The Courage and Identity of Christ
John 18:1-27

We're back in John's gospel and the account of Jesus' arrest and trial. And if you read the commentators, what many of them talk about is Jesus' total command of the situation. And they're not wrong. Yet, it's not just his command *over* events that's so striking, it's his courage in the midst of them.

But look closely and what do you notice? It's that this description of Jesus' courage is interwoven with Peter's denials. And yet, whether it's the courage of Christ or the cowardice of Peter, there's another thread that John's woven into this - and that's the issue of identity.

Because as you watch Peter's denials, what's he denying? And the good Sunday school answer is, Jesus! Which is true. But it's more subtle than that, isn't it? Because what he actually denies is who he, Peter is. And so what I want you to see from this passage this morning, is how courage - or lack of it - and identity - are intimately woven together, and not just here, but in our hearts.

You see, your ability to be courageous, to be willing and ready to do the right thing even if it costs you, or to find strength and keep going despite the sorrow or suffering you're facing, is deeply connected with who you think you are, and say you are, and know you are.

So we're going to look at three things: 1. Courage - why you need it; 2. Courage - why it fails; and 3. Courage - where you can find it.

Courage - why you need it
Look at v1: 'When Jesus had spoken these words, he went out with his disciples across the brook Kidron, where there was a garden.' So Jesus' Last Supper is over. He's washed his disciples feet and sent Judas out into the night to betray him, And now he also heads into the night with his disciples and walks to the Garden of Gethsemane.

Except, look what John writes next: v2, 'Now Judas who betrayed him, also knew the place.' So Jesus knows Judas is going to betray him - and yet he doesn't go 'Guys, we need to go somewhere different, somewhere they won't think of looking.' It's the opposite, isn't it. He goes to the first place Judas will think of - where they always went.

Why? Because Jesus is not avoiding the confrontation to come. But think about that. Maybe you're facing some situation you'd far rather not face, or a conversation you'd far rather not have. What do you need to face it? Courage. Because you know it's going to cost you or drain you. Yet it's into that garden of sorrows that Jesus walks.

But he's not the only one. Verse 3: 'So Judas, having procured a band of soldiers and some officers from the chief priests and the Pharisees, went there with lanterns and torches and weapons.'

And the word for 'band of soldiers' is the one for a cohort of Roman soldiers - anywhere between 3-600 men. So regardless of whether it was a full-cohort or not, they're taking no chances. They've seen Jesus escape before. They've had officers sent to arrest him coming back floored, saying, 'no one spoke like him'. And they're fearful of trouble at the feast. So they're thinking: strength and safety in numbers.

But it's not just their numbers. Look who makes up the party: Roman soldiers - the military superpower of the day. Officers from the high priests - the cultural, theological progressives of the day;

and the Pharisees - the conservatives of the day. Three groups who could not abide each other now united in their enmity to Jesus.

What does that tell you? It's that in different ways he has challenged and critiqued each of them and they know it. Which means, as you see him standing against them, Jesus is offering you something very different from secular power politics or liberal or even conservative religion. And it's the gospel.

Ok, but notice *his* response to *their* threat. Verse 4, 'Then Jesus, knowing all that would happen to him, came forward.' The powers of the world are ranged against him: left and right, progressive and conservative, secular and religious, yet he steps forward to meet them. So on this night of nights, sure they're the ones carrying lanterns and torches, but he's the Light shining in the darkness. Because to step up to the plate for the cause of truth when everyone and everything is uniting against you, takes courage, doesn't it?

And whether it's on campus, or in your work place, or even just at home, to step forward on things the prevailing culture doesn't want you to say, or to talk about your faith when others want you to keep that private, or to call a fellow Christian to obedience to God's word when everyone else is telling them 'good on you, you be you' that also takes courage.

Yet look again how John puts it: '*Knowing all that would happen to him*, [he] came forward.' You see, he knows the unimaginable suffering he's going to face at the cross. But he still steps forward.

Now think of what some of you are facing. It might be health or family issues, it could be your work, or lack of work. And it's not the cross, but it's suffering and sometimes it takes courage to just take the next step forward, doesn't it?

