

Matthew 27:1-31
Unanswered questions

Just because of their inexperience of the world and of the language, kids can come up with some interesting misunderstandings. I heard once of a child's drawing in a school RE lesson ... or possibly in a Sunday School. If it was school, it must have been quite a while back, because this kid had obviously heard of stuff elsewhere in the Bible ... but which just added to the confusion. It's also back in the days when *tell them a story and then ask them to draw a picture* was thought to be a good teaching method, too, so it must be way back.

Anyway. the lesson had been about the early days of Jesus' life, and the problems with that vicious paranoid King Herod. There's that line that makes Herod look like the worst of pantomime villains:

And he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him, bring me word, that I too may come and worship him."

(Matthew 2:8)

And if you didn't have any inkling of the devious thoughts in Herod's mind, it's spelled out for you soon afterwards:

Now when they had departed, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Rise, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you, for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him."

(Matthew 2:13)

Joseph responds immediately:

And he rose and took the child and his mother by night and departed to Egypt and remained there until the death of Herod.

(Matthew 2:14-15)

That's usually described by the phrase "the flight to Egypt". And, back at school, that phrase must obviously have been used in the classroom. So, when it came to the picture, it was a kiddie's drawing of an **aeroplane**, possibly with some pyramids on the ground far below.

Back in the passenger section, you could see two big people and one baby looking out of the windows ... on their "flight to Egypt". But there was another figure in the plane, too, up at the front. When the kid was asked about it, you know who it was? It has to be, doesn't it ... Pontius *Pilot*.

But when we come to this account of the end of Jesus' human life, here in Matthew 27, we are introduced to the Roman governor of Judea, Pontius Pilate. And

if there's one thing that becomes evident as we read through, it's that he is very clearly *not at all* in the driving seat here.

The Christmas carol described Jesus as

He was little, weak and helpless

Well, he's no longer little, but it is the characters around him now who appear weak and strangely helpless, as Jesus fulfills yet another of those prophecies:

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.

(Isaiah 53:7)

Last time we saw the outrageous illegalities of the Sanhedrin's nocturnal kangaroo court. Now we are told that they reconvened early the next morning - the original Good Friday - with anything but good on their minds.

When morning came, all the chief priests and the elders of the people took counsel against Jesus to put him to death.

(Matthew 27:1)

Only the power of life and death in those days, under Roman occupation, did not lie with the Sanhedrin. The governor needed to authorise an execution.

And they bound him and led him away and delivered him over to Pilate the governor.

(Matthew 27:2)

But before we see how that side of the story plays out, Matthew finishes a previous chapter. We might have wondered what had happened to ...

- **Judas (3-10)**

Judas, you will probably remember - Matthew keeps telling us he *betrayed* Jesus - had sold Jesus out for the token sum that at least used to ring bells in the English language as the price of treachery:

And they paid him thirty pieces of silver.

(Matthew 26:15)

People have speculated down through the centuries as to what it was that led Judas to betray Jesus. Basically, the bottom line is that we don't know. We have no definite insight into his thinking process, or how he rationalised this action. But we are at least told now that as this course of events unfolds - perhaps taking a turn that he hadn't really expected ... or perhaps only now really perceiving the grim reality of what is happening and about to happen ... he comes at least partially to his senses.

Then when Judas, his betrayer, saw that Jesus was condemned, he changed his mind ...

(Matthew 27:3)

But here are two of the saddest words in the English language: *too late!* The deed was done. The **wheels** are set **in motion**. There is no going back.

... he changed his mind and brought back the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and the elders, ...

(Matthew 27:3)

Some processes, once started, just cannot be halted. And the hardness of human hearts needs to be factored in, too. These chief priests and elders had simply been using Judas. But *care* for Judas ... why would they ever do that? So, despite Judas' words, they remain callous.

... saying, "I have sinned by betraying innocent blood." They said, "What is that to us? See to it yourself."

(Matthew 27:4)

Folks, there is a sad little tragedy playing out here, which we shouldn't overlook. I'm assuming that Judas is sincere in what he says here. He does realise that what he did wasn't just a slip, or a mistake, but an actual sin. But there will come a time when a person's sins cannot be forgiven.

If he could have got to Jesus, and said those words, do you think that even then, forgiveness would have been possible? Totally hypothetical, of course. I would still incline to say Yes. Even as he was being crucified, remember Jesus' words:

And Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

(Luke 23:34)

And Judas, I think I would still say, even if he knows and admits *now* that he has sinned, did not fully know *then*, as he betrayed Jesus, the *full* enormity of what he was doing and setting in motion. Even having ignored the various warnings and chances to leave this path of self-destruction earlier, there might still have been grace ... if he could get to Jesus. But that door is now closed.

