

**Matthew 27. 1-26. Nassau. 14 April 2013.**

Our reading this morning comes from Matthew's gospel, chapter 27, commencing at verse 1 ...

*And when morning came, all the chief priests and elders of the people took counsel against Jesus to put Him to death. And when they had bound Him, they led Him away and delivered Him to Pontius Pilate the governor.*

*Then Judas, who betrayed Him, seeing that He had been condemned, was filled with remorse and brought back the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and elders, saying, 'I have sinned in that I have betrayed innocent blood'. But they said, 'What is that to us? You see to it!'*

*And, throwing the pieces of silver into the temple, he departed, and went away and hanged himself.*

*But the chief priests, taking the silver pieces, said, 'It is not lawful to put them into the treasury, because they are the price of blood'.*

*And, having taken counsel, they bought with them the potter's field, to bury strangers in. Therefore that field has been called the Field of Blood to this day.*

*Then was fulfilled what was spoken by Jeremiah the prophet, saying, 'And they took the thirty pieces of silver, the price of Him who was priced, whom they of the children of Israel priced, and they gave them for the potter's field, as the Lord directed me'.*

*Now Jesus stood before the governor.*

*And the governor asked Him, saying, 'Are you the King of the Jews?' And Jesus said to him, 'You have said so'.<sup>1</sup>*

*And when accused by the chief priests and elders, He answered nothing.*

*Then Pilate said to Him, 'Do you not hear how many things they testify against you?'*

*But He answered him not so much as one word, so that the governor marvelled greatly.*

*Now at the feast the governor was accustomed to releasing to the multitude one prisoner, whoever they wanted.*

*And they had then a notable prisoner, named Barabbas.*

*When they had gathered together, Pilate therefore said to them, 'Whom do you want me to release to you? Barabbas, or Jesus who is called Christ?'*

*For he knew that they had delivered Him up because of envy.*

*Now, as he sat on the judgment seat, his wife sent to him, saying, 'Have nothing to do with that just man, for I have suffered many things today in a dream because of Him'.*

*But the chief priests and elders persuaded the multitude that they should ask for Barabbas and destroy Jesus.*

*The governor again said to them, 'Which of the two do you want me to release to you?' They said, 'Barabbas!' Pilate said to them, 'What then shall I do with Jesus who is called Christ?' They all said, 'Let Him be crucified!' But he said, 'Why, what evil has He done?' But they cried out all the more, saying, 'Let Him be crucified!'*

*When Pilate saw that he was gaining nothing, but rather that a riot was breaking out, taking water, he washed his hands before the multitude, saying, 'I am innocent of the blood of this just person. You see to it'.<sup>2</sup> And all the people answered and said, 'His blood be on us and on our children'.*

*Then he released Barabbas to them; but having scourged Jesus, he delivered Him to be crucified.*

Our reading opened with the words, 'And when morning came' – this particular morning ushering in the most momentous day in the history of the world ... very much a red letter day on God's calendar.

No doubt if we were asked to name those who, humanly speaking, were responsible for the death of the Lord Jesus, we would all apportion the blame between Judas Iscariot, the Jewish people (and, especially, their religious leaders), and Pontius Pilate. And, as I am sure you noted, our passage for this morning focuses our attention in particular on each of these three parties.

And what a day it was to prove for each of them.

In the case of Judas, it was to be his last on earth. For him, it was a day of black despair.

'Judas, who betrayed Him (the Lord Jesus), seeing that He had been condemned, was filled with remorse', we read. As he (Judas) watched Jesus being hurried to Pilate, the full enormity of his treachery finally began to dawn on him. It seems that previously he had not expected the Jewish council to actually pass a death sentence on the Lord. And we must remember that the council had not made public its intention until now.

According to the end of John 11, in the run up to the Passover, 'the chief priests and the Pharisees had given a command, that if anyone knew where He (the Lord Jesus) was, he should report it, that they might seize Him'.<sup>3</sup> Judas may well have expected therefore that Jesus would have suffered no more than a severe warning, and just possibly imprisonment. But certainly not to be handed over to the Romans for Him to be executed.

