

Meet Jesus: the end of darkness (John 18:28-19:27)

Dark times

I wonder if you have ever felt disillusioned by the dark injustices of our world.

No doubt you've been exposed to stories in the media of injustice; whether political corruption, war, oppression, social injustices, greed, conflicts. I remember, as a teenager staring at the ceiling, contemplating just how hopeless our world is. And just to add insult to injury, history classes reinforced a human history that was filled with war, conflict, poverty, disaster, greed. And the cycle does not stop. Round and round the world goes. So much for progress.

Have you ever felt disillusioned by the dark injustices of our world.

I've always been a pessimist. But looking at history and looking at the world today, you've got to be naïve to think that humanity might be able to somehow turn things around, whether through good politics, or better health care, or better economics, or just a better human spirit, provide some solution to the darkness of our world.

The popular post-apocalyptic genre, if you like those kinds of stories, envisages a world where the social infrastructure has fallen apart, and life is all about trying to survive within it. And I think that resonates with us at a deep level. We feel a darkness of our world continually spiralling out of control. And we just want to survive.

Have you ever felt disillusioned by the dark injustices of our world.

Cheerful way to begin, don't you think? No, it's not. But it is worth thinking about. It is worth facing the darkness of the world head on. And the Bible does not shy away from painting a realistic picture of what the world is like.

Some people treat the Bible as if it was fairy-tale, make believe. But I find that consistently the Bible paints a picture of our world that is far more believable, far more realistic than the metanarratives that our world has to offer.

Question: I wonder what are the signs that come to mind for you that our world is broken, damaged and full of darkness?

the sad tales of darkness

I remember when I was at bible college, there was a seminar from a man who worked at Anglicare. He worked with cases of sexual abuse within the church.

Now you might find this disturbing and a reason to dismiss Christianity. But it's not. You can't evaluate Jesus merely by those who claim to be his followers. You've got to look at Jesus himself. That's what we've been doing in this series. And that's what we'll do tonight.

And I remember hearing this man give us all the gory details of several accounts of child sexual abuse. I remember hearing of men taking years of planning and grooming and preparing children in order to satisfy their own twisted sexual appetites. At the end of that heavy seminar, I can remember feeling so disillusioned, and pretty torn up about the world. I remember feeling shocked at the predatory nature, the wicked deceitfulness of the men involved. And I remember feeling overwhelmed and sick to the stomach about it.

Have you heard stories of atrocities, perhaps a news report, or a video depicting real world tragedies, that has left you feeling disturbed and sickened, disillusioned by the darkness of the human heart. We all believe that people are wicked. That's why you locked your car before you came in tonight. Why? Because you believe humans capable of stealing.

the broader tales of darkness

Sexuality is one of those areas of human existence that tragically is full of darkness. The sex slave industry is another sad tale – it is estimated that there are still 5 million sex slaves worldwide, last I looked, that's about

the population of Melbourne. Young girls targeted and taken in, sometimes by force, sometimes with grand promises of a better life.

Now I am sure we could go around the room and each share endless, tragic, tales of darkness. I wonder if you have had occasions in life when the darkness of our world has just ripped all the wind out of your sails, leaving you breathless; when precious lives are damaged or extinguished, when some heinous crime has left you feeling gutted, when the darkness closes in. And any light in your life seems to be under threat.

And we do *need* to grapple with the grim realities of darkness. But what is the solution to it all? What is the way through it all? Well today I hope to persuade you that there is a way through it all. And that way is through meeting the crucified Jesus. In fact, Jesus claims to enter history to put an end to darkness.

“I am the light of the world. Anyone who follows me will never walk in the darkness but will have the light of life.” (John 8:12)

the epitome of darkness: the cross

And the crucifixion of Jesus is itself the epitome of all moments of darkness. That was the moment when the darkness did not merely threaten *part* of God’s world, but it threatened to put an end to the light of the world himself, to put an end to the very *source* of all goodness in one moment. This moment in history was the time of appalling darkness and depravity of the human heart.