And standing on this side of that closed door are a group of heartless schemers who have no further use for Judas. He came to them with the final realisation of his deep spiritual problem ... he comes to the supposed spiritual leaders of the nation ... but their only answer is, as we'd say nowadays, *That's your problem*.

They said, "What is that to us? See to it yourself."

(Matthew 27:4)

Two warnings here for us, I think. First: do not leave things until they become too late. Do not put off turning to Jesus *today*. None of us are guaranteed tomorrow. Two years ago, when **Coronavirus** first paralysed the world, and people were starting to die by the thousands, people suddenly realised, just for a while, that life was more precarious than they realised. Now we're back to something like normality - and we normally ignore this basic fact of our human existence:

And just as it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgement, so Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him.

(Hebrews 9:27-28)

There is a time for grace. And, as a hymn puts it,

*Plenteous grace with Thee is found
Grace to cover all my sin*

But that day of grace is *today*. Don't presume on a tomorrow that you may never see. Don't count on being able to finally come to Christ on your deathbed - when your thinking may be so blurred, or your heart so self-hardened by decades of practice, that it has become *too late*.

The other warning: just see how callous those religious professionals are. Folks, if someone comes to you in such clear turmoil, can you just ignore it? Can you turn your backs on *them*? And if someone comes to asking how they may come to Jesus Christ - or even just wanting to start to know more about him - have you ever thought what you would say? Do you know the Gospel well enough to be able to guide someone through those obvious Biblical steps?

Can you tell them about God, our creator, our maker, the great, holy, good, gracious God to whom we are all responsible?

Can you tell them about how sin has defiled every one of us?

Can you tell them about Jesus, who came to save his people from their sins?

Can you tell them to turn away from their previous way of life, and to put their trust simply in Jesus alone, so that they can have a total fresh start and a new life?

Folks, those chief priests were content to callously say that it's *your* problem. When we have someone in spiritual need, do we still prefer to say that that's *someone else's* problem to deal with? Visit this website. Phone the church elders.

Or can you simply bring a fellow undeserving beggar to the place - by which I mean the person of Jesus Christ - where *you* have already received the Bread of life?

Those chief priests and elders were such horrendous hypocrites. They gladly dished out blood money to buy Judas' treachery ... but they don't dare *receive* it

back. That can only be put to some conveniently less sacred usage. No remorse over Judas taking his own life as a result of their callousness ... just a tricky little problem over religious scruples to get all nice and tidy.

And throwing down the pieces of silver into the temple, he departed, and he went and hanged himself. But the chief priests, taking the pieces of silver, said, "It is not lawful to put them into the treasury, since it is blood money." So they took counsel and bought with them the potter's field as a burial place for strangers.

(Matthew 27:5-7)

But after this sad little aside, let's return to the main line of what's happening.

- **Pilate (11-26)**

Now Jesus stood before the governor, ...

(Matthew 27:11)

And maybe we should see even that as an encouragement. We say that Jesus has gone through death, and risen again, a bit like blazing a trail that we can now travel, in our time, with less need for fear. And that is of course absolutely right.

... he himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery.

(Hebrews 2:14-15)

But Jesus had also told his disciples some of the things that they would face if they followed him.

"Beware of men, for they will deliver you over to courts and flog you in their synagogues, and you will be dragged before governors and kings for my sake, to bear witness before them and the Gentiles."

(Matthew 10:17-18)

And look, here is Jesus blazing *this* trail too. Before the governor. Although Matthew doesn't mention it, he'll be trailed off across town to see a different "King Herod":

Pilate ... asked whether the man was a Galilean. And when he learned that he belonged to Herod's jurisdiction, he sent him over to Herod, who was himself in Jerusalem at that time.

(Luke 23:6-7)

And "Gentiles", it also said. Those vicious thugs of soldiers we read of at the end of today's passage, possibly? Folks, Jesus has already been there, ahead of anything that we might suffer for his sake.

Now Jesus stood before the governor, and the governor asked him, “Are you the King of the Jews?” Jesus said, “You have said so.”

(Matthew 27:11)

The interrogation starts ... but it is very one-sided. Jesus answers once again with that odd little phrase that probably means something like *Those are your words*. If he claimed to be a king, then the Roman governor would *have* to act against a challenge to the authority of Caesar. But it's not as if Jesus *isn't* a king, either, is it?

And then the religious guys get in on the scene, to press their accusations - with even less response.

But when he was accused by the chief priests and elders, he gave no answer.

(Matthew 27:12)

Now this is odd! Wouldn't just about any normal, sane person want to interrupt and correct those deliberate manipulations of the truth ... or at least want to answer them all when the accusers have had their say? Pilate is certainly amazed by Jesus' silence.

Then Pilate said to him, “Do you not hear how many things they testify against you?” But he gave him no answer, not even to a single charge, so that the governor was greatly amazed.

