

Good Friday

What do I do with Jesus?

It had been a full week – it started with huge crowds on the streets of Jerusalem and now here they were, just the thirteen of them in a private room celebrating the Passover - and only two people in that room knew where this night would lead.

Jesus knew, because ... He's Jesus ... and Judas knew, because he had put the wheels into motion the day before when he had agreed to betray his friend for thirty pieces of silver. Jesus knew that He had already been betrayed, and yet in this amazing display of grace He still invites Judas to celebrate with them. And that is the invitation that continues to be extended by Jesus, even knowing all that we will do, and all the various ways that we will betray His love and His name, He still says, "Come."

Last Sunday we celebrated Palm Sunday and we looked at the wondrous celebration of Jesus as people everywhere were saying, 'The King has come!' But there was a dark side too. It was after Jesus had entered into Jerusalem riding on a donkey while the crowds praised Him and waved palm branches that the religious authorities felt that they had no option but to take matters into their own hands. It was at that high point of celebration that they decided, this Jesus must die. It was that decision which led us to this point only five days later.

It was a perfect set up, it had to be this way. During the day Jesus was surrounded by crowds of sympathetic people who had come to hear Him preach. People whose lives had been impacted by Jesus. Perhaps they had been healed by Him; or maybe because of His teaching on forgiveness they had seen a relationship restored; or perhaps they had been part of the multitude He had fed by the shores of Galilee. Regardless of the how and why, those who gathered around Jesus during the day would pose a considerable problem for the authorities, and so they came for Him under the cover of darkness.

Even then they were taking no chances. And so, to arrest the man who had spoken so much of love, forgiveness and grace, a crowd was sent. Three of the gospels simply identify them as a crowd of men armed with swords and clubs, however John gets more specific and tells us in John 18:2-3 Judas, the betrayer, knew this place, because Jesus had often gone there with His disciples. The leading priests and Pharisees had given Judas a contingent of Roman soldiers and Temple guards to accompany him. Now with blazing torches, lanterns, and weapons, they arrived at the olive grove. I don't know if they expected Christ to fight or run, but either way they came prepared, what they didn't prepare for was for Jesus to simply surrender.

Luke 22:52-53 *"Then Jesus said to the chief priests, the officers of the temple guard, and the elders, who had come for him, "Am I leading a rebellion, that you have come with swords and clubs? Every day I was with you in the temple courts, and you did not lay a hand on me. But this is your hour - when darkness reigns."*

And in that one statement Jesus was letting them know that he already knew everything.

You see even though the night arrest made for good strategy and good theatre it was the beginning of the dreadfully flawed prosecution of Jesus. And Jesus knew what they knew and that was if they could not prove a case against Him then they would have to fabricate one.

Historical documents tell us that there were two major problems with this arrest. The first was that it was performed at night. There were all kinds of guidelines and regulations in place for the Jewish judicial process and one was that neither arrests nor trials were permitted at night. Two thousand years ago in Israel, justice was under the authority of the Sanhedrin, they were the supreme religious authority at the time, and functioned kind of like a supreme court. And there would have been no discussion about the separation of religion and state then. While Israel may have been under Roman rule, they still considered themselves a Theocracy.

In our nation we enjoy a democracy, and that word can be traced back to two Greek words: *demos* meaning *people* and *kratia* meaning *power*. 2,000 years ago, Israel was a Theocracy. *Kratia* still meant *power*, but *Theos* meant *God*. And so, in matters of religious and civil law you had a religious court, the Sanhedrin, comprising members of the Pharisees, Sadducees and the Priesthood. The Grand Sanhedrin had 71 members and was only convened for matters of national security and then you had a cabinet of 23 that was probably the group that conspired against Christ.

They functioned just like courts everywhere, under constraints, and one of those constraints was that justice must be performed in the daylight hours. There was some symbolism wrapped up in that - justice was all about being transparent and about light being shone into the darkness. So justice should be able to bear up to the scrutiny that would come upon it in the light of day. But here they are with their torches seeking Jesus out after dark. The arrest of Jesus happened somewhere between 1 and 2 o'clock in the morning - and that was in direct violation of the rules.

The other issue is that Jesus was arrested on the information of Judas and under the law of the day someone who was an associate of the accused, could not provide the evidence needed for an arrest in a capital case, because of an obvious conflict of interest. They would be as guilty as the accused. And yet the story here revolves around the betrayal of Jesus by Judas, one of His closest associates.

