

Worship The King!

Mark 15:1-20 [Isaiah 53:1-7]

Have you ever had that moment where you've got a verdict totally wrong. Come to a conclusion only to realise you're very mistaken. This happened to me just the other day as I found a room in our house in total chaos. Clothes everywhere, empty bags flung across the room, cupboard doors open...

And as I was about to call the two likely culprits, my children, bringing down another classic "how many times have I told you..." speech, there appeared my wife Holly with more bags of clothes she was sorting through... Turns out my presumed guilty until proven innocent for my kids was mistaken!

Have you ever had moment? Where you got the verdict – and response totally wrong? There are of course some very public examples of this: consider Microsoft CEO Steve Ballmer, who in 2007 declared *"There's no chance that the iPhone is going to get any significant market share."*

You only need to hop on a train, go to the shops, or meet a teenager to know how that verdict turned out. Or what about in Blockbuster video CEO Jim Keyes, who in 2008 declared, "Netflix isn't even on the radar screen in terms of competition".

We know exactly how that prediction went given that no one under 20 even knows what Blockbuster video is anymore and almost everyone's got Netflix!

But perhaps one of the most well-known mistaken verdicts was that of the 12 publishers who all rejected the pitch from the unknown J.K Rowling and her kids book Harry Potter and the Philosopher's stone.

After spending five years writing it, Rowling was knocked back time and time again with feedback like, "You might want to consider a writing course" or "young boys aren't likely to read a book penned by a female author."

Even when Bloomsbury Publishers bought her book, the head of children's literature warned her "You won't make any money writing children's books and you shouldn't expect anything from it."

Well how did that verdict turn out? That first book alone has sold over 100 million copies, a Harry Potter brand worth over \$15 billion, and Forbes declared her the first ever billionaire author.

It is easy to get the verdict wrong and end up looking a bit silly isn't it? But what about the trial and scene that you just heard read? What did you think, what was your verdict as Pilate ultimately sentenced Jesus to be crucified despite declaring his innocence and releasing a murderer?

What's your response as the soldiers mock, humiliate, and pummel Jesus before sending him off to be nailed to a cross? You see this event, this scene, can be so familiar, we hear it and think business as usual. All went according to plan, nothing new, nothing to be gained.

It's so easy for us to glaze over the details and forget that here we come to the centre and climax of human history. Events that changed the world forever. Events that are so familiar we can lose sight of not just how bizarre and unjust this trial is, but how moving and powerful it is too.

As we return the story of that first Easter we are seeing God's power, love, mercy, and faithfulness on display but also the human heart, every human heart, diagnosed and exposed.

And Mark is writing because everyone has to come to verdict of what you think about Jesus, what you're going to do with him, how you're going to respond to him.

It's why the Passion Narrative in all the gospels is full of people's words, actions, responses, and with almost no editorial comments at all. What are you doing; what are you going to do with Jesus? Jesus who is the unassuming, mocked, rejected, yet innocent King who is condemned to die. **#1 The Innocent King**

In Mark 15, we're told it's a new day, Good Friday morning. As we heard last week, the religious leaders, the Sanhedrin, have deliberated long into the night after their corrupt and illegal meeting found Jesus to be guilty of blasphemy and worthy of death (14:64).

But they have a problem: they have no authority to put anyone to death. Only Rome could do that so in v.1 they *handed him over to Pilate*. Pontus Pilate was the 5th governor of Judea serving from 26-37AD until he was fired by Emperor Caligula.

He was no friend of the Jews. He didn't usually reside in Jerusalem but made the trip, along with his army, during several of the significant Jewish festivals in order to keep the peace.

And hearing cases like the one against Jesus was the kind of thing he'd often be doing early in the morning. But the Sanhedrin have a problem. Pilate and Rome would have no interest in some trumped up religious charges like claiming to be the Messiah (14:61) or blasphemy (14:64).

Hence they probably deliberated early into the morning to find a way to bring Jesus to Pilate with political charges, like claiming to be a king, would be a threat to Rome and treason. It's probably why they bound him, to make him look more dangerous than he really was.