(Matthew 27:13-14)

So folks, remember that there is ...

... a time to keep silence, and a time to speak; ...

(Ecclesiastes 3:7)

And Jesus chooses to keep silence here. He remains in control of the situation by that apparent passivity. And Pilate's options are gradually closed down, one by one. The Son of David, the King of Israel, the Suffering Servant *will* go on his appointed way, at his appointed time. The hurricane winds of destruction circle around him, but he is strangely serene in the eye of the storm. It is as if, even in that silence, the Father still bears witness:

“This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him.”

(Matthew 17:5)

What does his silence say all the more loudly to us? That he is precisely on track, in control of this maelstrom.

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.

(Isaiah 53:7)

But Pilate, for all that he was capable of brutality in his rule of Judea, is no dope. He does not give up easily. So maybe that old tradition can be made use of?

Now at the feast the governor was accustomed to release for the crowd any one prisoner whom they wanted.

(Matthew 27:15)

Yes, that could work. But ... how to make sure that Jesus was the one released ... and he was let off his own hook, at the same time? There was some pressure behind this, motivating him to try to engineer this. Pilate had been called to these deliberations early in the day, and it seems his wife had been left to sleep in ... but was troubled.

Besides, while he was sitting on the judgement seat, his wife sent word to him, "Have nothing to do with that righteous man, for I have suffered much because of him today in a dream."

(Matthew 27:19)

He might think it was largely superstition ... but to have the governor interrupted like this would be highly unusual. She would have to be more than simply hysterical, surely? And anyway, he could see through these hypocritical accusations. There was something going on here behind the scenes, for sure.

For he knew that it was out of envy that they had delivered him up.

(Matthew 27:18)

Ah yes, this will do it. A notable terrorist, or a notable rabbi. No contest, surely? And he must have heard that it was less than a week ago that there was nearly a riot in *support* of Jesus as he entered Jerusalem. This popular vote is only going to go one way ... surely?

And they had then a notorious prisoner called Barabbas. So when they had gathered, Pilate said to them, "Whom do you want me to release for you: Barabbas, or Jesus who is called Christ?"

(Matthew 27:16-17)

Bear in mind that there were quite possibly already three wooden crosses on that hillside. Ready to quickly dispatch three terrorists, two of the standard riff-raff, and the one in the middle for the ringleader, Barabbas. Do you see that picture of that theological word "substitution" being painted here? Barabbas was in all possibility scheduled to die that day, or very soon after ... but Jesus will take his place. The death of one becomes the life of the other.

But Pilate is not the only political player here. Those cheering crowds a week ago were Galilean peasants. Good Friday's crowds are the more politically savvy - or politically maneuverable - citizens of Jerusalem. And their leaders knew just which buttons to press - even if we're not told the details. So the vote does not go as Pilate expects.

Now the chief priests and the elders persuaded the crowd to ask for Barabbas and destroy Jesus. The governor again said to them, "Which of the two do you want me to release for you?" And they said, "Barabbas."

(Matthew 27:20-21)

Several times, he tries to reason with them. But ... can you reason with a mob? Will they listen to considerations of justice, or mercy? The answer thunders back.

Pilate said to them, "Then what shall I do with Jesus who is called Christ?" They all said, "Let him be crucified!" And he said, "Why? What evil has he done?" But they shouted all the more, "Let him be crucified!"

(Matthew 27:22-23)

So now it becomes a matter of saving face, as much as anything. Political expediency. Distance yourself from the problem. Declare it someone else's responsibility.

So when Pilate saw that he was gaining nothing, but rather that a riot was beginning, he took water and washed his hands before the crowd, saying, "I am innocent of this man's blood; see to it yourselves."

(Matthew 27:24)

And the crowd's answer now is really rather chilling, isn't it? How do you read this?

And all the people answered, "His blood be on us and on our children!"

(Matthew 27:25)

That verse has been used, down through the centuries, as an excuse for anti-Semitism. It's claimed that the crowd that day pretty much eternally curse themselves ... and their descendants ... gladly taking on blood-guilt for not just murder - homicide - the killing of a human being - but *deicide*: the killing of God. Bigots have latched onto that pretext to justify their hatreds.

Most likely, it's just the stupid kind of thing that people say when they're emotionally overcharged. Stupid, yes, offensive, yes - but not a considered self-condemnation.

But I wonder if we could also see it as an inadvertent call for mercy? The NT picks up the theme of the blood of Christ, and it does not speak with that voice. There is an OT example of the blood of a murder that cries for vengeance. Abel, slain by his brother Cain:

And the LORD said, "What have you done? The voice of your brother's blood is crying to me from the ground."