The opening word of the chapter<sup>4</sup> serves to link together two incidents which involved serious failure on the part of two of the Lord's disciples. The first of these is recorded in the closing section of chapter 26, where Peter 'denied' any association with the Saviour – the actual word 'denied' being used twice.<sup>5</sup> The beginning of our chapter looks back on the second incident – that of Judas's betrayal of the Saviour – the actual word 'betray' occurring twice<sup>6</sup> – once in the expression 'who betrayed Him' and once in Judas's own confession that he had 'betrayed' innocent blood.

But the sequel to each of these cases of sad failure was very different. For, whereas the end of chapter 26 reports the genuine repentance of a penitent man (Peter), who 'went out and wept bitterly' ... the opening of chapter 27 reports only the 'remorse' of a despairing man (Judas), who 'went away and hanged himself' – the word rendered 'filled with remorse' in verse 3 being different to that normally translated 'repent', the word here suggesting only an emotional feeling of regret and remorse, as opposed to a genuine change of mind and will, which is the meaning of true 'repentance'.

While others of the Jewish religious leaders were escorting Jesus to Pilate, some had remained in the Temple, and it was there that Judas confronted them with his confession, 'I have sinned in that I have betrayed *innocent* blood'. The betrayer may well have known the words of God's law,<sup>7</sup> 'Cursed is the one who takes a bribe to slay an *innocent* person'. But, whether he had ever read those words or not, he had certainly heard the even more fearful words of the Lord Jesus,<sup>8</sup> 'truly the Son of man goes as it has been determined, but woe to that man by whom He is betrayed!'

And I note that the word translated 'temple' in verse 5 indicates, not the whole temple area, but the inner sanctuary itself – that part where only the priests and the Levites could enter. It seems therefore that, in his desperation, Judas ventured to the edge of the holy place itself, into which he hurled the thirty pieces of silver – which represented, as the chief priests rightly described them, 'the price of blood'. This money could be retrieved from the inner sanctuary only by the priests, who, having picked it up, used it to purchase, in Judas's name, the potter's field in which he had chosen to commit suicide ... and which later became known as 'the Field of Blood', partly because it had been bought with 'blood money', and partly because of Judas's violent death there.

And what a day it was to prove for the Jewish people, and in particular for their 'chief priests and elders'.<sup>9</sup>

And, if for Judas, it was a day of black despair, for these men it was a day of unflinching determination.

The Jewish council knew only too well that, as they were compelled to acknowledge to Pilate, it was not lawful for them to execute the death sentence.<sup>10</sup> For, when Judea had been brought under direct Roman rule in AD 6, the then emperor, Augustus, had banished its previous ruler and appointed the Roman knight Coponius as its first governor. The Jewish historian Josephus recorded that 'Caponius, one of the equestrian order of the Romans, was sent as a procurator, having the power of life and death put into his hands by Caesar'.<sup>11</sup> That is, from that moment the Sanhedrin lost their ability to pass the death sentence.<sup>12</sup>

Had the Jewish council possessed the authority to execute Jesus, they would doubtless have stoned Him on the charge of blasphemy.<sup>13</sup> But where, I ask, would *that* have left those Old Testament prophecies<sup>14</sup> and our Lord's own predictions, both of which pointed clearly to His death being by crucifixion? But, as John noted towards the close of chapter 18 of his gospel, the Jews were forced to concede to Pilate that 'It is not lawful for us to put anyone to death', to which John added the comment, 'that the saying of Jesus might be fulfilled which He spoke, signifying by what death He would die'; namely, by being lifted up from the earth – on a cross, that is.<sup>15</sup>

Little did Caesar Augustus imagine when he conferred the power of life and death on Coponius in AD 6 that God was using him to pave the way for the fulfilment, well over two decades later, of Old Testament prophecy regarding the mode of our Lord's death ... any more, I suppose, than Augustus had realised ten years earlier that the decree he then passed that there was to be an empire-wide census was God's way of securing the fulfilment of Old Testament prophecy regarding the place of our Lord's birth.<sup>16</sup>

We thought earlier of the suicide of Judas in 'the Field of Blood'.<sup>17</sup> Well, I guess it would be true to say that, in one sense at least, the Jewish people before Pilate's judgment seat that day committed national suicide when they accepted full responsibility for the murder of their own Messiah.<sup>18</sup> In effect, they signed their own death warrant.