And it is the *human* heart. Because John’s intention here is to show us a scene where we can see ourselves reflected and represented in the dark injustice of this moment. This is the moment when we, humanity, in *these* our representatives, Pilate, the Jews, the soldiers, the crowds, did all that we could to throw off God’s shackles and free ourselves from him and in the process. We were willing to go to such lengths to liberate ourselves that we sought to destroy the one who Christians believe is the true source of all light and goodness in our world.

Christians live with this tremendous tension in that we see ourselves both in the darkness of this rejection of Jesus, and yet we also hold this same Jesus has brought us into the light.

the range of soundbites that lead to the crucifixion

And so John offers us a sequence of interviews to draw this out. He is like a reporter, running around with a microphone to give us a range of soundbites so that we can hear people speak for themselves in this moment, so we can hear what they were thinking. He allows each of the characters to share, in their own voice where they are coming from. And he gives us opportunity to just listen in, so that we can hear enough to unveil the *horror* and darkness of what’s going on, right here in front of us in this narrative.

Pilate: political self-interest (12, 14, 16)

Pilate...the good guy?

Pilate...advocates for Jesus’ innocence (18:38, 19:4, 19:6)

Well, what do we discover when John puts the microphone up to Pilate? At first, Pilate seems like not such a bad guy. He *seems* like someone who’s speaking the truth. Time and time again, Pilate says things that really resonate with us as Christians. He seems to have a degree of reliability amidst the chaos. Three times Pilate declares Jesus not guilty. And as Christians it seems like he’s championing Jesus’ cause here, and we cheer him on.

18:38 'I find no grounds for charging him.'

19:4 'I find no grounds for charging him.'

19:6 'I find no grounds for charging him.'

Pilate...advocates for Jesus' release (v12)

And if we come down to verse 12, we find him seeking to release Jesus, to set him free. Pilate has made his judgement clear. The defendant is emphatically 'not guilty' and ought to go free. As Pilate enters into dialogue with the Jewish leadership, his *goal* seems to be to have Jesus' released.

Pilate...advocates for Jesus' royalty (18:39, 19:14, 19:19-22)

But that's not the end of Pilate's honesty. Along the way, Pilate will acknowledge the *royalty* of Jesus. In fact, in this story, there's no greater advocate for Jesus' claim to kingship than Pilate. While Jesus remains silent, Pilate's there, again, three times, publicly declaring to the Jews themselves that Jesus is the *king* of the Jews. He did it back in 18:39.

do you want me to release to you the king of the Jews?

Then over in verse 14 he says 'here is your king.' And then finally Pilate has a sign placed over Jesus' head, so that almost everyone in Jerusalem, coming and going past that very public spot, would see it, in their own language, *whatever* that was.

¹⁹Pilate also had a sign made and put on the cross. It said: JESUS OF NAZARETH, THE KING OF THE JEWS. ²⁰Many of the Jews read this sign, because the place where Jesus was crucified was near the city, and it was written in Aramaic, Latin, and Greek.

They all get access to this declaration that Jesus is the king of the Jews.

But then in vs22, the final word from Pilate is emphatic

What I have written, I have written.

"What I have written, I've written. That's my assessment, this crucified man is the king of the Jews."

BUT Pilate...is controlled by political insecurities (v8, 12, 10, 1, 16)

And yet there's more to the story with Pilate. In fact, John only includes Pilate's statement about Jesus as a king, post-ironically, as Gen-Zed call it. Pre-ironically, Jesus is a real king. Ironically, Pilate calls him a king. Post-ironically, John has Pilate calling him a king.

Notice how Pilate goes inside and outside and inside and outside as he's going backwards and forwards between Jesus in the palace and the Jewish leaders outside the palace. On a surface reading, it might look like he's trying to make up his mind what to do with Jesus on the one hand and appease the Jews on the other.

Seven movements. Seven scenes.

