Two Trials
Mark 14:53-72

We're looking at Mark's gospel and today's passage is described by some commentators as 'the climax of the gospel'. You see, what's the major question Mark has had us grapple with? It's, who is this man Jesus? And at his trial, it's that question that becomes the central, life-defining one.

And yet, this passage doesn't just present us with the trial of Jesus. It's also the trial of Peter. And it's not just the identity and character of Jesus that's in the spotlight, but Peter's. And that's where it gets challenging. Because if here we see Peter under pressure, what are you like when you're under stress, or you've got accusations coming in, and you're under pressure? And where are you supposed to find the resources to live a life of truth and integrity when you're up against the wall?

Well, as we saw last week, at his arrest the disciples have abandoned Jesus, and Mark tells us he's led away to the high priest and his trial before the council of the Sanhedrin. But Mark adds, v54, 'And Peter had followed him at a distance.'

And before we look at anything else, does that describe you? Maybe you would or maybe you wouldn't call yourself a Christian, but in some sense or another you're following Christ *but* you're keeping a distance. You're neither fully in nor out and you're not fully his. In fact, look what Mark says Peter did. He entered, v54, 'Right into the courtyard of the high priest. And he was sitting with the guards and warming himself at the fire.' And these are almost certainly the guards who arrested Jesus. So at one level, this takes courage. And yet, what's he trying to do? He's trying to blend in. He's trying to stay around Jesus but at the same time mingle with the crowd and not stand out. And as we're going to see, that kind of compromise rarely goes well.

And so, in the room above the courtyard, Jesus stands alone.

The Character of Jesus
Well, let me ask you, what are you like under pressure? Now you might say, 'well, I thrive under pressure - it's when I'm at my most productive.' Or, 'I need the pressure of a deadline to make me knuckle down.' But what about your character? What would those closest to you say you're like when you're stressed, or others attack you, or criticise your actions or question your motives?

Because that's the situation Jesus finds himself in in the early hours of this Friday morning. Look at v55, 'Now the chief priests and the whole council were seeking testimony against Jesus to put him to death.' So they've already decided what they think about Jesus, it's just a matter of getting the evidence to stick.

And Mark tells us, v55-56, 'But they found none. For many bore false witness against him, but their testimony did not agree.'

Earlier this week, one of my girls showed me a meme called 'the three hardest things to say'. 1. I was wrong; 2. I need help; 3 Worcestershire Sauce.

But the first one at least is right, isn't it? Even when we know we've done something wrong it can be hard to admit., and not defend yourself.
How much harder is it to stay silent when you're *falsely* accused? Don't you find this urge to speak out welling up inside you? And yet Mark tells us Jesus was silent. There is a succession of witnesses whose testimony does not agree, and Mark says, v60, 'The high priest stood up in the midst and asked Jesus, "Have you no answer to make?"… *But he remained silent and made no*

answer.' Here he is, on trial for his life, and the man who never hesitated to answer people's questions in the past now says nothing in his defence.

I once heard Campbell McAlpine, a great Bible teacher, use Jesus' example here to say, 'never defend yourself.' And his point wasn't that you should never, under any circumstances, defend yourself from false accusation. His point was that frequently we can be just that little bit too sensitive about our reputations. Whereas God sometimes seems strangely less concerned with them than we are.

You see, what man can stand on trial like this, knowing his life is on the line, and hear false accusation after false accusation and not give in to that urge to defend himself? Only a man who knows that his life and reputation are in God's hands. Now, in today's courts, a refusal to answer may be interpreted as evidence of guilt - with Jesus it's the opposite. It's evidence of his character, of his innocence, of his security in what his heavenly Father thinks of him; the only opinion that really matters.

And yet, as he stands there silent, you can almost hear the echoes of the prophet Isaiah talking of the Suffering Servant, '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' (Is 53:7).

Now, Mark only gives us the detail of one the charges brought against him: v58, "We heard him say, 'I will destroy this temple that is made with hands, and in three days I will build another, not made with hands.'" It's the same charge that will be thrown at him as he hangs on the cross. But as Mark tells us, v59, 'Yet even about this their testimony did not agree.'

