
The Trial of the King

The Gospel According to Mark

Mark 15:1-20¹

Sunday Morning, April 17, 2016

Context

This morning we have before us last transition before the climax of the Gospel of Mark. As you find your place in Mark's chapter fifteen we will be reading three mini-vignettes leading to the death of Jesus. I am going to "preach" this section a bit differently this morning. I am going present some background material prior to them and then read the text without additional comment. Our conclusion will be to highlight the impact this passage should have on our reading of scripture and living in the light of the gospel. The particular allusions to Scripture and references to the Roman culture would have been quite vivid to Mark's first readers but are likely vague to us currently. Even though the first reader/hearers of this Gospel may have been "Roman" they were no doubt Christian and likely Jewish by heritage. This means that the basic storyline of what we call the "Old Testament" and the general facts and implications of Jesus' life and death would have already been familiar to them as they heard this account of "the beginning of the Gospel of Jesus the Christ, the Son of God" being presented to them.

Since the days of Julius Caesar, the Roman government was becoming an empire with an emperor as its head. Caesar himself was hailed as *divi Julius*, the Divine Julius. After Julius' death his adopted nephew dedicated a temple in his name and as his successor was given the title of "the august one," Augustus. This view of the divinity of the Caesar (now the royal title) was continued and expanded with each successive emperor. The worship and authority of the Caesar was considered absolute and his power extended throughout the empire in his designated leaders and the Roman army.

One of the historical ceremonies to celebrate a great leader was in the appointment of a "triumph," a victory parade through the city. Exceptional achievement connected the general to Rome's mythical and semi-mythical past. He was acknowledged as regal and divine in this grand procession. He wore a purple and gold toga and a laurel crown. The captives of his victory led the way; his armies followed behind while he rode in a four-horse chariot to the applause of crowd, to the temple of Jupiter. Upon arriving at the temple, a sacrifice was made. It was a great day of celebration throughout the city.

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Soon a special triumph became associated with the emperor alone with a grandness of scale unsurpassed. The crowds would shout, "Hail Caesar!" as Augustus and his "heirs" were announced as saviors of Rome and the kings of peace for the city, the empire and indeed the world.

On the other hand, the Romans had utilized one of the most humiliating and painful methods of execution for particular enemies of the state. A Roman citizen could not be "crucified" because it was so humiliating and to be reserved for those of "lesser" status. Crucifixion involved being fastened (tied or nailed) to a cross-shaped apparatus and allowed to die from exhaustion and exposure. The criminal was often beaten beforehand to such a state as to hasten his death because of blood loss and weakness. This preliminary beating was called "scourging" and involved a vicious lashing with a whip that had broken pottery shards or pieces of metal knotted in the leather. Those sentenced to such a death were considered enemies of Rome, and in the outskirts of the empire had likely participated in some insurrection or uprising.

Indeed, Judea was considered by some the most outcast and abandoned part of the empire. The Jews had been unwilling to become "Roman" even with the most generous of Roman policies. Conquered, subjugated peoples were allowed to often their own customs, religion, even mint their own coinage at times as long as they gave allegiance to Rome and its law and emperor (an emperor considered divine and absolute). This did not set well with most of the Jewish residents of Palestine or throughout the empire for that matter. There were some sects who cared for the political expedencies of the day, but many others were looking to overthrow their pagan, idolatrous "masters." There were many insurrections and attacks on Roman authority most often with disastrous consequences.

Because of this element of subjugation, history is clear that the prefect or procurator over this area faced conflict and controversy at all sides. Pontius Pilate was no exception and history portrays him as one of the most antagonistic of all of the Roman rulers who were sent to supervise Palestine. Pilate would typically live on the coast in Caesarea, as did his predecessors. But at times of festivals and holy days, he would move to Jerusalem with his soldiers to be closer to the "action" should unrest break out.

One of the "jobs" of the Roman leader was to serve as court for issues regarding taxation and crime. Pilate typically heard his "court cases" in the very early mornings so the Sanhedrin, the whole council of Jewish leaders who still had some element of authority, had to meet quickly during the night to establish charges to bring to Pilate at the crack of dawn. To be charged as an insurgent "king" would be treason to Rome and to Caesar and therefore a capital offense, a sentence only legitimately carried out by the Roman authorities.

The whole event is steeped in OT references regarding Messiah, Son of Man and kingship. Even the name of the insurrectionist released to the crowd had the name Barabbas. This name means “son of the father”. The irony, not lost on those who knew the language, was that the true “son of the father” was condemned, while a false “son of the father” was set free.

In particular, Isaiah 42-55 has many allusions to the Messiah as it presents the servant-deliverer from many angles. Many of these texts are familiar to Christians. We are going to read three extended texts from the prophet Isaiah. Do not hear them as retrofitted into a Christian package but as poetic foreshadowing. The original Markan audience likely knew these texts, perhaps also had heard them explained as referring to Jesus. And even though these passages represent a “near-far” fulfillment, looking for delivery from Babylonian Captivity, they find a greater meaning in the events we are about to read.

Let’s go to Isaiah 42:1-7--

*Behold my servant, whom I uphold,
my chosen, in whom my soul delights;
I have put my Spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations.
² He will not cry aloud or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street;
³ a bruised reed he will not break, and a faintly burning wick he will not quench; he will faithfully bring forth justice.
⁴ He will not grow faint or be discouraged
till he has established justice in the earth; and the coastlands wait for his law. ⁵ Thus says God, the Lord,
who created the heavens and stretched them out,
who spread out the earth and what comes from it,
who gives breath to the people on it and spirit to those who walk in it:
⁶ “I am the Lord;
I have called you in righteousness;
I will take you by the hand and keep you;
I will give you as a covenant for the people, a light for the nations,
⁷ to open the eyes that are blind,
to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon,
from the prison those who sit in darkness.”*

And in Isaiah 50:5-7--

*⁵ The Lord God has opened my ear, and I was not rebellious;
I turned not backward.
⁶ I gave my back to those who strike,
and my cheeks to those who pull out the beard;
I hid not my face from disgrace and spitting.
⁷ But the Lord God helps me;
therefore I have not been disgraced;
therefore I have set my face like a flint,
and I know that I shall not be put to shame.*

And finally in Isaiah 52: 13-53:12--

¹³ Behold, my servant shall act wisely;
he shall be high and lifted up, and shall be exalted.