And as he steps forward he asks them v4-5, '"Whom do you seek?" They answered him, "Jesus of Nazareth." Jesus said to them, "I am he." And he could mean just that. 'You're looking for Jesus of Nazareth - well, you've found him. That's me. That's my identity.'

And yet, v6, 'When Jesus said to them, "I am he," *they drew back and fell to the ground.*' Because when Jesus says 'I am he' what he literally says is, 'I Am' - the name God revealed himself by to Moses: I Am Who I Am.

So Jesus' courage to stand, and step forward, and face suffering, is intimately linked to who he is. The One before whom all people will one day fall.

And yet, he doesn't destroy them, does he? I mean, he could have. They are sprawled on the ground and with a word he could have finished them off. Because that's what God did to the Egyptian soldiers hunting down Moses. But he doesn't.

And doesn't that also take courage? To not destroy others, or even harm their reputation, when it's in your self-interest *and power* to do it. Especially when our culture tells you - 'you're the one who matters, so don't let anyone else stand in the way of you getting what you want.'

Yet here is the One who could take whatever he wants - and what does he want? Verse 8: "If you seek me, *let these men go*." But he could have used a heavenly stun grenade or set off a celestial smoke screen, and made his exit and saved himself and abandoned them. But he does the opposite. He lets himself be taken that they might go free.

And it's at that point that John makes the first contrast with Peter. Because Peter also wants to take a stand, and he's up for a fight. Verse 10, 'Then Simon Peter, having a sword, drew it and struck the high priest's servant and cut off his right ear.'

Now, I've always wondered how Malchus the servant managed to dodge the slice so he lost his ear and not his head. But that's not the point is it? It's that Peter's missed the point. Verse 11, 'So Jesus said to Peter, "Put your sword into its sheath; shall I not drink the cup that the Father has given me?"'

And sometimes, to embrace the purpose of God for your life takes courage, doesn't it? Especially when it's hard. Especially when everyone else has got a sword and wants a fight. Or especially when it's a million miles from 'your best life now.'

And John tells us they arrest Jesus, bind him and take him to Annas, father-in-law of Caiaphas the high priest. And they take him there first because historians call him the real power behind the high priestly throne. But did you notice the line of Annas' interrogation? Verse 19, 'about his disciples and his teaching.'

Why his disciples? Because Annas wants to know how many men are with him. What's the scale of the threat? What commands have you given them?

But look how Jesus responds: v20-21: "I have spoken openly to the world… I have said nothing in secret. Why do you ask me? Ask those who have heard me what I said to them; they know what I said." In other words, there is no secret plot, because the gospel is transparent good news. But also notice what he doesn't say: anything about the disciples. Annas wants names and addresses and Jesus refuses to go there.

Now, have you ever been tempted to throw others under the bus to save your own skin, or your own reputation? It takes courage not to, doesn't it.

But if in the garden Peter struck a high priest's servant, here, in the high priest's house, it's Jesus who's struck by a servant: v22, "Is that how you answer the high priest?"

How much courage does it take to hit a man whose hands are tied behind his back? So why does he do it? Because it's also about identity: The high priest's identity. 'Don't you know who you are speaking to?'

The irony, of course, is that *they* don't know who *they're* talking to! And the One the high priest is supposed to represent, and offer sacrifices to, and whose forgiveness and mercy he's supposed to entreat, and mediate for - the Great I Am - is standing before him bound.

So how does Jesus respond to the slap? Verse 23, "Jesus answered him, "If what I said is wrong, bear witness about the wrong; but if what I said is right, why do you strike me?" And if there is no courage in beating a bound man, to be bound - to have no power and yet stand against the injustice of those who have power - that takes courage.

And so here, Jesus displays courage in all his multifaceted beauty. And we want to be those people of courage, don't we? People who stand and step forward and speak up. The problem is, while Jesus shows us the possibility of courage, Peter shows us something else.