And that's because, while Jesus has predicted the destruction of the temple, nowhere had he said he would personally do it, or that he would rebuild it three days later. And yet, his accusers have clearly picked up on something. Because after Jesus cleansed the temple, and the leaders demanded by what authority he had done it, John records Jesus replying, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up" (John 2:19). And they thought he was meaning the physical, man-made building in front of them. Whereas, John tells us, 'he was speaking about the temple of his body' (John 2:21).

And so what these false witnesses had failed to get was that Jesus was linking the future destruction of the temple in AD70 with his death and resurrection. Because when Jesus was raised from the dead, the temple ceased to have any point. Because from that point on, you don't need animal sacrifices or elaborate rules of ritual cleanliness to draw near to God. Because Jesus is the ultimate temple and it's through him that you can meet with God.

But it's that question of who Jesus is claiming to be that gets the high priest of the temple on his feet.

The Identity of Jesus

Now this Sanhedrin that Jesus is standing before had the authority to impose the death penalty in one case only, and that's if someone defiled the temple. Everything else had to go to the Roman authorities. So, having failed to land the charge of temple defilement, the high priest switches attack.

Verse 61, ‘Again the high priest asked him, “Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed?”’ Why ask that? Because if Jesus replies ‘yes’, not only will that satisfy their grounds for guilt on a charge of blasphemy, to claim to be the messiah, a revolutionary king, would be grounds for a charge of treason and death under the Romans.

And Jesus has claimed to have authority to forgive sins, he’s redefined the Sabbath around himself, he’s demonstrated undeniable authority over demons, he’s entered Jerusalem on a donkey - enacting the prophecy of *the* coming king, and he’s cleansed the temple. So the obvious question is, *‘who do you think you are?*’

Except, what the high priest literally says is even clearer: ‘You are the Christ, the Son of the Blessed?’ And so, if the first half of this gospel built to Peter’s confession, when he said ‘You are the Christ’, now, as the gospel reaches its climax, the high priest, the chief of Jesus’ accusers, uses those same words, only in contemptuous question.

And so the irony is that, because *Son of the Blessed* is a way of saying *Son of God* without mentioning his name, the clearest declaration in the gospel of who Jesus is, comes not from his disciples’ or even his own lips, but from the mouth of the high priest, his accuser.

And in response to *that* question, Jesus breaks his silence, not to defend himself, but to confirm his identity, v62, “I am, and you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power, and coming with the clouds of heaven.” Yes, that’s who I am. I am the Messiah, I am the Son of God, and you will see me, the Son of Man - the one Daniel saw in his vision, to whom all authority on heaven and earth is given, seated at the right hand of God.

And this is Jesus’ trial, but his resurrection and ascension and enthronement are his vindication. And whereas here the high priest and Sanhedrin dishonour Jesus, God will give him the highest honour. And while now he stands on trial before them, the day will come when he returns and they will stand on trial before him: 'because you will see me come with the clouds of heaven.’

And it’s this, his identity, that secures the guilty verdict. Verses 63-64: ‘And the high priest tore his garments and said, “What further witnesses do we need? You have heard his blasphemy. What is your decision?” And they all condemned him as deserving death.’

Now, if you’re not yet a Christian, you’re probably wary of the whole idea of blasphemy, especially in the age of Salman Rushdie and Islamic fatwas. So I doubt you think of Jesus in those kind of terms. And yet, you’ve still got to settle this question of who Jesus is. And CS Lewis famously said we’ve got three options. He’s either Lord, liar or lunatic. He either is who he says he is. Or he isn’t and knows he isn’t. Or he’s crazy. But as you see him standing on trial, and as you watch him throughout this gospel, does he seem like a liar to you? Does he same crazy? Isn’t it rather the opposite, that of all people he’s the one who speaks the truth and who’s in his right mind?

Now, more recently atheists have suggested there’s another option, that the gospels are simply made up, that Jesus didn’t really exist. But as we’re going to see with Peter, the gospels repeatedly present the leaders of the early church in a highly critical light. So rather than massaging the truth they give every sign of presenting the unvarnished truth.