Chapter 18 verse 29, As he comes out to them

verse 33, he goes back inside with Jesus

verse 38, he goes back out to them

chapter 19, verse 1 and he then takes Jesus to be flogged

verse 4 and then...comes out to the Jews again;

verse 5 and brings Jesus out to them

verse 9 and they go back inside again;

Until finally in verse 13, brings Jesus out to them to the judges seat and hands down his verdict: Here is your king.

Back and forth he goes. Is he innocently trying to make up his mind what to do with Jesus? It might seem like that.

Except that, what is making it difficult for Pilate is that **Pilate is controlled by his own political insecurities.** Have a look back in verse 8, just before we come to our story. There we are reminded that as this scene is unfolding, Pilate was more afraid than ever. We are reminded that he's a typical politician who acts out of insecurity and fear for his position. Imagine the school bully who has just discovered there's a bigger school bully in his playground. So he needs to be careful that he doesn't overstep.

So in verse 12, we find the Jewish leaders have perfectly crafted their threat of reporting him to Caesar, to tap into that insecurity, to exploit that fear, to tease out Pilate's fears, pressing on the politician's weak spot. And so it shouldn't surprise us that in the end what Pilate pursues is merely a policy of appeasement. He pretends to have an interest in justice. He wants to sound noble and give that impression. But in the end, Pilate will act as if His hands were tied, he was constrained by his circumstances, He could not have done anything different. His political situation did not allow him to do what he really wanted to do, and he was prevented from making a just decision because of the pressure of the situation.

But in the end, we find he is just trying to work out "how do I appease the group of people that are most threatening to me? How do I remove this threat, and salvage whatever I can for myself in the moment?" And sure enough, verse 1, he had Jesus brutally flogged with a lead-tipped whip. And then in verse 16, he hands Jesus over to be crucified. So, in the end, for all his apparent openness to Jesus being a King, for all his apparently noble declarations of Jesus innocence, for all his apparent endeavours to pursue a just judgement and have Jesus released, none of that seems to really count for anything when his political position is on the line.

Bullies love to provoke others. They love to throw their weight around. And in the end, Pilate's declarations of Jesus' innocence and royalty are merely designed to bait the Jews. He keeps reminding them of his power to give them what they want. He's playing power games and in the end it's all a parade, putting on a show of his power.

But he gets in their face and plays these games, and reminds them of his power over them, baiting the Jews, lording it over them like a typical tyrant in our world, all out of his own insecurity. You wish you could go back in a time machine and slap the man, and say, "Listen to what you just said!" Because back in verse 10,

¹⁰So Pilate said to him, "Do you refuse to speak to me? Don't you know that I have the authority to release you and the authority to crucify you?"

Listen to yourself Pilate: boasting about the authority you have to decide Jesus' fate, but in the end, you just yield to the pressure and hand him over to be crucified. Pilate boasts and parades his own power but refuses to use it for the sake of justice and of doing the right thing. In the end, for all of the Pilate's attempts to assert himself, all he does is prove the very words of Jesus in vs11:

¹¹"You would have no authority over me at all," Jesus answered him, "if it hadn't been given you from above.

According to Jesus, it turns out that there is a deeper ironic truth to Pilate having his hands tied. In the end it is God who controls the judgement the Pilate passes. Pilate has no authority in the end.

the Jews: blasphemy, hypocrisy and spiritual adultery (v5, 12, 6, 7, 21, 15)

Then we encounter the blasphemous hypocrisy and spiritual adultery of the Jews. And these are probably the bleakest, blackest, darkest descriptions in this whole section. If I could keep the time machine running, I'd go back and really slap these people for their hypocrisy and spiritual adultery. It begins with the political manipulation that we've already talked about verse 12, playing the Roman power game, turning the tables on Pilate, threatening him that someone might come and judge him and judge his administration and it might not turn out well for him. They're playing the political games of these overlords that they hate and resent so much. They have no care for truth. They've learned to play the political power game. They know that any unrest is likely to attract Caesar's scrutiny and Pilate will be in trouble. So they just remind him of that threat.

And they want blood. Three times they call out for the blood of Jesus. Verse 6,

⁶When the chief priests and the temple servants saw him, they shouted, “Crucify! Crucify!”