Courage - Why it Fails

Verse 15: 'Simon Peter followed Jesus, and so did another disciple. Since that disciple was known to the high priest, he entered with Jesus into the courtyard of the high priest.' And that other disciple, who's probably John, speaks to the servant girl guarding the gate and gets permission for Peter to enter too. But as she lets him in, John tells us, v17, 'The servant girl at the door said to Peter, *"You also are not one of this man's disciples are you?"*' And the way John reports it, you can almost hear the disdain, the mocking in the young woman's voice, can't you?: 'You're not one of them as well are you?'

So Peter's moment for courage doesn't come in the form he might have expected. It's not on the field of battle with a sword in his hand. It comes with a young woman opening a door and asking him an off-hand, throw-away question.

But that's the point isn't it? The moments that require moral courage of us probably won't come with neon lights flashing - 'your life depends on this, do not falter, now is the moment.' They come with a young woman asking you a question, or a good looking non-Christian guy asking you on a date. It comes with an advert for a well-paid job, or as the doctor breaks the diagnosis to you. It comes in your lab as you sit in front of your screen and you're tempted to massage your results just a bit.

So how does Peter answer the test? Verse 17, "I am not." Now, just hours before he had pledged undying loyalty to Jesus, and here he is floored by a servant girl.

But did you notice how he does it? By denying who he is, by negating his identity. In *his* moment of testing Jesus said, "I am" and here is Peter saying, "I am not". And he's just forsaken his deepest commitments. Commitments he had absolutely no intention of forsaking.

Some time back I spoke to a man who had compromised himself ethically in his business dealings. And I asked him, 'did your conscience ever prick you?' 'Yes' he replied 'at first, but it became easier with time.' And, like Peter, you can start off thinking, 'I'll never do that', until you do, just once. But each *once* makes the next one easier.

And as he stands around the fire, the high priest's servants ask him again, v25, "You also are not one of his disciples, are you?" And again he says, "I am not." Until, v26-27, 'One of the servants of the high priest, a relative of the man whose ear Peter had cut off, asked, "Did I not see you in the garden with him?" Peter again denied it, *and at once the rooster crowed*.' And humanly speaking, Jesus is at his most vulnerable, and Peter abandons him and his fall is complete.

Why does Peter do it? Or looking at ourselves - why are we so often not the hero? Why do we keep quiet about being a Christian, or fail to speak up when we should? Why do we take the easy path of compromise rather than the costly path of obedience? Why are we willing to throw our colleagues under the bus?

Well, think of Peter. Because, firstly, those asking the questions are disapproving, even mocking. And the social pressure to conform can be huge, can't it? And none of us want to be mocked. We want to be liked, better still, respected.

Then there's the risk - he's been recognised, possibly as the guy who wielded the sword. And now they're the ones with the swords. And his instinct for self-preservation, his desire to live life matters more to him in that moment than Jesus.

Then this is Annas' - *the* Annas' courtyard - and maybe he feels his social smallness. His lack of social capital.

Then there's the moral relativising. I mean, 'I am not' - it's just three words in English, two in Greek, and what's the big deal? It's just words, what matters is my heart. Except, as Jesus said, the mouth is always the overflow of the heart, and a tree is known by its fruit.

Which begs the question - who is Peter at the level of his heart? At the root of his self? Is he a disciple of Jesus or not?

You see, Jesus knows who he is and that makes him brave and courageous and determined in purpose: I will drink my Father's cup. But Peter fails and falls because he can't decide who he really is.

The American social psychologist, Roy Baumeister, has argued that of all the fundamental questions people ask about life, the first is the question of identity: who am I?

How do you answer that? Well, psychologists argue that your identity is made up of two things: a sense of worth and a sense of self. A sense of worth - an inner confidence and significance and value, that doesn't crumble but gives you courage. And a sense of self - the core you that doesn't change with the different roles you have: that underneath Martin the husband, or Martin the father, or Martin the pastor, there's a core Martin.

And today, at least in the West, you're told your identity is for you to decide. And you've got to discover who you are and create it for yourself. And then you've got to be true to yourself.