And Pilate asks him directly, *Are you the king of the Jews?* (v.2) And Jesus' answer is somewhat ambiguous: *"You say so."* Now what is Jesus doing here? People have different theories. Is he affirming or deflecting? Confirming or denying? Or merely saying, that's the word on the street!

Because if he says yes, two things would happen. Firstly, the plan of the religious leaders would work; Jesus would be a threat to Rome and he'd be executed. But secondly, if Jesus confirms he's the King, Pilate and the others wouldn't understand what that really means: what kind of King he is.

But if Jesus says no, he'd been lying. Mark has declared from the opening verse of his Gospel, Jesus is the Messiah, the anointed one, God's promised King who would come to rule and restore.

Because while "the King of the Jews" was probably a laughable notion to Pilate and might not mean much to us today, it's an important reality that affects the whole world.

For the God of Israel is the only true and living God, the creator of the world. And the King of the Jews, as Psalm 2 promises, is one who will judge all nations, who will rule the world, a king you cannot escape but must turn to and find refuge in. One who will bring peace and renew all things.

And while it mattered greatly to the Jewish leaders who deemed Jesus unworthy of such a title, Pilate knew nothing of these promises and nor did he care.

So Jesus essentially splits the middle, somewhat affirming that he is the King of the Jews, the charge against him isn't wrong, but what that means and the kind of King he is isn't something Pilate can comprehend at all. Because what kind of King is Jesus as he stands before Pilate?

Well strangely he's silent. Even as more accusations come against Jesus in v.3, Pilate wants something more direct from Jesus, but he won't get it: ⁴*Pilate questioned him again, "Aren't you going to answer? Look how many things they are accusing you of!"* ⁵*But Jesus still did not answer, and so Pilate was amazed.*

Jesus is silent. Pilate is amazed. And that is fair enough. Pilate had probably never seen someone remain silent when on trial. I can't even ask my own kids to pack up their own toys or mess without the inner lawyer coming out to defend themselves! Yet Jesus remains silent.

Silence that essentially accepts whatever the outcome, even a guilty a verdict. Which is exactly the verdict that Pilate is surprising unwilling to give. As the trial continues, he repeatedly calls Jesus the King of the Jews (v.9, 12), unknowingly confirming his status, but also a King who is clearly innocent.

As the crowd call for his crucifixion Pilate is perplexed in v.14, asking them what wrong, what evil he has done. Here before them is the innocent King on trial yet he remains silent – a silence that will move the trial along toward a guilty verdict. The King is innocent, silent, and condemned.

But more than that, he's swapped for the guilty (**#2 – The Innocent For the Guilty**). We are told that Pilate had a tradition of releasing a prisoner during the Passover festival. Perhaps looking to keep the Jews happy during a time with tensions were high, this was a savvy political move.

And in v.7 we are told about a man named Barabbas, a rebel and murderer who was probably awaiting his own crucifixion that day. Executing Jewish freedom fighters during a festival with thousands gathered in Jerusalem was a sure way for Rome to remind everyone who was in charge.

And as the crowd come in v.8 seeking him to honour this tradition, Pilate actually seeks to use this as an opportunity to release Jesus. He knows, v.10, that the whole trial is a set-up, he's being played by the Jewish leaders to get rid of Jesus. So he offers Jesus for release in v.9.

"Do you want me to release the king of the Jews for you?" But it doesn't work. The chief priests get busy in v.11, persuading the crowd to ask for Barabbas instead. Pilate can't believe it, so he asks again in v.12, *Then what do you want me to do with the one you call the king of the Jews?"*

¹³ Again they shouted, "Crucify him!" ¹⁴ Pilate said to them, "Why? What has he done wrong?" But they shouted all the more, "Crucify him!" ¹⁵ Wanting to satisfy the crowd, Pilate released Barabbas to them; and after having Jesus flogged, he handed him over to be crucified.

The guilty murderer is set free, while the innocent king takes his place and is condemned to die. And the contrast between the two is quite deliberate. Barabbas' name means "son of the Father" and Matthew's gospel tells us his first name is actually Jesus! (Mt 27:16-17).