But, if for Judas Iscariot it was a day of black despair, and if for the chief priests and elders it was a day of unflinching determination, for Pontius Pilate it was a day of humiliating defeat.

As far as Matthew's account is concerned, our Lord's so-called 'trial' before the Roman governor began when that governor asked Him, 'Are you (emphatic) the king of the Jews?' But we know that there was some background to his question. For, when Pilate had formally opened proceedings with the demand, 'What accusation do you bring against this man?',<sup>19</sup> according to Luke, the spokesmen of the Sanhedrin 'began to accuse Him, saying, "We found this man perverting our nation, and forbidding us to give tribute to Caesar, and saying that He Himself is Christ, a king".<sup>20</sup> Leaving aside the first two charges, the third and last indictment was grave indeed ... for it amounted to the

most serious crime known to Roman law, to high treason. And this was not a good time for anybody to be suspected of such. For during the reign of the current emperor, Tiberius, there had been a significant increase in the number of trials for treason<sup>21</sup> – and not many of the accused had lived to tell the tale!<sup>22</sup>

Behind closed doors, the Jewish high priest had cross-questioned Jesus about His identity from a religious standpoint; ‘tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God’.<sup>23</sup> But such a question would have meant nothing to Pilate ... which is why the Sanhedrin had heaped up charges of a purely political nature against our Lord.

And here, in the early section of chapter 27, Pilate was as troubled by the title ‘King of the Jews’ as, in the early section of chapter 2, had been King Herod – although for very different reasons. It is in some way ironic that whereas then King Herod had tried in vain to kill the One spoken of as ‘king of the Jews’, now Pilate tried in vain to stop Him being killed. Interestingly, just as back in Herod’s day the beginning of our Lord’s life on earth had been punctuated by significant dreams, so now, as His life on earth nears its close, we read of another significant dream.<sup>24</sup> And, thinking of *this* dream, I note that throughout the whole of our Lord’s passion the only person to plead for Him was a woman, and the wife of His judge at that.

Pilate was in an unenviable position. He was torn in two opposing directions. His dilemma is summed up well by two expressions in the gospels: first, ‘wishing to release Jesus’,<sup>25</sup> and, second, ‘wishing to satisfy the crowd’.<sup>26</sup> He sorely wanted to set Jesus free because he could see that He was innocent and that the Sanhedrin had delivered Jesus to him, not, as they pretended, out of patriotism and love for Rome, but out of envy of Jesus’ popularity with the people.<sup>27</sup>

And yet ... and yet, things were not that simple. For Pilate knew that, metaphorically speaking, he was skating on thin ice. In his dealings with the Jews, he had already stepped out of line badly on several occasions. He could hardly forget his first mistake when, soon after his arrival in Palestine, he had marched into Jerusalem, with his men carrying standards bearing the emperor’s image.<sup>28</sup> The Jews considered such images to be idolatrous, and Pilate’s action provoked a six-day demonstration by the Jews and eventually he was compelled to remove the ensigns.<sup>29</sup>

Still less could he forget his last blunder. Not now flags but shields ... gilded shields which he had hung up in the praetorium in Jerusalem ... nothing wrong with shields, you would think ... but these shields carried, not only his own name, but the name of the emperor Tiberius, to whom Pilate had dedicated the shields ... but, alas for Pilate, as in all official inscriptions, the emperor was referred to as ‘the divine Augustus’. This time the Jewish council appealed directly to Tiberius ... who wrote to Pilate in the sharpest of terms and ordered that the shields be removed immediately.<sup>30</sup>

Add to this that Pilate’s patron at Rome – one Sejanus<sup>31</sup> – had fallen from favour with the emperor, and if he had not already been executed he would shortly be ... and executed, mark you, on the charge of high treason.<sup>32</sup> No, Pilate certainly could not afford a riot – especially if caused by his defence of a man accused of treason!