So, how do you discover who you are? Two ways: the first is to try the 'you are what you do' way. Who are you? I'm a mum, I'm a doctor, I'm a professor, I'm a pastor. Or if those leave you cold, it's what you do when you can do what you want to do: like 'I'm the guy or the girl who comes alive in the mountains.' Like the young man I was speaking to once who lived for the mountains, and I asked him, 'what would you do if you were paralysed and you could no longer climb, and run and ski?' 'I'd kill myself' he said. Why? Because who he was would have died.

But you don't need to be paralysed do you? You might just need to retire, or your kids leave home and you're left thinking, 'who am I? Who am I now I'm no longer *this*.'
And notice, Jesus doesn't say "I Am" because of what he does. He does what he does - secures the disciples' freedom, faces suffering, drinks the cup, stands up to injustice, *because* of who he is, not the other way round.

Ok, but the second way is 'you are what you want'. And you've got to decide what you want out of life and dream your dreams, and decide your desires and attractions and then express yourself. And then, to be courageous is to go against what anyone else like your family or culture are saying and be who you want to be.

But that's as unstable a basis for building identity as what you do, isn't it? Because what you want changes, doesn't it? I mean, who does Peter want to be? At one and the same time, he wants to be loyal to Jesus, that's why he's in the courtyard, but he also wants to save his own skin. He wants to fight, but he also wants to flee. He wants to be brave but he also wants to be liked. Does he love Jesus? Of course he does. But in this moment he loves himself more.

So if Peter looks inside himself, at his desires - who is he? I am… no I'm not. And we're no different are we? So looking inside yourself is never going to give you a stable sense of worth or of self. You need something better. Something from outside you, which tells you who you are. And Peter got it.

You see, if this was today, when that rooster crowed it would've been the end of Peter. No way back, cancelled, deplatformed, and hung out to dry. No atonement and no forgiveness, the man who said the unpardonable thing.

But this isn't the end of Peter. It's just the beginning. And within weeks Peter is standing up for Christ in the presence, not just of the high priest's servants, but the high priest himself, telling him, 'we will obey God not man'.

What made the difference?

Courage - Where to Find It

In the garden, Jesus steps forward and tells the soldiers, 'let these men go'. Then, before Annas, he refuses to throw them under the bus. What is that? It's just a foretaste of him giving himself up and laying his life down in their place.

And when he says, v11, "Shall I not drink the cup that the Father has given me?" what's the cup? Well, Isaiah the prophet tells us, it's 'the cup of his [the Lord's] wrath' (Is 51:17) - it's God's just judgement against sin. But look who's going to drink it: it's not the soldiers, it's the not high priest, and it's not Peter. It's him. He steps forward to take the cup in Peter's place and your place.

And when, in the aftermath of Jesus' death and resurrection, Peter realised that, courage was kindled in his heart - because he finally knew who he was. Who am I? I am his. I'm a disciple of the king who drank the cup for me.

And Jesus drank the cup of wrath so you can drink the cup of mercy, and love, and joy, and a secure and lasting identity. Because when you know deep in your heart who Jesus is: I Am, and that he died for you, and rose and reigns and intercedes for you, who are you? You are one for whom Christ the king died. You are one whose every sin has been forgiven. You are one upon whom your heavenly Father looks with joy. You are a beloved son or daughter of God. You are one for whom God is working all things for good.

And when you know that it'll give you courage and purpose. Philippians 2 says that for us Jesus made himself nothing, or as the old versions put it, made himself of no reputation. When Peter understood that, he ceased to care about his reputation. When he knew that Jesus loved him so much it cost him everything, he loved Christ so much he was willing to lose everything. When he understood that at the cross Jesus had fully identified with him and stood in his place, he willingly identified with him.

That's what gives you courage. That's what will give you the strength to walk through suffering, or make hard ethical decisions, or walk in obedience, or stand up for him even if it costs you your reputation. Because with Peter, you know who you are. You're Christ's and that can give you a courage and a purpose that no job, or looking inside for the authentic you, can ever give you.