

JESUS ON TRIAL

(Isaiah 53.4-8, Mark 14.53-72)

Introduction

We live in an age of sensational court cases, dramatically reported by the media; Donald Trump's impeachment, Rolf Harris, Harvey Weinstein, Oscar Pistorius... powerful men and disgraced celebrities facing the music.

But today, I want to talk about the most famous legal trial the history of the world. The most written about, the most read about, the most spoken about, the most notorious, the most grievous for its dishonesty, and the most heinous for its verdict was the criminal trial of Jesus of Nazareth.

As we follow on from last week's reading, Jesus has just been arrested and is now on trial for his life. He is staring death in the face, knowing that his enemies are set on terminating him. They rough him up and ply him with questions in an attempt to trick him into incriminating himself.

A Rigged Trial

By the standards of any fair legal system, Jesus' trial was a joke. It was rigged. It was actually engineered to deliver a miscarriage of justice.



There are twelve different reasons why Jesus' case should have been thrown out. Even according to the first century Jewish legal system, Jesus' trial was null, void and invalid.

Here they are, 12 reasons why Jesus' trial was unlawful...

1. All four Gospels state that Jesus was arrested without a charge being made against him. That was illegal.
2. The arrest was set up by his judges, who thus became the counsel for the prosecution. It was a clear conflict of interest.
3. Legally the trial had to be held in daylight hours but it took place at night.
4. The trial took place on private property, the high priest's home, not in the public court as the law stated.
5. The trial began without the accused being charged of any offence. That was not permitted.
6. The prosecution witnesses brought no consistent evidence, so the case should have been dismissed.
7. Those whose statements disagreed were not charged with perverting the course of justice for bringing false evidence in court as they should have been.
8. Jesus was not released when his accusers were shown to be unreliable witnesses as justice required.
9. The judge didn't call a single testimony for the defence, failing in his solemn duty of impartiality.
10. The judge made no cross-examination of Jesus' claim to be the Messiah; in fact, he ignored it.
11. Jesus was physically attacked and harmed while in custody, thus punished before a verdict was made.
12. The death sentence was rushed through on the same day, allowing no time for a legal appeal.

On every count, this trial should have collapsed, and the conviction, being unsafe, should have been quashed.

Who Is Jesus?

As we'll see, Jesus' hearing centres on one vital question. And it's where the high priest asks Jesus, "Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?" In other words, "Jesus, who *are* you?"

In a sense, Jesus' trial is still unfolding now. People every day are still judging for themselves what their answer is to that same question. Who is Jesus Christ?

It's the most important question in life actually. "Who do I think Jesus is?" Your entire life; this one and the next, depends on the answer you give. Everyone has to make their mind up. Who do you say Jesus is?

So the trial begins. It's gone midnight. Jesus is led to the high priest's house. Peter follows at a distance. They look for evidence to convict him but no one can find anything wrong with him. People make up stories to accuse him. But they bungle the case for prosecution badly. They misquote him but, even then, they can't really agree about what he *didn't* say.

So the high priest looks at Jesus and says, "What have you got to say for yourself?" Jesus gives no answer. He doesn't waste his breath.



So, the big question comes. "Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?"

Firstly, "Are you the Messiah, the Christ, the anointed one? Are you the chosen one all Jews have long awaited? For many centuries, every baby born into the Jewish nation, people wondered, is this the special one? Could this be the great leader who will rise up and change our fortunes?"

So the high priest says to Jesus, "Well, news about you has travelled. People say you might be our Messiah. Is this who you think you are?"

The thing is, they have already decided that Jesus *cannot* be the Messiah. Everything about him is wrong.

- He heals on the sabbath. It's not allowed.
- He eats without ceremonially washing his hands. It's against the rules.
- He touches lepers. It's contagious.
- He walks on water, showing contempt for health and safety.
- He raises the dead using the wrong liturgy.

So this man, whatever else he is, *cannot* be the Messiah. Like many people today, they write Jesus off without even investigating.

Then the high priest asks, "Are you the Son of the Blessed One?" In other words, do you claim some kind of special relationship with God almighty? Have you come to earth from heaven? Are you God himself in human form?"

And Jesus' answer is emphatic. "Yes, that's *exactly* who I am. *I am.*" The great I am. I'm not just

- a wise teacher
- a charismatic leader
- a social innovator
- an advocate for the poor

Jesus is all those things, but that isn't why they killed him. They killed him because he said, "I am the Messiah, the Son of God."

What Jesus says here is not ambiguous. He claims the identity of a figure from the Book of Daniel; the Son of Man, at the right hand of the Mighty One, and coming on the clouds of heaven. This is who Jesus says he is.

In Daniel 7, there's a dramatic vision of eternity with a powerful figure *from heaven* but who is "*like* a Son of Man." A heavenly being, clearly, but one who's going to take on humanity; he's going to be one of us.

And this great figure comes with the clouds of heaven God Almighty, and is given authority and power.

Is it some kind of angel or archangel? Is that who Jesus says he is? A created spiritual being sent as God's messenger? It can't be. It goes on to say, "All nations and

peoples of every language will *worship* him." Everyone should bow down and adore him.

And it says, "His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom will never be destroyed."