And so, when the Jews played their trump card ... ‘If you release this man, you are not Caesar’s friend; everyone who makes himself a king sets himself against Caesar’<sup>33</sup> ... Pilate threw in his hand. It was all over.

It was ironic that, on the one hand, the council had felt compelled to condemn Jesus to death because they feared that a riot on the part of His followers would lead Tiberias to deprive them of their position,<sup>34</sup> and that, on the other hand, Pilate felt compelled to ratify their sentence because he feared that a riot on the part of Jesus’ foes would lead Tiberias to deprive him of his position ... if not his head!

It was a strange trial indeed which ended with the judge protesting his own innocence!

I said earlier that we would all likely apportion the blame for the death of the Lord Jesus, humanly speaking, between Judas Iscariot, the Jewish leaders, and Pontius Pilate.

And, interestingly, in our reading today, the sin of each of these three parties is expressed by the same word ... usually translated as ‘deliver’ or ‘delivered’.

Back in chapter 26 verse 15, we read the words of Judas to the chief priests, ‘What will you give me, and I will *deliver* Him to you’ – which is the very same Greek word rendered ‘betrayed’ in verse 3 of our chapter.<sup>35</sup>

Then, in the opening verses of our chapter, we read that ‘the chief priests and elders of the people ... *delivered* Him to Pontius Pilate the governor’.

And, finally, in the closing verse of our section, we read of Pilate that, ‘having scourged Jesus, he *delivered* Him to be crucified’.

Yet we know that, ultimately, it was God Himself who 'spared not His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all'<sup>36</sup> ... that, in the final analysis, it was not so much that Judas delivered Him out of greed, nor the Jews out of envy, nor Pilate out of weakness, but God ... out of love for sinners such as you and me.

If in Romans 8, Paul tells us that God 'delivered up' His own Son, in Romans 4 (verse 25) Paul tells us why. He 'was', we read there, 'delivered for ('because of') our offences' – 'because of our trespasses' ... our deliberate acts of deviation from God's requirements and standard for us.

According to the Bible, God '*delivered up*' His own Son that He might '*deliver*' us, not only *from* sin, but from Satan and the fear of death. And so we read of God the Father in Colossians 1 that He 'has delivered us from the authority of darkness, and translated us into the kingdom of the Son of His love'.<sup>37</sup>

And then we read in Hebrews 2 that He (the Lord Jesus) took part in flesh and blood 'that through death He might destroy (might render ineffective) him that had the power of death, that is, the devil; and deliver them who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage'.<sup>38</sup>

We saw just now from Romans 8 that God 'did not spare His own Son, but *delivered Him up* for us all'. We may well contrast this with the words of Peter in the second chapter of his second letter, where we read that 'God did not spare the angels who sinned, but cast them down to hell and *delivered them into* chains of darkness, to be reserved for judgment'.<sup>39</sup>

For the God who did not spare the angels *that sinned* and delivered them into chains until the day of His judgement, did not spare His Son who had *never sinned* that He might deliver us who *had sinned* from His judgement.

Let me say that again ... the God who did not spare the angels *that sinned* and delivered them into chains until the day of His judgement, did not spare His Son who had *never sinned* that He might deliver us who *had sinned* from His judgement.

But, having assured us that God 'did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all', the apostle immediately went on to speak of our Lord Jesus as the One 'that died, yea rather, that was raised from the dead, who is at the right hand of God'.<sup>40</sup> 'That was raised from the dead', Paul claimed ... and, as many of us have considered recently, he (Paul, onetime Saul of Tarsus) spoke as one who had personally encountered the risen, glorified Lord.

You are probably not aware of it, but yesterday (the 13th April) was the anniversary (the 270th anniversary) of the birth of Thomas Jefferson, one of the Founding Fathers of the USA.