¹⁴ As many were astonished at you—
his appearance was so marred, beyond human semblance,
and his form beyond that of the children of mankind
— ¹⁵ so shall he sprinkle many nations;
kings shall shut their mouths because of him;
for that which has not been told them they see,
and that which they have not heard they understand.

53 Who has believed what he has heard from us?
And to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?

² For he grew up before him like a young plant, and like a root out of dry ground; he had
no form or majesty that we should look at him,
and no beauty that we should desire him.

³ He was despised and rejected by men;
a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief;
and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised,
and we esteemed him not.

⁴ Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows;
yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted.

⁵ But he was pierced for our transgressions;
he was crushed for our iniquities;
upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace,
and with his wounds we are healed.

⁶ All we like sheep have gone astray;
we have turned—every one—to his own way;
and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

⁷ 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.

⁸ By oppression and judgment he was taken away;
and as for his generation,
who considered that he was cut off out of the land of the living,
stricken for the transgression of my people?

⁹ And they made his grave with the wicked and with a rich man in his death, although he
had done no violence, and there was no deceit in his mouth.

¹⁰ Yet it was the will of the Lord to crush him; he has put him to grief;
when his soul makes an offering for guilt, he shall see his offspring;
he shall prolong his days; the will of the Lord shall prosper in his hand.

¹¹ Out of the anguish of his soul he shall see and be satisfied;
by his knowledge shall the righteous one, my servant,
make many to be accounted righteous, and he shall bear their iniquities. ¹² Therefore I
will divide him a portion with the many,
and he shall divide the spoil with the strong,
because he poured out his soul to death
and was numbered with the transgressors;
yet he bore the sin of many,
and makes intercession for the transgressors.

Text

So now let us read these twenty verses found in the fifteenth chapter of the Gospel of Mark. Listen to the flow of the narrative, you should feel the backdrop and allusions to history, culture and Scripture. Listen to this text much like the first Roman listeners would have as they faced persecution and slander over the nature and object of their faith. This entire text would have put all of the pieces together and bolstered their confidence in the intentionality of the “apparent” tragedy of the cross.

And as soon as it was morning, the chief priests held a consultation with the elders and scribes and the whole council. And they bound Jesus and led him away and delivered him over to Pilate. ² And Pilate asked him, “Are you the King of the Jews?” And he answered him, “You have said so.” ³ And the chief priests accused him of many things. ⁴ And Pilate again asked him, “Have you no answer to make? See how many charges they bring against you.” ⁵ But Jesus made no further answer, so that Pilate was amazed. ⁶ Now at the feast he used to release for them one prisoner for whom they asked. ⁷ And among the rebels in prison, who had committed murder in the insurrection, there was a man called Barabbas. ⁸ And the crowd came up and began to ask Pilate to do as he usually did for them. ⁹ And he answered them, saying, “Do you want me to release for you the King of the Jews?” ¹⁰ For he perceived that it was out of envy that the chief priests had delivered him up. ¹¹ But the chief priests stirred up the crowd to have him release for them Barabbas instead. ¹² And Pilate again said to them, “Then what shall I do with the man you call the King of the Jews?” ¹³ And they cried out again, “Crucify him.” ¹⁴ And Pilate said to them, “Why, what evil has he done?” But they shouted all the more, “Crucify him.” ¹⁵ So Pilate, wishing to satisfy the crowd, released for them Barabbas, and having scourged Jesus, he delivered him to be crucified. ¹⁶ And the soldiers led him away inside the palace (that is, the governor’s headquarters), and they called together the whole battalion. ¹⁷ And they clothed him in a purple cloak, and twisting together a crown of thorns, they put it on him. ¹⁸ And they began to salute him, “Hail, King of the Jews!” ¹⁹ And they were striking his head with a reed and spitting on him and kneeling down in homage to him. ²⁰ And when they had mocked him, they stripped him of the purple cloak and put his own clothes on him. And they led him out to crucify him.

Conclusion

I want this text to resonate with you this morning. Our concluding remarks are simple.

First, continue to tie this to Mark 1:1. There we read “The beginning of the gospel of Jesus the Christ, the son of God.” This “good news”, the “good news” of God’s kingdom and Jesus’ work as the anointed one is being brought to climax, he will soon sit on throne, and is lead in victory for his “people”. Perhaps his glory and throne is a cross of wood and his victory is in his sacrifice for sin. This brings him to the right hand of the father.

Second, the gospel is a cultural reversal for every culture both currently and historically. Jesus’ victory and kingly rule is not what we expect (and clearly was not what his first hearers and followers naturally expected). Where in our lives is the gospel of the kingdom made to fit into our own expectations. How often do we not allow the radical nature of the message and power of the cross truly change our thinking and our living.

And lastly, we are rebel sinners. We are clamoring for the death of the deliverer. We are ready to kill the son for our own agenda and gain. And yet, the king sacrifices himself for us! God loved us in this way, He sent His Son. He “gave,” and “delivered” him. And yet Jesus yielded His will to fulfill the Father’s plan. Do you believe?