(Genesis 4:10)

But the blood of Jesus cries out differently ... and just as well for us, too!

... and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

(Hebrews 12:24)

Blood that was going to be shed on that Friday made it Good Friday - eternal good for us and people like us. Blood that proclaims pardon and forgiveness. The Son of God taking the place not just of a terrorist hoodlum like Barabbas, but people like you and me, just your average sons and daughters of Adam and Eve - who need to be saved from our sins just as much as did that "notorious prisoner".

But that blood is not to be shed quite yet. There are still some hours before that final agony. First, there will be brutal mockery - and astounding irony. Pilate acquiesces to the voice of the people. He has been outmaneuvered by the crowd, and the chief priests pulling their puppet strings.

Or perhaps by Jesus' calm determination that

"The Son of Man goes as it is written of him, ..."

(Matthew 26:24)

Then he released for them Barabbas, and having scourged Jesus, delivered him to be crucified.

(Matthew 27:26)

- **The Roman soldiers (27-31)**

Then the soldiers of the governor took Jesus into the governor's headquarters, and they gathered the whole battalion before him.

(Matthew 27:27)

There would be a much smaller contingent that would take Jesus to the place of execution, but here was some rough and brutal fun that probably well over a hundred men would have gleefully gathered for. After all, since anyone who is going to be crucified is just so much human garbage, any level of sadism can be justified as just a perk of the trade. Matthew doesn't linger on the details, though - and nor should we, actually. He's only going to use the word "crucified" once, with *no* details whatsoever, in the following verses. Maybe it doesn't help to fill our minds with those awful physical details - it might just distract us from seeing what that death was *for*.

And they stripped him and put a scarlet robe on him, and twisting together a crown of thorns, they put it on his head and put a reed in his right hand. And kneeling before him, they mocked him, saying, "Hail, King of the Jews!"

(Matthew 27:28-29)

So here is simple mockery. They probably thought they were being oh so very clever, pulling together these sneering semblances of regalia ... a tattered and faded cloak from a dark corner of the barracks ... a garland of thorns to add to his pains instead of denoting the glory of victory.

And yet, the curious thing, the overwhelming irony here, is that they call Jesus what he really is. Their hearts were dark, and their eyes were blind, but their lips actually speak truth.

If we were going to translate this verse into more colloquial English - and at least one of the Bible paraphrases has done this, we would say, in this context of royalty, not "Hail", but .. what? *Long live* the King of the Jews! Can you see even further irony in that?

This Jesus could not be our Saviour if he *lived long*. He must go to the cross that very afternoon, to replace not just Barabbas, but you and me too. There's a hymn that puts us into the shoes of Joseph of Arimathea, the man who owned the tomb in which Jesus' body would be placed, just a few hours after these events.

*What may I say? Heaven was his home
But mine the tomb wherein he lay*

I want to push that a bit further, as we come to break bread in a few minutes' time. We should think ourselves into the shoes of that notorious prisoner, and a different line might come to our lips.

But mine the cross on which he died

Perhaps you remember that old film **Spartacus**. Spartacus, back in the days of the Roman empire, was a revolutionary, a freedom fighter, in some ways quite a parallel for Barabbas. But history (or perhaps just Hollywood) shows Spartacus in a rather more heroic light.

And there is a scene in which Spartacus and some hundred of his fellow zealots are captured ... but there is uncertainty as to precisely which of these men is the ring-leader. Kirk Douglas, I think it was, playing the lead, knows that the game is up, and owns up to his identity - perhaps with the hope that the Romans would spare the rest of them the horrible fate that he knew he now could not avoid. *I am Spartacus*.

And then (I think), Tony Curtis, his right-hand man, risks it all, to perhaps confuse their captors one final time. **No, I am Spartacus**. And gradually all of those captives insist that *they* are Spartacus. You might know how the story goes, and it makes for a rather grim ending.

But there is something in Matthew's account of these final stages of Jesus' so-called trial that reminded me of this film. If indeed there were three wooden crosses already commissioned for use, back on that first Good Friday ...

... then shouldn't all of us be saying, deep within ourselves, *I am Barabbas*. I'm the one who deserved that cross. Those are the wages that my sins have earned. We have shouted, as in that parable,

“But his citizens hated him and sent a delegation after him, saying, ‘We do not want this man to reign over us.’”

(Luke 19:14)

We have claimed the right to rule on the throne of our lives that is God's alone - spiritual *treason!* - and there is only one proper penalty for that rebellion.

But, quoting another line from that same hymn:

*Yet meekly he to suffering goes
that he his foes from thence might free*

Folks, *I am Barabbas*. And so are you, you know, if you are a disciple of Jesus Christ. It was your place he took, too.

*It was my sin that held him there
Until it was accomplished
His dying breath has brought me life
I know that it is finished*