Pilate is essentially asking the crowd, which Jesus, which king, what kind of saviour do you want? And although we might find their choice for a murderer shocking, to the crowd he was probably a hero. He's exactly the Messiah figure they want. While Jesus preached repentance and faith, Barabbas took up the sword. While Jesus healed the sick and touched the leper, Barabbas fought back against Rome.

Which king do we want? I think we are deceived if we think the decision would go any differently today. The human heart prefers the saviour who will fight the enemy out there but not expect us to change at all. Jesus has come exposing our sinful hearts and they hate him for it.

The guilty is set free and the innocent one takes his place. And so what we have here in Barabbas is stunning picture of the Gospel, anticipating what is about to take place on the cross. The great exchange where the righteous one dies in the place of the unrighteous.

Which is not simply Barabbas but all of us. As you read the Easter story, the human heart is exposed as everyone is guilty. The Jews condemn Jesus out of envy; despite all his power Pilate is a weak, people pleaser that releases a murderer and condemns an innocent man out of self-interest.

As we are about to see, the soldiers mock, beat, and humiliate Jesus for their own entertainment; the crowds are manipulated and unjust as they demand the crucifixion without any evidence; and the best of the lot, the disciples who know Jesus the most, who declared they'd follow him even to death?

Already gone, deserting and denying him the moment trouble came to protect themselves. And it's only delusion that says we would have done any better or be any different.

The human heart, mine and yours, is exposed here. As John Piper says, "All human beings — no exceptions — are born with this kind of fallen, diseased, deceived, self-exalting, God-opposing heart."

But as we process that, a confronting and exposing diagnosis, we are immediately struck with the stunning reality that Christ willingly died for us: taking our place under God's judgement for our sin.

Not by accident, not because of the unjust cries of a easily swayed mob, but by divine purpose. Jesus is so clearly fulfilling God's promise that we heard in our first reading: Isaiah 53. The promise of a suffering servant who dies, who is punished by God in the place of the wicked.

⁵ But he was pierced because of our rebellion, crushed because of our iniquities; punishment for our peace was on him, and we are healed by his wounds. ⁶ We all went astray like sheep; we all have turned to our own way; and the LORD has punished him for the iniquity of us all.

One who is silent before his accusers, v.7, *Like a lamb led to the slaughter and like a sheep silent before her shearers, he did not open his mouth.* Jesus knows exactly what is happening as he sits before Pilate silently and the innocent King is condemned to death.

Silence not of defeat, but willing submission to God's plan of salvation. Which is exactly how the NT writers speak of Jesus death. Just two examples: 2Corinthians 5:21, *²¹ God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.* Or 1Peter 3:18,

¹⁸ For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God.

The innocent King is condemned and will go to the cross willingly, not the King the crowd wanted, not the King we'd choose, but the King God promised. The king we desperately need. One who can truly save us from our sins and bring us to God.

Isn't that what we sung last week? "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" (How Deep The Father's Love).

So it's worth pausing and asking if you really get that. Jesus' death, the cross of Christ confirms that we really are more sinful and flawed in ourselves than we'd ever dare believe. Yet as Christ willingly goes to the cross for us, we are at the same time more loved and accepted than we'd ever dare hope.

If you get how purposeful, how personal, how powerful and freeing it is to know Christ's death is for me – my guilt, my punishment, gone – God's wrath, against my sin, willingly taken by God's perfect son if you get really get that, you cannot help but worship him. **#3 The 'Worshipped King (vv.16-20)**

That point is made through the tragic irony of the soldiers as Jesus is handed over the them to be flogged. In Roman law, once the death sentence had been passed, soldiers had unlimited opportunity to torture the prisoner. And the scene is moving and confronting.

In v.16 Jesus is taken to the Governor's residence, Herod's palace, along with the whole company of soldiers, about 600 of them, where he is whipped. These whips were leather with bits of metal or bone attached to them designed to rip the flesh.

The Jewish historian Josephus tells us that this scourging had no maximum number of strokes and was often fatal. It's no wonder Jesus can't carry the cross in v.21.