The one person who comes out shining is the man on trial.

That's the other great irony of the trial. While the high priest accuses Jesus of blasphemy, in reality it's him who blasphemes the Son of God. As they spit on him and blindfold him and beat him, they demand, v65, "Prophesy!" They want him to tell them who hit him. Yet, since Peter's confession of who Jesus is, back in chapter 8, Jesus has repeatedly prophesied that he would be arrested and beaten and killed by these very men.

But ask yourself, if he is who he says he is, why allow himself to be treated like this? Why not blast the lot of them? Why not bring the future judgment he's talking about into the present?

Why not? For the sake of the other man on trial, and for all those like him.

The Failure of Peter

And if you noticed, this passage gives us another of Mark's sandwiches. He begins by telling us Peter followed Jesus at a distance, entered the courtyard and warmed himself by the fire. Then he breaks off and tells us about Jesus' trial. But now he returns to Peter, v66, 'below in the courtyard.' Mark wants you to compare Jesus under trial in the room above with Peter under trial in the courtyard below.

Because whereas Jesus faces the powerful Sanhedrin, Peter faces, v66, 'one of the servant girls.'

And she recognises him from somewhere, v67, 'seeing Peter warming himself, she looked at him and said, "You also were with the Nazarene, Jesus."' But, v68, 'he denied it, saying, "I neither know nor understand what you mean."

In the room above, Jesus stood silent before his accusers, Peter was quick to speak, quick to deny he had anything to do with him. Earlier that night Peter had vowed he would never abandon Jesus, even on pain of death. And at Jesus' arrest Peter was willing to use physical violence and wield a sword against the leader of the arrest party. But now, before a young girl, he cannot bring himself to admit he's a follower of Christ.

Why not?

Well she's a servant of the high priest, a colleague of the man whose ear Peter sliced off. And Jesus is on trial for his life - that's not someone you want to identify with, is it? Fear and self-preservation can be powerful motivators, can't they? They can make us say and do things we shouldn't, or not say and do things we should.

You see, you can be the alpha male before a crowd with clubs when you've got a sword in your hand and your mates are watching, and then stumble before a servant girl. It's a reminder that the character-shaping and life-defining moments are often not the seemingly great ones. They're the ones that might otherwise appear trivial. Like how you handle the temptation to speak or stay silent in that conversation at the water cooler, or with a friend over a beer. It's what you do when no-one else is looking and it doesn't really matter.

And so as you watch Peter stumble, keep in mind Paul's words, 'Therefore let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall' (1 Cor 10:12). Because the temptation to deny Christ rarely, if

ever, comes in the form of a crowd with clubs or a council threatening your life, but in those small moments that seem no threat at all.

But, of course, Jesus had predicted Peter would deny him three times, and maybe realising he's one down, Peter moves away, v68, 'And he went out into the gateway.' But as he moves into the shadows, he's also moving away from Jesus. He's positioning himself closer to the exit, in case he needs to run for it.

But he doesn't leave totally. So, v69, 'The servant girl saw him and began to say to the bystanders, "This man is one of them."' I mean, by now it's 2 or 3 in the morning, why else would he be there? And so Mark tells us, v70, 'But again he denied it.'

That's the nature of sin, isn't it? You start down a road and it's hard to turn back. Like a rock fall that causes a landslide, it takes on a momentum all its own, and one sin leads to another. We tell an untruth, and find ourselves having to cover our tracks. We click on one thing and find ourselves clicking again. We entertain critical thoughts and find criticism spiralling. And having denied Jesus once, Peter does it again.

And it doesn't end at two. Verse 70, 'After a little while the bystanders again said to Peter, "Certainly you are one of them, for you are a Galilean." Now, I have been known to mistake a Canadian for a Californian, but clearly there's no mistaking a Galilean accent. And v71, Peter 'began to invoke a curse on himself and to swear, "I do not know this man of whom you speak."'