So, this was a blatant breach of the rules. When the crowd came to arrest Jesus, Judas steps forward and kisses Him. That was done to make sure that in the darkness of the night, lit only with flickering torches, no mistake would be made, and the right man would be arrested. Because the one thing that those who conspired to end Jesus' ministry agreed on was "*Jesus must die.*"

But it wasn't only the arrest that was flawed, the trials were flawed also. Notice that I said trials, not trial. What happened after the arrest of Jesus would have been considered a travesty by today's legal standards. From His arrest to His interrogation, to His conviction to His sentence, things were done differently than we would do them today. Of course, that is to be expected, we often watch as historical figures are judged by today's standards, and very seldom do they fare well. So, we can't expect that a trial held in an occupied country 2,000 years ago should be held to the same standards as the same trial would be today in our nation. But we would expect that it would be held to the standards of that day and time.

In 1948 British Judge Frank Powell wrote a book called "*The Trial of Jesus Christ*" and it looks at the trial of Jesus in light of the historical standards of that day, specifically, the way that a capital case was supposed to be tried under Jewish law. What Powell discovered was that there was nothing fair about the trial of Jesus and very little was done properly.

Around the same time, American Lawyer David Breed wrote *"The Trial of Christ"* and found a number of errors that under Jewish and Roman Law would have been considered serious breaches. Today they would be considered reversible errors and would be the basis of an appeal and a new trial. And not just one or two, Breed identifies no less than 17 issues that contravened the trial laws of that time.

From Jesus' first appearance in front of Annas, we see that nobody is really interested in justice, they are interested only in ridding themselves of Jesus. Annas had no legal standing in the Jewish community. He had been the High Priest but now he was retired, and he was the father-in-law of the man who was now High Priest, Caiaphas. So why would Jesus have first been taken into the home of this man? I would suspect it goes back to an event that happened earlier in the week when Jesus cleansed the temple courts. You might recall how Jesus had come into the courts and saw the money changers and vendors who were taking advantage of the pilgrims who had come for the Passover celebration.

Mark 11:15-17 *"On reaching Jerusalem, Jesus entered the temple courts and began driving out those who were buying and selling there. He overturned the tables of the money changers and the benches of those selling doves and would not allow anyone to carry merchandise through the temple courts. And as he taught them, he said, 'Is it not written: 'My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations'? But you have made it 'a den of robbers.'"*

Well, here is an interesting tidbit from history: the man who was in charge of what happened in the temple courts; the man who profited from the extortion, was none other than Annas. The temple courtyards were even referred to by the Jews of the day as *"The Bazaars of the sons of Annas."* And so Annas demanded the names of Jesus' followers and what He had been teaching them. When Jesus didn't give the answers that Annas was looking for, He was beaten. And in turn Jesus responds:

John 18:23 *"If I said something wrong," Jesus replied, "testify as to what is wrong. But if I spoke the truth, why did you strike me?"*

So it was at that point that Annas had Jesus bound like a criminal and sent to his Son-in-law, Caiaphas. In the Gospel of John in reference to Jesus, Caiaphas told his colleagues:

John 11:50 *"You do not realize that it is better for you that one man dies for the people than that the whole nation perish."*

Two days later we read this account:

Matthew 26:3-4 *"Then the chief priests and the elders of the people assembled in the palace of the high priest, whose name was Caiaphas, and they schemed to arrest Jesus secretly and kill him."*

So, the next person who is involved in Jesus' trial has already stated publicly his intention to have Jesus killed. I'm thinking that Caiaphas might have had a little bit of a problem being unbiased. Caiaphas knew the truth about Jesus:

Matthew 26:59-61 *"The chief priests and the whole Sanhedrin were looking for false evidence against Jesus so that they could put him to death. But they did not find any, though many false witnesses came forward. Finally, two came forward and declared, 'This fellow said, 'I am able to destroy the temple of God and rebuild it in three days.'"*

As we now know, under Jewish law a capital trial could only happen during the daytime, they are still under the cover of dark. And criminal cases were not permitted to be held during the religious celebrations and the Passover celebrations had started the day before.

The trial also was supposed to be held in the meeting place of the Sanhedrin, but they were meeting in the home of Caiaphas. At least two witnesses had to be examined separately, yet here the witnesses were examined together after being coached to twist the words of Christ.

