Jesus on Trial
Luke 22:63-23:25

If you've been up in the mountains hiking, sometimes you come across these two streams, waterfalls even, coming down from opposite sides of the valley and meeting together at the bottom to form a river, with all their combined power.

Well, as Jesus' trial begins, something like that is happening here. The torrent of satan's scheme to rid the earth of Jesus is coming down on the dark side of the valley, and it's already sucked in Judas and the religious leaders and now Pilate and Herod, but on the other side of the valley, the sunlit side, is coming God's plan of salvation and redemption. And these torrents, one of darkness and destruction and one of salvation and redemption, are coming together, and converging on Jesus.

Now, last week we saw Peter all but swept away, today as we watch Jesus stand trial, we're going to see something very different, because Luke has almost come full circle.

In the early part of this gospel, Luke kept putting before us the question, 'who is this man Jesus? Who is this who heals the sick and cleanses lepers, and gives sight to the blind and commands demons to flee, who controls the wind and the waves and teaches in a way that cuts to the heart and yet leaves you longing for more? Who is he?'

And now, Jesus is put on trial for who He says He is. But as we watch these other players who have been sucked in by satan's scheme – the priests and Pilate and Herod, grapple with Jesus' identity, what you discover is that ultimately, it's not Jesus who is on trial here. It's them and it's us, as everyone is confronted with the questions, 'who do *I* think He is?' and 'what should *I* do with this man, Jesus of Nazareth?'

So we're going to look at each of the main players and see how they responded and what we can learn from them.

Chief Priests
So, having been arrested and taken away, and mocked and beaten by the soldiers, when morning dawns Jesus is hauled before the religious leaders in council. And they have a question they want an answer to: v67, "If you are the Christ, tell us." 'Spit it out Jesus, are you the Messiah?' That's their question. Except they don't really want to know that – what they really want to know is who *Jesus* thinks He is. Because they have already made up their minds who *they* think he is. They think He is a dangerous little upstart, who is threatening their security and making grandiose claims about Himself and exposing their practices to the public. And He needs to be got rid of.

So they're not asking questions so they can change their minds if the evidence is persuasive. They've already made up their minds and whatever extra they hear will merely confirm their already negative decision against Jesus.

And sadly, of course, people can still respond like that. If you're not yet a Christian, there may be a whole load of things that make you feel negative towards the Christian faith, or the church, and by extension, towards Jesus: it

might be how the church or individual Christians have treated you in the past, or how they behave in general, or it might be stuff about what you think the Bible does or does not teach on something. But whatever it is, these things have the ability to close our minds to any further discussion. We've made up our minds. And yet, if we are honest, those are peripheral issues, because they are not about the crucial question – who is this man Jesus? Because if He is who He says He is, these other issues may take on a very different light.

Well, the minds of these religious leaders were closed, and so in response to their question, Jesus replies, (v67-8) "If I tell you, you will not believe, and if I ask you, you will not answer." They don't believe – worse, they refuse to be open to believing Him. And that refusal even to engage with the evidence about Jesus is all too common even today.

But then Jesus goes on to say something that must have been like a bomb going off in the council chamber: v69, "From now on the Son of Man shall be seated at the right hand of the power of God." Now if you take one song and blend it with another one, people call it a mash-up. And that's what Jesus is doing here. He takes the prophecy of Daniel 7 – which speaks of one like a Son of Man approaching God, the Ancient of Days, and being given glory and power and everlasting dominion over the nations; and He mashes it up with Psalm 110 which talks of the Messiah sitting at God's right hand and his enemies being made his footstool, and Jesus is saying – 'you want to know who I am – well from now on, this is how you will know me.' From now on, He will be the Judge, with ultimate authority, not them.

And He is claiming to be worthy to do what these religious leaders would have considered blasphemous – to sit at God's right hand. To these men, God and man were separated in the Temple by walls and doors and curtains and sacrifices and sin. And when the prophets saw God, they would quake in their boots in His presence, and the angels would cry out 'holy, holy, holy' whilst covering their eyes, too awesome is He to look on. And Jesus is claiming that He is going to sit at God's right hand? I mean, that's outrageous.

Unless, of course, it is true. But how would you know, if your mind is already closed?

So out of their indignation they ask one last question to pin him to the ground: v70, '"are you the Son of God then?" Are you claiming to be that close to God? And Jesus bats it straight back: "You say that I am." You see, Jesus doesn't let them wriggle out from their responsibility: they've got to decide. And yet they can't convict Him without His own words, and Jesus provides them for them. He provides the only evidence they have and the only evidence they need.

But these religious leaders know that they have no authority to execute Jesus and that Pilate the Roman governor will laugh them out of court if they accuse Jesus of being a false prophet. Rome isn't interested in prophets. It's kings and rebels they worry about. So they need to persuade Pilate that Jesus is a risk to Pax Romana – that He's claiming to be a king and stirring up the people. That He's a rebel to be disposed of.