This man. Not so long ago Peter had proclaimed Jesus was the messiah, now he dismisses him as 'this man'. As one commentator puts it, Peter manages to 'deny Jesus without ever using his name.' Upstairs Jesus has just confirmed his identity, knowing it will cost him his life. Downstairs, at the gate, to save his own life, Peter can't even bring himself to name him. You know, after saying Jesus was the messiah Jesus called him Peter, the rock, and as one commentator says, that rock has now hit rock bottom, and nothing can stop the cock crowing.

Verse 72 'And immediately the rooster crowed.' And that sound broke Peter. Verse 72 again, 'And Peter remembered how Jesus had said to him, "before the rooster crows twice, you will deny me three times." And he broke down and wept.'

Temptation and sin always promise to make you happy, or keep you safe. In reality, it always ends in tears, either in this life or the next. As Psalm 16 puts it, 'The sorrows of those who run after another god' whether the god of safety or popularity, - 'shall multiply' (Ps 16:4).

But think what this comparison of Jesus and Peter on trial would have meant for Mark's first readers. You see, they would have known Peter, and known that Mark was writing Peter's account of Jesus. So this is Peter's account of his own fall. And that would have reinforced the very message Peter had been preaching to them. Don't put your trust in mere men, put your trust in Christ. He's the only one who stood firm.

But it would tell them something else as well. Less than 60 years after Mark wrote this, the Roman governor, Pliny the Younger wrote to the emperor Trajan, asking for advice on what to do with all the Christians in his province. People, he said, who engaged in the 'depraved superstition' that is Christianity. And Pliny explained that when he arrested the Christians they were asked three times

whether they were Christians. Three opportunities, like Peter, to deny Christ. If they admitted it, they were executed. If they denied it they had to prove it by worshipping an image of the emperor and by cursing Christ. And that, wrote Pliny, was 'a thing which, it is said, genuine Christians cannot be induced to do.' [Strauss, 667]

And Mark's first readers were facing increasing levels of opposition for their faith, and the easy way out would be to take the way of Peter and deny Jesus. Because to bear witness to him could be costly.

So why do it - then or now?

The Grace of Jesus

Well, if Mark's readers knew Peter they would also have known how it all ended. Because if here he runs from a servant girl, within a few weeks, before a crowd of thousands at Pentecost he stood and proclaimed Christ. And the day came when he himself had to stand accused before this same Sanhedrin and that day he refused to stay silent about Jesus. And in AD64, under Nero's persecution, Peter himself was crucified for Christ.

What explains that transformation? It's the grace of Christ and the power of the Spirit. It's that Peter knew *why* Jesus had stayed silent and not saved himself. Because he had done it to save him, Peter, and you and me.

You see, Jesus' silence is not just the quiet dignity of a man falsely accused. It's the silence of the lamb going to the slaughter. it's the silence of the man who knows it is his Father's will that he gives his life in Peter's place and your place and my place. That he gives his life as a ransom for many. And it's not the false testimony of others that convicts him - it's his own testimony that condemns himself, so that Peter and you and I can go free.

And after his resurrection, Jesus met with Peter and restored him. And at Pentecost, he filled him with his Spirit. That's what transformed Peter.

But listen, all of us have failed like him. Maybe your heart has grown cold towards God. Maybe you've denied Jesus with your words or your actions. Maybe like Peter, that first sin has snowballed. Well, look at Christ being condemned as guilty that you might be declared innocent and know he welcomes you back just like he welcomed Peter back.

And let that be what gives you the courage to bear witness to him when it would be easier and safer to head towards the gate. Polycarp was the Bishop of Smyrna in the years immediately after the apostles. And like Peter he was eventually caught up in one of the persecutions against Christians. But he was an old man, so the Roman proconsul gave him the opportunity to deny Christ and go free. Polycarp replied, "For eighty-six years I have been Christ's servant, and he has done me no wrong, how can I blaspheme my King who saved me?"

And for that, he was burnt at the stake. That almost certainly won't be required of you. But there might be a price to pay. So look to Christ who paid the ultimate price for you, and know no one ever gave up anything for him that compares to what he gave up for you.