In vs7, they again insist on the death sentence and then again in verse 15, for the third time they'll cry for Jesus to be crucified

¹⁵They shouted, “Take him away! Take him away! Crucify him!”

They're rejecting Jesus as their king. And by this stage in the narrative, that doesn't really surprise us. They have been rejecting Jesus claims to God-appointed Kingship throughout the whole narrative of the gospel.

And we get it because there is a significant impulse part of each one of us that does not want Jesus ruling us. Each one of us don't like being told what to do. Each one of us don't like the persistent, intruding, authority of Jesus in our lives.

And the Jews of been consistent about their rejection of Jesus. And that all becomes blatantly clear in this chapter. But verse 15 is the absolute showstopper. Just have a look at verse 15. It's perhaps the darkest, darkest moment of all, in this whole section, where the high priests reply,

“We have no king but Caesar!” the chief priests answered.

“Wait, what did they just say?” These are the religious leaders of Israel. Have a look at these verses from the Old Testament. Who is king?

- Psalm 10:16
 - The Lord is King for ever and ever;
the nations will perish from his land.
- Psalm 24:8
 - Who is this King of glory?
The Lord strong and mighty,
the Lord mighty in battle.
- Psalm 29:10
 - The Lord sits enthroned over the flood;
the Lord is enthroned as King forever.
- Psalm 47:7
 - God is the King of all the earth;
sing to him a psalm of praise.
- Psalm 95:3
 - For the Lord is the great God,
the great King above all gods.
- Psalm 149:2
 - Let Israel rejoice in their Maker;
let the people of Zion be glad in their King.

And that's just a smattering of verses from one book of the OT. The Scriptures, those words of God that they apparently revere so much, for all their piety, it all seems to evaporate when they feel threatened by Jesus.

Now in fairness, there's some urgency to this whole process. This is the day of Passover preparation. John reminds us again and again of that. There's work to be done to get ready for their Passover meal. And these religious men are probably getting impatient. “How long is this going to take, I've got to get home and put the lamb on the spit.” So if they cut some corners along the way, we shouldn't be so surprised. They are being kept from their religious duty. They are being kept from being with their families and remembering the redemption of Israel. They are being kept, just hours away from the Passover meal, where they will rehearse the Haggadah, the story of the Exodus, and the great Hallel (Ps 113-118) songs and just hours later, they'll say this prayer:

“from everlasting to everlasting, you are God. Besides you, we have no king, no redeemer or saviour, no liberator, deliverer, provider, none who takes pity in every time of distress or trouble. We have no king but you.”

These guys are desperate to get to that celebration, they're desperate to recite those words, they've been reciting those words all their lives. And now in this appalling, hypocritical twisting of those *precious* words, they declare that they have no king but Caesar, just so that they can get home soon enough to declare they have no king but God.

So desperate to get rid of Jesus they say "**We have no king but Caesar**". Do you hear the blaspheme? Do you hear the irony? They've concocted this trial based on *Jesus'* blaspheme, when they have just committed the most appalling blaspheme by saying they have no king except Caesar. Can you hear the spiritual adultery and apostasy of it, getting into bed with Caesar? Of course, the irony is, in rejecting Jesus, they are rejecting God. And by their own admission they speak truthfully, that they have no king except Caesar.

In the end, for all their piety, they are prepared to carry through this gross injustice in order to rid themselves of Jesus. And *in* getting rid of Jesus, they're clueless as to the great contradiction in their very own words. Most likely they are unconscious of their hypocrisy and blaspheme and betrayal. But John makes it perfectly clear to us. They're not just rejecting Jesus; they're rejecting the God who made them. In ridding the world of Jesus, out of their faces, out of their lives, they are rejecting *their* God. It is the most appalling rejection of God.

the soldiers: greedy opportunism (vs23-25)

Then we come to the greedy opportunism of the soldiers: verses 23 to 25. Here is Jesus on the receiving end of this terrible corruption and depravity. All the darkness and cruelty and injustice humanity can muster is thrown at him. And yet these soldiers, careless and apathetic, are concerned about who is going to get his clothes. Petty, selfish, greedy opportunists, acting out of self-interest.