So, Luke tells us, 23:1, that 'the whole company of them arose and brought him before Pilate.'

Pilate

The religious leaders bring three charges against Jesus. 1. He is misleading our nation, he's disturbing the peace. 2. He forbids us to give tribute to Caesar – he's a financial risk to Rome; a charge that we saw a few weeks back that was untrue and 3. That he is saying that he is Christ a king – he's a revolutionary – a threat to Caesar.

Now, given what they have told him, Pilate would have been forgiven for expecting some kind of hardened bandit. Instead Caesar's representative comes face to face with Jesus. And immediately dismissing the the first two charges he homes in on the third – and if you know the other gospels, you'll know that something about Jesus unsettles him: v3, And Pilate asked him, "are you the King of the Jews?" And once again, Jesus bats it straight back: 'You have said so." Is He a king? Yes, but not the kind Pilate thinks.

And from this point on Pilate does everything he can to acquit Jesus. He does everything he can to set Jesus free, except set Him free. Pilate knows the truth. He knows Jesus is innocent. But he vacillates, he does nothing about it. He fails to do the very thing he should and could have done and release Jesus.

Instead, he wants others to decide about Jesus. When he hears that Jesus is from Galilee, and that Herod is in town and Jesus falls in Herod's jurisdiction, he packs Jesus off to Herod. He wants Herod to make the decision, and take the heat. And Herod just sends Him back.

You see, neither Pilate, nor you or I can duck the question, who is this man Jesus? And what am I to do with Him? Pilate wants to turf that decision. But you can't - Jesus is relentless, to try and be neutral is to decide against Him. You have to decide and decide for yourself.

But ask yourself, why does Pilate find it so hard to do what's right? Why does he finally condemn Jesus to death when he knows He is innocent? And the answer is, because he has this crowd shouting him down. And the hard truth is that Pilate sends Jesus to the cross to placate the masses. Like many a politician or leader, he sacrificed doing what was right on the altar of popular opinion.

But think about it – if you're not yet a Christian, do you draw back from becoming one because you worry about what other people will think of you? Or if you are a Christian, do you hesitate to speak up for Christ, because you worry about others' opinion of you?

And put yourself in Pilate's shoes. Luke tells us in v23 that the crowd 'were urgent, demanding with loud cries that [Jesus] should be crucified.' Pilate has an imminent riot on his hands. Things are beginning to turn ugly. And it's Passover and Jerusalem is full to overflowing with people, and the day is still young. And if this spreads there could be disaster. And John tells us that the religious leaders

make a thinly veiled threat to Pilate: (John 19:12) "If you release this man, you are not Caesar's friend. Everyone who makes himself a king opposes Caesar."

So, suddenly, Pilate's career is on the line. If this turns into a full-scale riot, or an uprising – things look bleak for Pontius Pilate. Is Jesus worth that cost? Is he worth the loss of popularity; is He worth the cost of Pilate's job?

And we're faced with the same questions. Am I willing to give up everything for this man Jesus? Am I willing to pay the price of loss of friends, loss of popularity, or losing out on promotion, or seeing my career suffer, for Jesus? Does this man Jesus mean more to me than anything else? Am I prepared to lose *this* (whatever *this* is) for Him?

And tragically, the answer for Pilate, was no. Luke tells us, v24-25, that 'Pilate decided that their demand should be granted… he delivered Jesus over to their will.' And Pilate surrendered Jesus to save his own neck. Public pressure and his job, meant more to him than Jesus, they meant more to him than truth.

Now, in life the right decision is not always the easiest one, is it? Especially when it comes to Jesus. But that doesn't stop it being right. And Jesus never promised that following Him would be easy – in fact He said it is like taking up your cross daily. But Jesus is worth every penny of every price you ever have to pay for Him. As the apostle Paul puts it, any loss we might experience in this life for the sake of Christ, is light and momentary trouble, and not worth comparing to the weight of glory that is ours in Jesus (2 Cor 4:17).

Let's look at the third actor on this stage:

Herod

Pilate sends Jesus to Herod, and Herod is one happy man: v8: 'When Herod saw Jesus, he was very glad, for he had long desired to see him.' And Luke tells us why he's over the moon: 'because he had heard about him, and he was hoping to see some sign done by him.'

So here is King Herod, and he finally gets to meet Jesus, the real king, and he's happy, but not because at last he can hear Jesus teach, not because he feels cut to the heart about his sins and wants to ask Jesus what he must do to put things right, not so he can hear the message of repentance and grace and the kingdom. But because he wants to see a miracle, he wants to see Jesus do a trick. He treats Jesus as if he's a magician at a children's birthday party, or some kind of travelling circus act.