Mr. Jefferson, who was of Welsh descent, had a kind of faith in God, but for much of his life at least did not believe in miracles – our Lord's resurrection included. While living at the White House, he produced his own abridged version of the Gospels – which became known as 'The Jefferson Bible'. The closing words of 'The Jefferson Bible' read, 'There laid they Jesus and rolled a great stone at the mouth of the sepulchre and departed'.<sup>41</sup> And that is how his Bible ends. But, thank God, the true story does not end in a sepulchre!

There are indeed many famous tombs and mausoleums scattered around the world – from the Taj Mahal<sup>42</sup> in India – to The Mausoleum of Emperor Qin<sup>43</sup> in China – to The Mosque of the Prophet Muhammed<sup>44</sup> in Saudi Arabia – to the Pyramids of Egypt – to Westminster Abbey in England. And they all have one thing in common. They are all occupied ... they are all associated with those *whose bodies lie buried there*.

But, thank God, that, as the angel proclaimed, our Lord's tomb was empty ... that the story of Jesus does not end in a tomb!

And I close this morning by quoting a question that Pilate posed to the multitude which had been egged on by the chief priests and elders, 'What then shall I do with Jesus?'<sup>45</sup> And, in some ways, *that* is the most important question which you and I will ever answer in this world ... 'What *shall I* do with Jesus?' ... will I receive Him or reject Him?

Mr. A. B. Simpson was a Canadian preacher, author and hymn-writer.<sup>46</sup> He penned several hymns, including one with the chorus, 'Yesterday, today, forever, Jesus is the same'.<sup>47</sup> A little over a hundred years ago,<sup>48</sup> with his eye on Pilate's all-important question, Mr. Simpson wrote the following searching lines ...

Jesus is standing in Pilate's hall  
Friendless, forsaken, despised by all.  
Hearken, what means now the sudden call:  
What will you do with Jesus?

What will you do with Jesus?  
Neutral you cannot be!  
Someday your heart will be asking,  
What will He do with me?

---

## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> 'Which is all one as if he had said, "I am"; see Matt. 26. 25, compared with Mark 14. 62.

<sup>2</sup> Compare the same in verse 4.

<sup>3</sup> John 11. 57.

<sup>4</sup> 'And'.

<sup>5</sup> Matt. 26. 70, 72.

<sup>6</sup> Matt. 27. 3, 4.

<sup>7</sup> Deut. 27. 25.

<sup>8</sup> Luke 22. 22.

<sup>9</sup> And we should note the key role played at all stages by these men; Matt. 26. 59; 27. 1, 3, 12, 20.

<sup>10</sup> John 18. 31.

<sup>11</sup> Flavius Josephus, 'Wars of the Jews', Book II, Chapter VIII, Paragraph 1.

<sup>12</sup> The only concession made was that the Jewish authorities were able to execute the death sentence against any gentile who entered the inner section of the Jerusalem temple; cf. Acts 21. 27-36.

<sup>13</sup> Matt. 26. 65-66; cf. John 10. 33.

<sup>14</sup> Psa. 22. 16; Zech. 12. 10.

<sup>15</sup> John 18. 31-32; 12. 32-33.

<sup>16</sup> Luke 2. 1; cf. Mic. 5. 2. I note that, where Matthew says that 'the chief priests and elders persuaded the multitudes' that they should ask for Barabbas, Mark says that 'the chief priests stirred up the multitude' ... using the very same word as these man had used when accusing Jesus to Pilate; Mark 15. 11; Luke 23. 5.

<sup>17</sup> Acts 1. 18-19.

<sup>18</sup> Matt. 27. 25. Although, I note that not many months later the Jewish council self-righteously rebuked the apostles for holding them accountable for our Lord's blood, Acts 5. 28.

<sup>19</sup> John 18. 29.

<sup>20</sup> Luke 23. 2.

<sup>21</sup> 'To Tacitus and later writers a sinister feature of Tiberius' reign was the increase in the number of treason-trials ... Rome had no public prosecutor, but left it to private individuals to bring abuse to official notice ... the crime of majestas ... had meant any offence against the State, but was now used to protect the emperor against treachery or even insult', H. H. Scullard, 'From the Gracchi to Nero', page 275.