But what we discover is that what they are doing is exactly what God had planned should happen beforehand in Psalm 22.

²⁴So they said to one another, "Let's not tear it, but cast lots for it, to see who gets it." This happened that the Scripture might be fulfilled that says: **They divided my clothes among themselves, and they cast lots for my clothing.** This is what the soldiers did.

In their petty selfishness, these greedy opportunists are found to be carrying out the very plans of God. See its tempting to see all this as God losing the battle, as if Jesus is merely a victim: poor Jesus, he couldn't do anything about it. But what John keeps showing us, all the way along is that all this happened under the sovereign control of God.

18:32: ³²They said this so that Jesus's words might be fulfilled indicating what kind of death he was going to die.

19:24: .. This happened that the scripture might be fulfilled

19:28: ²⁸After this, when Jesus knew that everything was now finished that the Scripture might be fulfilled, he said, "I'm thirsty."

Although it may seem like mere chaos and corruption and injustice, again and again, John is showing us that all of this happened according to the sovereign will of God. God controls even the darkest evil of our world. And that's a good thing, because it guarantees us that God can and will do away with darkness in the end.

Confronted by our own darkness

Well, we've surveyed the scene, we have heard the testimony of Pilate, the Jewish leaders, and the soldiers, and the darkness that controls them. But then if we are honest with ourselves, then we know that there are moments when we are confronted by the darkness of our own hearts: our own pride, our own selfishly-motivated greed, our own hypocrisy, our own careless apathy. We will have these moments where we can see a part of ourselves in each of these characters.

Like Pilate, we are fearfully self-protective

Like Pilate, each one of us has thoughts that are motivated by political self-interest. Part of our everyday operations comes out of our insecurity and fear. You avoid difficult paths even though they are the right paths. You, like me, have learnt the subtle art of manoeuvring and manipulating. Often you are not even aware that you are manipulating situations so that you can avoid some trouble for yourself. And we have become so proficient at this, we can even fool everyone around us that it all comes out of the goodness of our hearts. We are so proficient and so convincing we even fool ourselves. We believe our own lies about our own goodness.

Like the chief priests, we are spiritually compromised

You'll hear your own words driven by hypocrisy and spiritual adultery, like with the chief priests, where you, perhaps just for a time are willing to sell out everything, to grab at a moment of power.

Like the soldiers, we are greedily self-interested

Like the soldiers, we can find ourselves indifferent about Jesus, seeing life and people only as opportunity to get what you can out of the moment and turning a blind eye to injustices when it suits us. Instead of rising to moral demands of the moment, finding yourself acting out of greed, self-interest and exploitation of the helpless.

There is this whole spectrum of darkness, and we are not only victims of evil and darkness and hostility. We have been perpetrators of darkness and evil too.

the Christ: integrity and kindness (v25-27)

But John doesn't tell us this story to overwhelm us with the darkness of our own depravity. He tells us the story to show us how Jesus brings an end to all darkness with his piercing light. In this section we get the integrity and kindness of Jesus.

As Pilate ums and ahs over Jesus' future, Jesus sits there silent, he entrusts himself to God. Whilst the Jews are hellbent on the violent rejection of Jesus, Jesus for his part, resists the impulse for retaliation and vengeance. As First Peter says

²³when he was insulted, he did not insult in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten but entrusted himself to the one who judges justly. (1Pet 2:23)

And then, as our section closes in verses 25 to 27, we see the compassion and kindness of Jesus. Pilate's determining his future, the Jews are screaming for his blood, the soldiers are gambling for his robe, and Jesus is drinking the cup of God's judgement. So what's on his mind as he does this?

Jesus has been reticent to say much throughout this whole ordeal, but finally, we hear Jesus break his silence. John holds the microphone up to Jesus now. And what does he say? What's he worried about? What's he thinking about?

