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels? A surface level reading of Pilate before the crowds might lead us to think that there are lots of active parties but Jesus is not one of them. A cursory reading might leave us thinking that Jesus is passive.

A kind of a bystander. Like a ball on a pitch being kicked about from one end to the other. But bear those words in mind. Do you think I cannot appeal to my Father and he will at once send more than twelve legions seventy-two thousand angels?

That is what Jesus has at his disposal at any moment. moment. We need to recognize right throughout the crucifixion narrative including our passage here this evening that Jesus' apparent passivity is activity.

[26:07] It is a deliberate choice that he is making not to do anything in order that the events might happen in exactly the way they do.

He might not look particularly active but his inaction is an active choice that he is making every single moment. So what is Jesus actively doing here by not doing anything?

What is he choosing to do? He is choosing in his evident innocence to take the place of the unquestionably guilty. Our second point this evening will be much briefer not because it is less important only because we have kind of covered the ground already.

The righteous takes the place of the unrighteous. That is what we see Jesus doing through this passage. The righteous is choosing to step into the shoes of the unrighteous that the unrighteous might go free.

Each of the gospels gives us kind of various levels of details on Barabbas. Matthew is the most sparse. For what Matthew wants us to understand, all we need to know about Barabbas was that he was a notorious criminal.

[27:25] I mentioned this briefly earlier, the word notorious, it means outstanding, right, of exceptional quality. When it came to keeping the law, Jesus was as good as it got. When it came to breaking the law, Barabbas was as good as it got.

If lawlessness is what you're looking for, right here's the guy. The two of them together are offered to the crowd. Pilate is ready to release someone from custody.

Here's their choice, as good as it gets or as bad as it gets. Now, the crowd really do make a choice, we've seen that, but so does Jesus. Because there's not an angel in sight, is there?

Not one. Jesus lets Barabbas be released so that he can stand in his place. It is a vivid illustration of the even greater truth that Jesus is coming to make a reality.

Jesus allows himself to be condemned so that the very, very guilty might walk away free. for nothing.

[28:39] Barabbas doesn't pay anything, he doesn't walk free for a small fee, he goes without payment because Jesus pays it all. The innocence takes the place of the guilty, the only one deserving of life, stepping to the shoes of the one who deserved death.

As with so many things in the Bible, I think there's simultaneously a great comfort and a great challenge in what Jesus is willingly doing here as he substitutes himself into the place of the truly guilty.

There is great comfort because if you are here this evening with your faith and trust in Jesus, if that is you this evening, no matter how messed up your past might be, no matter how much you messed up this last week, no matter how long your list of crimes might be, no matter how grievous they are, no matter what you might have done or left undone, no matter how much hurt you might have caused, if you have truly come in faith to Jesus, this right here is a glorious picture of exactly what he has done for you, not before the judgment seat of Pilate, but before the judgment seat of God, no more condemnation, free, completely and utterly without a penny to pay, because he willingly, he chooses to take your place, you didn't force him to do it, he chose to do it for you, the mess of your life, the mess of my life, it demands justice, doesn't it, for what people have seen and what people haven't seen, for the sin we're aware of and the sin we aren't, justice demands that it cannot be ignored, and we know that it should not be ignored, and a just God cannot overlook such lawlessness, but it is wholly, entirely, completely and utterly dealt with by God himself in and through Jesus. That is a wonderful reassurance, isn't it? Jesus doesn't pay a percentage and ask us to make up the rest of the life of good works, that's not the gospel, he steps into our shoes and bears every single stroke of punishment we deserve.

That I hope is a great comfort to you, as it is to me. There's a wonderful truth to be able to rest on, when, as we sang at the beginning of this service, when the devil comes and accuses us of a long list to failures in the past, we really can look at the sinless savior who died for us and say, my soul is counted free.

[32:00] Not because of me, but because of our great high priest. It is a wonderful comfort, but there is, I think, also a challenge in this gospel portrait, great, because Jesus chooses to take the place of the most notorious criminal.

Jesus does not just step into the place of the somewhat righteous, the better than average person, he willingly takes the place of the worst of the worst. we are often, I think, comfortable with the idea of Jesus' mercy reaching as deep as our sins, and then every inch deeper it goes, perhaps we start to get a little bit more uncomfortable.

But Jesus' mercy goes deeper than the deepest sin. The kind of people who Disclosure Scotland would never issue a PBG to, Jesus says, I'll take their place if they come to me.

The worst of the worst, fraudsters, people traffickers, murderers, hesitate to even say the words, people guilty of the worst sexual sins.

The fact that I hesitate to say the words, I think, kind of proves the point, doesn't it? There are people in the world who we might well be tempted to look at and think too far.

[33:40] Forgiveness for some, but not for you. But Jesus comes, to willingly take the place of the worst of the worst.

And we are cleansed by exactly the same blood that they can be cleansed by. I wonder what your first reaction is when you open the news and see someone convicted of the most horrific crime. does your heart demand justice? Or before that, does it long for mercy?

That, I think, is the great challenge of this passage. Because when we see depths of sin that we think are much deeper on our own, our calls for justice get louder and louder, don't they?

And I think our cries for mercy get quieter and quieter. In just over a chapter's time, Jesus is going to say to the church, go and make disciples of all nations.

[34:52] everyone, everywhere Jesus came to step into their shoes to bear the punishment they deserved should they come in faith to him.

And he says to the church, go and tell them that good news. It's not wrong to want to see justice. but our heart should be like that of Jesus who before he wants to see justice come crashing down on people's shoulders wants to see mercy wash over them that is what he calls the church to go and do to go and make disciples of all nations of all people from those we consider the most respectable from the respectable middle classes to those that we consider the very worst of the worst to those the rest of society would look at and go no, nothing but justice for them Jesus comes to offer them mercy mercy and I think the better we wrestle with the reality of our own sin the quicker we will be to realize just how wonderful that is that that is the heart that Jesus has because as much sin as we see and the worst of the sinners we see around us as much sin as the people would have seen in Barabbas' life

God sees far more in my life and in your life our sin runs deeper than we know but Jesus' love runs deeper still and that is amazing almost scandalous grace isn't it that we can come before the throne of God with our sinful souls counted free knowing that we can go and offer that same hope that same gospel to everyone whoever they are saying to them you too can come and bow before the king the king who came for everyone forever let us as a church family rejoice in the amazing salvation we have and let us also reach out in mercy with that amazing salvation to everyone that we come across let us pray that we would do that together as we close

Father we do just thank you and praise you afresh for the Lord Jesus Christ Lord we pray that you would help each and every one of us here to respond to him in faith and trust Lord that we would not fear people more than we would fear you that we would seek to have peace with you even if it would cost us peace with people Lord we ask that you would grow our faith deep that its roots would stretch far so that Lord nothing would take us away from following our king bowing before Jesus and living our lives for him Lord we thank you for the amazing gospel that you hold out to us in him that he willingly steps into our place as our substitute to take the punishment that we deserve as deep as our sins might go your mercy runs deeper still and we praise and thank you for that so Lord we pray that you would also help us to go out with that same gospel to make disciples of all nations knowing that there is no one no one who is beyond your grace

Lord none of us are deserving and all of us need your forgiveness we pray that you would strengthen us as a church to make that glorious gospel known to everyone who would hear it that they might respond and be forgiven as we are in Jesus name we pray Amen Amen