Also, under Jewish law, only a 'not guilty' verdict could be delivered the same day as the trial. When the verdict was guilty at least one night had to go by before sentencing, so the tribunal would have time to reflect and perhaps consider mercy. Jesus' whole trial was finished in a few hours.

These were the Sanhedrin's own rules and, in their rush to get rid of Jesus, they were prepared to make a mockery of the very legal system they established, and which was admired in their day. The charge that Caiaphas and his cronies finally settled on was the charge of blasphemy. That Jesus had claimed to be God. The problem for them was that 300 years earlier they might have had the authority to have Jesus executed, but not under Roman law.

And so, we pick up the story here:

John 18:28 *"Then the Jewish leaders took Jesus from Caiaphas to the palace of the Roman governor. By now it was early morning, and to avoid ceremonial uncleanness they did not enter the palace, because they wanted to be able to eat the Passover."*

Well at least they were conscientious about that! The problem was that blasphemy was a religious charge and Pilate could not have cared less about the religion of the Jews.

Luke 23:2 *"And they began to accuse him, saying, "We have found this man subverting our nation. He opposes payment of taxes to Caesar and claims to be Messiah, a king."*

So, the charge has changed from blasphemy to treason. And when Pilate said that he didn't see any evidence of treason they upped the ante:

Luke 23:5 *"But they insisted, "He stirs up the people all over Judea by his teaching. He started in Galilee and has come all the way here."*

But it was here that Pilate saw a way out, he didn't want to execute the carpenter, but he didn't want to alienate the religious leaders either. So, he passes the buck.

Luke 23:6-7 *"On hearing this, Pilate asked if the man was a Galilean. When he learned that Jesus was under Herod's jurisdiction, he sent him to Herod, who was also in Jerusalem at that time."*

This was the same Herod who had John the Baptist killed and it was his father who had tried to kill Jesus when he was a newborn. We are told that Herod had heard about Jesus and wanted to meet Him and see Him perform a miracle. Comedians often tell how annoying it is when they meet someone and are asked to say something funny, and magicians say that they are often asked to perform a trick for people. Very seldom does a preacher get to eat in a group without being the person who is asked to say grace. I am reminded here of Herod's song in Andrew Lloyd Webber's musical, *Jesus Christ Super Star*:

*So, You are the Christ, You're the great Jesus Christ
Prove to me that You're divine - change my water into wine
That's all You need do, and I'll know it's all true
C'mon King of the Jews*

But we are told that Jesus doesn't even grace Herod with an answer. So, Herod puts a purple robe on Christ and sends him back to Pilate, saying that he just found Jesus annoying.

So, what is Pilate to do? He has the religious leaders and the mob they had incited demanding that Jesus be executed, but he can find no evidence to support a case against Jesus and neither can Herod. His wife has shown up in the middle of everything, telling him about a dream she had about Jesus and how Pilate should release him.

Pilate tries - he tells the crowd that as a gesture of good will because it's the Passover he will release one prisoner. And he stands Jesus up next to a known murderer named Barabbas and offers the crowd their choice of who should go free, he figured it was a no-brainer. And the mob, egged on by the authorities, look at Jesus and yelled, *"Crucify Him, crucify Him."*

Things are getting out of control and so Pilate has Jesus flogged with a steel tipped whip, but even that doesn't satisfy the bloodlust of the crowd. Pilate now faces the question which every human being on this planet must face one day: *"What do I do with Jesus?"* We are clearly told in Scripture that Pilate found no fault in this man and want to set Jesus free. But all Pilate could see and hear was the angry faces and bloodthirsty pleas of the world before him. Pilate then washes his hands of the whole issue and says, *"I am innocent of this man's blood. It is your responsibility!"*

So, at that point, Pilate delivers Jesus into the hands of the people and effectively says, *"What will you do with Jesus?"* We all know the crowd answer – they murdered Him.

Brothers and sisters, the same question which Pilate faced on that dark and horrible day is the question every single human being must answer sooner or later: *"What do I do with Jesus?"* How do I respond to this man – this Messiah – this Saviour? Do I reject Him, ignore Him or embrace Him as Lord? Of all the days on our calendar, I think Good Friday is the day when that question confronts us most powerfully. As we gaze upon this innocent man hanging on a cross, that question is right in our face: *"What do I do with Jesus?"*