He wants to make sure that his mother is looked after. He wants to make sure that his beloved disciple is entrusted with her care. If we look back at the arrest of Jesus, it's just so striking how Jesus' overriding concern was the safety of his disciples. When he's arrested Jesus very quickly says,

"Who have you come for? It's me, you want me. Don't worry about them. You want me. You want me."

Jesus was determined to keep his people, the sheep of his pasture, safe. In the midst of all that turmoil and danger, we see the other-person-centeredness of Jesus, the way he persistently loves others despite the mind-boggling personal cost to himself. And again, we encounter that here. Jesus is breathtaking in his composed tenderness and compassion in the midst of unimaginable stress and turmoil. It's the mother of all moments of human darkness and depravity, and right *there, in the midst of that*, Jesus is busy making sure that he's provided for his mother, entrusting her to the beloved disciple.

John prepared us for this in the first few verses of his gospel. Back in chapter 1, verse 3 he said

John 1:3-4 All things were created through him, and apart from him not one thing was created that has been created. ⁴In him was life, and that life was the light of men. ⁵That light shines in the darkness, and yet the darkness did not overcome it.

It's Passover time, it's a time for redemption, for renewal of the covenant and we're watching as Jesus liberates people from sin and death and judgment, liberating us from the darkness so that we can bask in the light of his resurrection existence.

It is finished (vs28-30)

But the real clincher for this chapter comes in those final verses,

²⁸After this, when Jesus knew that everything was now finished that the Scripture might be fulfilled, he said, "I'm thirsty." ²⁹A jar full of sour wine was sitting there; so they fixed a sponge full of sour wine on a hyssop branch and held it up to his mouth. ³⁰When Jesus had received the sour wine, he said, "It is finished." Then bowing his head, he gave up his spirit.

According to John, Jesus final words before he bows his head and surrenders his life to God are 'it is finished.' What did he mean by that? Finally, that's the end of my life? That's the end of all the taunting and humiliation? That's the end of putting up the shortsighted self-interest of people? No, in fact another way of translating that is 'it is completed'. That Jesus has completed his work. Eternal life is secured for all who trust him because at the cross, he took all human darkness into himself and put an end to it. So that you and I, through simply trusting in him, pledging allegiance to this king, that we would have our eternal life secured, even for people like you and I, no matter how full of darkness our lives and our world has become. That does not mean we do not still experience all kinds of darkness. We absolutely do. But we do so, knowing that Jesus has won the decisive battle which will put an end to all darkness.

In our moments of darkness...

In our moments of darkness we need to remember this: the darkness will not overcome the radiant power and love of Jesus. I mentioned earlier some of the darkest moments of history. And no doubt, for some of you, you've already seen and experienced real darkness in this world. And there will continue to be appalling darkness in our world and in our personal lives, unspeakable depravity, and the temptation to despair. In these times, you will need to take refuge in the crucifixion of Jesus; and *remember* this moment of the crucifixion when darkness threw all that it could at the light of God, and yet it was utterly powerless to overcome it. And in times like *that* we need to know and remember the one who offers us refuge, the Good Shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep.

Have you met him? Do you know him? Will you trust him?

There is no other saviour. There is no hope outside of him. We need to take refuge in the crucifixion of Jesus, refuge in his triumph over the darkness that lies in our hearts. At the end of the day, the crucifixion of Jesus is the decisive victory that puts an end to all darkness, and so in him there is great hope.

Have you met him? Do you know him? Will you trust him?

If you're not sure, talk to someone today. There is no decision more important. Don't let another day go by without knowing the light of Jesus in your life.

Have you met him? Do you know him? Will you trust him?

Pray

Heavenly Father, we know this darkness all too well. We encounter darkness on a daily basis, and we're aware of it still lurking in our hearts. Please open our eyes that we might live in the glorious light of the Lord Jesus, that we might be people of the light, and that we might know the certainty of this hope for ourselves, that 'it is finished', that Jesus has powerfully overcome all darkness.