<sup>22</sup> The Lord Jesus had carefully avoided giving any encouragement to an uprising against Rome, John 6. 15; but He now stood charged with being the very kind of Messiah He had refused to be. Indeed, He died in the place of a man (Barabbas) who represented the very kind of Messiahship Jesus refused to accept for Himself.

<sup>23</sup> Matt. 26. 63.

<sup>24</sup> Matt. 27. 19.

<sup>25</sup> Luke 23. 20.

<sup>26</sup> Mark 15. 15.

<sup>27</sup> Matt. 27. 18.

<sup>28</sup> Previous governors had always avoided displaying these ensigns in public, especially in Jerusalem. But not Pilate!

<sup>29</sup> Flavius Josephus, Antiquities of the Jews, Book XVIII, Chapter III, Paragraph I.

<sup>30</sup> And transferred to the temple of Augustus at Caesarea. See Philo, 'The Embassy to Gaius', XXXVIII (299). (Available at ... <http://www.earlyjewishwritings.com/text/philo/book40.html>.) See also H W Hoehner, 'Herod Antipas', pages 176-182.

<sup>31</sup> Pronounced, SAY-YANOOS.

<sup>32</sup> 'Sejanus won the personal friendship of Tiberius, who appointed him Praetorium Prefect ... the influence of Sejanus grew steadily and he began to plot to secure the succession for himself ... he was nominated joint consul with Tiberius in AD 31: he was clearly to be the successor. But Tiberius' suspicions were at long last aroused ... he appointed Sutorius Macro to succeed Sejanus as Praetorium Prefect ... the Senate then condemned him, he was strangled in prison', H. H. Scullard, 'From the Gracchi to Nero', pages 276-278. 'Pilate was a Roman equestrian (knight) of the Samnite clan of the Pontii (hence his name Pontius). He was appointed prefect of Judaea through the intervention of Sejanus, a favourite of the Roman emperor Tiberius. (That his title was prefect is confirmed by an inscription from Caesarea.) Protected by Sejanus, he incurred the enmity of the Jews by insulting their religious sensibilities, as when he hung worship images of the emperor throughout Jerusalem and had coins bearing pagan religious symbols minted. After Sejanus's fall (ad 31), Pilate was exposed to sharper criticism from the Jews, who may have capitalized on his vulnerability by obtaining a legal death sentence on Jesus (John 19:12)', <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/460341/Pontius-Pilate..>

<sup>33</sup> John 19. 12.

<sup>34</sup> John 11. 48.

<sup>35</sup> Where Judas is said to have 'betrayed' or 'delivered' Him. Compare Matt. 26. 2.

<sup>36</sup> Rom. 8. 32.

<sup>37</sup> Col. 1. 13.

<sup>38</sup> Heb. 2. 14.

<sup>39</sup> 2 Pet. 2. 4.

---

<sup>40</sup> Rom. 8. 34.

<sup>41</sup> Based on Matt. 27. 60.

<sup>42</sup> Pronounced, *TAHJ-MUH-HAL*.

<sup>43</sup> Pronounced, *CHEEN* or *CHIN*.

<sup>44</sup> Pronounced, *muh-HAH-mehd*.

<sup>45</sup> Matt. 27. 22.

<sup>46</sup> He preached his first sermon in a Presbyterian Church at age 16 – before he became a Christian. His conversion of faith began under the ministry of Henry Grattan Guinness, a visiting evangelist from Ireland during the revival of 1859. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Albert\\_Benjamin\\_Simpson](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Albert_Benjamin_Simpson).

See too ... <http://www.sharefaith.com/guide/Christian-Music/hymns-the-songs-and-the-stories/yesterday,-today,-forever-the-song-and-the-story.html>

<sup>47</sup> Yesterday, today, forever, Jesus is the same.

All may change, but Jesus never! Glory to His Name!

Glory to His Name! Glory to His Name!

All may change, but Jesus never! Glory to His Name! (1890)

<sup>48</sup> 1905.