But Mark's focus is less on his physical pain but more the ironic worship he's given. The soldiers dress him up as a King in v.17, purple robes were associated with royalty due to the expensive nature of the dye. A crown is put on him, not of gold but of thorns.

In v.18, they salute, fall to their knees and cry out, "*Hail, king of the Jews*" all the while beating him with a stick and spitting on him in v.19. To them he's a joke. Weak and powerless.

And let's be honest. By all normal standards he is a laughable king isn't he? Everyone has deserted him, he has no friends, no army. He's weak, humiliated, and defenceless. He has no power, he is no threat, no one is saving him, and he can't save himself.

So they mock, they beat, they spit. It's degrading, it's humiliating, it's shocking: to the reader of Mark we *know* Jesus really is the king! So why would he endure this? Why would he allow this? Why is he silent? Well because he's completely in control.

The King is doing exactly as he promised, exactly as he predicted. In Mark 10, Jesus for the third time told his disciples what would happen in Jerusalem: condemned to death by the religious leaders (v.33), handed over to the Gentiles, like Pilate, mocked, spat on, flogged (v.34)

And why? Because this is how the King will save his people, giving himself as ransom for many (10:45). He's the suffering King, the crucified king. He rules from the cross not a throne.

Can you imagine Barabbas watching all this? He awoke that morning condemned to die. Then by no effort or choice, he is given life and freedom – as another, an innocent one takes his place. Then seeing Jesus flogged and crucified only hours later, what would he think? Surely: "It's meant to be me. That's my punishment, my death sentence, what I deserved – and he's taken it all."

That's exactly what all of us are all meant to think as we come again to Easter. To the Jew's he's a fake Messiah, worthy of death. To Rome and Pilate, he's weak and dispensable. But what is he to you?

The soldiers mock him for what they are convinced he isn't, yet in doing so they declare both who he really is and what he really deserves: Hail the King! Worship the one who gives his life for yours.

So as we come to Easter this Friday, as you hear again this familiar story, what's your verdict? What response will you, are you giving the King who died for you? The King who reigns from the cross.

I think there's a warning for us in v.15 – it's possible to have your response to Jesus shaped more by the world and expectations around us than the reality of who he actually is. Possible to know the right things about him but give him the opposite or so much less than what he deserves.

A response to Jesus that satisfies the crowd around us: remember the story, but don't make too much of it, don't be too distinct because of it, and don't talk about it too much either. And that's especially true at Easter as we are encouraged to focus on and talk about pretty much anything other than Jesus.

And it can feel like we are up against it right? As my daughter finished kinder this week, she came home with a personalised basket to collect choc eggs. As I collected my son from school, he had a bunny ears crown they'd made in preparation for Easter. Catalogues are filled with bunnies and eggs.

Life is busy and we are coming to a four day weekend can look so appealing to just rest and switch off – but will we actually take the time to focus on, delight in, and go deep into this reality which should do so much more for us than simply be an idea we remember.

How can I do that for my family and children this week? How can you? And importantly how can we do it for ourselves?

As Christ goes to the cross for us, this is so much more than a mere transaction of debt + payment. No, it is the faithful, persistent, generous, costly love of God on display that should capture our hearts and become the very centre of our lives. Listen to how Paul describes it in Galatians 2: ²⁰ *I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.*

To embrace Jesus' death for you sets your life on a new Christ-centred course, the daily privilege of knowing you're at peace with God, cleansed from all unrighteousness, always welcome, always safe in the presence, of God. But more than that, it's to know you're always and incomparably loved.

Romans 5:8, ⁸ *But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.*

John Stott helpfully says, "As we contemplate Christ's cross, whether we like it or not, we are involved. Our sins put him there. So, far from offering us flattery, the cross undermines our self-righteousness. We can stand before it only with a bowed head and a broken spirit. And there we remain until the Lord Jesus speaks to our hearts his word of pardon and acceptance, and we, gripped by his love and full of thanksgiving, go out into the world to live our lives in his service." (The Cross of Christ)

So brothers and sisters, not just this morning and not just this Easter, but every day, let's worship the king took our sin, who loved you, and gave himself for you.

Let's pray.