He rules an invincible kingdom that will never end. Almighty God is going to come as flesh and blood into human history, and everyone is to exalt and honour and revere him. Jesus says, "That's who I am."

- That's why the high priest shouts, "Blasphemy!"
- That's why they condemn him to death.

What do *you* think? Could it be that Jesus was making up some story about being the Son of God, knowing he was nothing of the sort?

Could it be that Jesus possibly schizophrenic, fantasising about being the Son of God, but tragically nothing of the sort? Or is this most beautiful life the world has ever seen for real?

What a thing! God, the author of life, the source of everything good comes to earth. And we sit with a wig and gown, put him in the dock, break every rule in the book, rig the trial, then smash the gavel on the desk and pronounce him guilty.

And Peter...

I wonder how much of the trial Peter got wind of in the courtyard? At least he got as far as that. Were there leaks from people going in and out about how the trial was unravelling? Did Peter hear raised voices from within? All we know is that there are three occasions when people blow his cover.



A girl recognises his face as someone who was walking around with Jesus. "Didn't I see you two together?"

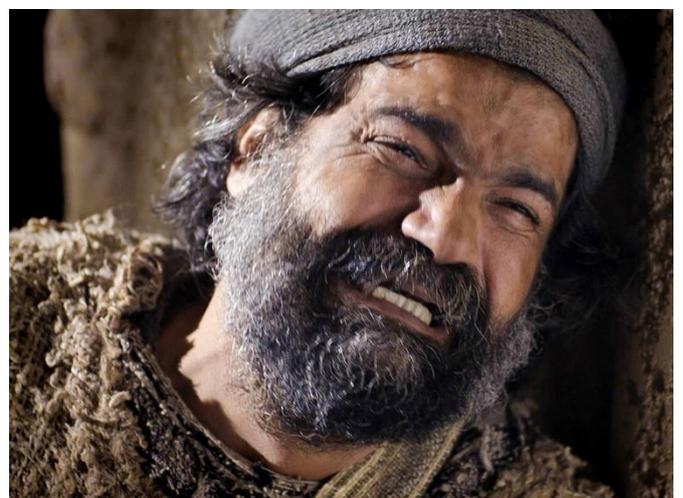
It's late. Peter's tired. "What are you talking about?" he says and he moves away from the light of the fire where people can recognise him.

Then after wondering, "where have I seen that guy before?", she remembers that he *was* with the other disciples. "Yeah," she says in earshot of everyone around, "you were with his followers, it *was* you!"



Peter's heart starts to beat faster, his throat tightens, his hands begin to sweat. Again, he says, "No, definitely not, it's just someone who looks like me."

And then a group of bystanders notice the distinctive way he talks. "It must be you, with your northern accent!" Peter loses it. "God damn it; I swear, I don't know the man, I've never met him. He means *nothing* to me at all."



Peter buries his face in his hands, a broken man, bitter tears running down his face. "What have I done?"

Jesus is his best friend. For three years they have eaten together, laughed and cried together, travelled together, slept under the stars together.

Peter has seen thousands spellbound by Jesus' preaching, he's seen Jesus cast out demons, heal the sick and raise the dead. This is his leader, his hero.

A few hours earlier, Jesus says to the twelve, "You will all fall away." Peter says, "Oh no! Everyone else maybe, but even if I have to die with you, I will never disown you."

And Jesus says, "Ah, but you will, Peter. Not once, not twice, but three times, before daybreak actually, before the cock crows.

God knows we will let him down; he knows when, and he knows how badly. He knows where we will fall into sin and he knows how.

He knows how wretched things can get, how estranged from him we can become and the thing is this; he still loves us and is committed to us.

Where sin flourishes and overflows, the Bible says that grace flourishes and overflows *even more*.

Our adversary brings heaviness on us every time we let God down. He'll say, "You are a failure. God doesn't love *you*. You always mess things up, don't you? You're pathetic. You will never change. This is who you are."

And how many of us have done this? People ask, "What did you do at the weekend?" and you don't dare to say, "Oh, I was in church"; you say, "Oh, this and that."

Then you feel terrible. You feel sick. Why did I keep quiet? Why didn't I just say it?

Has being associated with Jesus become an embarrassment? Let this be a day to return to him.

Ending

One last thought. How do we know about Peter's denial? How did Mark get to hear about it?

All the scholars say that this Gospel was constructed from Mark's notes of Peter's excited preaching when they both lived in Rome. That means that Peter himself must have told Mark about what happened.

He doesn't dress it up. He doesn't try and make himself look good. It's an admission, a confession. "Tell them the truth Mark. I denied the Lord. Three times"

Mark's Gospel doesn't mention that Peter actually walked on water with Jesus for a moment. Or that Jesus said he would build his church on Peter. You've got to go to Matthew for that. He doesn't mention Jesus restoring Peter either, "Do you love me? Feed my sheep." You've got to go to John for that.

In Mark's Gospel, from Peter's own testimony, you've just got, "I denied him. I said, I had never heard of him." In other words, don't look at me. Don't idolise me. Don't put me on a pedestal.



Look at Jesus. Look at the Messiah, the chosen one, the Son of Man, coming on the clouds of heaven, at the right hand of the Mighty One, the Ancient of Days, and to whom is given authority, glory and sovereign power.