Well, Herod wants a sign, but what he gets is silence. V9: '[Herod] questioned [Jesus] at some length, but he made no answer.' It's not just that Jesus doesn't do anything, He doesn't say anything either.

Now, I don't know about you, but I find those words chilling. Herod is so superficial, so frivolous, that Jesus has nothing to say to him. The man who never turned away a sincere questioner stands before Herod in silence. Don't you think it's a terrible position to be in that God has nothing further to say to you?

And as one commentator (Wilcock) says, when Herod doesn't get his way and Jesus refuses to play, his curiosity turns to contempt, and he joins his soldiers in mocking Jesus. Here he is, in the presence of the Son of God, in the presence of the real King of the Jews, and he thinks it's a great big joke and He plays dressing up with Him.

You see, for Herod, Jesus is just the latest bit of entertainment, and when he's tired of that, he moves on to the next thing. It never goes beyond the superficial, it just never sinks in, who he is dealing with.

Now, the hard truth is that it is possible to have some level of interest in spirituality, even an interest in Jesus and what He can do for you, but it never goes beyond the shallows. And what Herod teaches us, is that you won't find God that way. When God was calling the people of Israel back to Himself he said through Jeremiah the prophet, 'For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope. Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will hear you. You will seek me and find me, when you seek me with all your heart' (Jer 29:11-13).

You see, Jesus doesn't have much to say to the person whose interest in Him is just superficial and shallow and it's all so much froth. But He has plenty to say, words of welfare and future and hope to those who will seek Him with all their heart.

So, if the lesson of the Chief Priests is be prepared to have your thinking about Jesus challenged, and if the lesson from Pilate is be prepared to pay the cost of siding with Jesus because He is worth it. The lesson of Herod is 'think'. Think deeply. Think hard. Seek Him with all your heart and you will find Him and find Him supremely satisfying.

But at the centre of all this, the man in the middle of the maelstrom, is Jesus.

Jesus

Now, I don't know about you, but when I'm treated badly, there is this urge to let people know about it. But here is Jesus, and He's blindfolded and beaten and mocked and falsely accused and robbed of a fair trial. And He suffers innocently and in silence. And Isaiah the prophet saw it all coming. In Isaiah 53, written 700 years before Jesus, Isaiah says that there will come a servant of the Lord, who will bear our griefs and our sorrows, who will be pierced for our transgressions and crushed for our iniquities. And listen to how Isaiah says this Servant will conduct himself: Isaiah 53:7, 'He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he opened not his mouth.'

And Jesus, the ultimate Passover lamb is being led to His slaughter and He is silent. And when the New Testament writers reflected on that they saw in Jesus our supreme example of how we should stand up under unjust suffering and persecution. This is what Peter wrote: 'If when you do good and suffer for it you endure, this is a gracious thing in the sight of God. For to this you have been

called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps. He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly' (1 Peter 2:20-23). So the next time you feel the urge to defend your reputation, think about Jesus.

But why? Why does Jesus allow this unjust process to continue? Why doesn't He perform a miracle, or call down angels? Why this acquiescence to evil and injustice and iniquity?

Well, that brings us to the last character in this trial.

Barabbas

In his attempt to free Jesus, Pilate offers the crowd a choice. It's Passover and Pilate's made a habit of pardoning a prisoner at Passover, so he tries to set up the starkest of contrasts. He has his men bring up from the cells their worst, most notorious death row inmate, Barabbas. And the crowd can choose Jesus or Barabbas, Jesus or, v19, "A man who had been thrown into prison for an insurrection… and for murder." Surely, they'll choose Jesus. No one would want Barabbas released back into society.

But the crowd starts crying out, "Away with this man, and release to us Barabbas." And finally Pilate caves. Barabbas walks free and Jesus is condemned to die Barabbas' death, the death of a rebel.

But what is going on here runs much deeper even than that simple exchange. Ask yourself, what does Barabbas' name mean? It means, son of the father. And Barabbas isn't given a first name, so he could be the son of anyone's father. And when you see that, then you have found yourself in this story. You see, we are all Barabbas. Like Barabbas, we are all rebels against God, we are all guilty. But Jesus, *the* Son of the Father, takes our place.

That's why He allows this to go forward, because the torrent of satan's destruction has met the overflowing stream of God's salvation; because Barabbas's freedom is our freedom; because Jesus, the King, will die the death of a rebel, so that every rebel might become a citizen of His kingdom.

And when you grasp that, and the extent of His love for you, you won't be closed-minded like the priests, or shallow like Herod, or vacillate over whether Jesus is worth it like Pilate, but you'll seek Him with all your heart and find Him, and choose Christ, no matter what the cost.