

# Jesus before Pilate

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Preacher: David MacPherson

[ 0 : 00 ] Well, turn with me to the passage that we read there in Matthew's Gospel in chapter 27.

As I say, over the next three Sundays we'll be giving thought to this chapter and what it tells us of the events that led up to and indeed including the crucifixion and death of Jesus.

And this evening we'll begin by giving some thought to the account that Matthew provides for us here of Jesus before Pilate, the trial if we can dignify what occurred with that word.

Now the passage that we read covers a lot of ground, but we're going to think about it from a very specific perspective that revolves around the language and reality of innocence.

This word innocent, it recurs throughout the passage and we're going to use that as our guide in a way to make our way through the passage or parts of it.

[ 1 : 12 ] We're focusing on this word and on the theme of innocence. And the way we'll do it is we'll give some thought to the innocence of the one being judged.

Speaking of Jesus, of course. And we'll find how on three occasions three separate witnesses testify to his innocence. And so we'll give a little thought to that threefold testimony to the innocence of the one being judged, of the accused.

And that will really occupy a bit more of our time. But we will also look at how another is described or at least declares himself to be innocent. And in this case we're thinking of a pilot.

The innocence, very much in inverted commas, of the one judging. So the innocence of the one judged, a threefold testimony to it. But then also the innocence or the declared innocence of the one judging.

But then having done that, we'll then draw things together by giving some thought or seeking to answer the question, why did the one who is presented to us by a threefold testimony as innocent, why did he die the death of the guilty?

[ 2 : 32 ] If he was innocent, then why did he die as a guilty man? So that's the way we're going to try and make our way through some of the material in the passage that we've read.

First of all then, the innocence of the one being judged at this trial. Let's think of three witnesses that we find in the passage. First of all, we find Jesus being identified, declared, described as innocent by Judas, the one who had handed himself, or rather who had handed Jesus over to the religious authorities.

There in verse 4, we're not going to be thinking about all the circumstances relating to Judas and then what happened next. We're simply focusing on what he declares as it's recorded there in verse 4.

For I have sinned, he said, for I have betrayed innocent blood. So the first witness in the defense, we might say, of Jesus.

He wasn't, of course, a witness at the trial, but as we are considering the passage, he declares, Judas, the one who betrayed Jesus, declares Jesus to be innocent. He is, says Judas, innocent.

[ 3 : 45 ] Now I wonder what did Judas mean by that? What did he have in mind when he used this language? I don't think Judas had in mind the charges that had been brought against Jesus in the previous chapter.

We have, we haven't read, but we have the trial before the Jewish authorities. Different charges were leveled against Jesus. We'll think about them in a moment. But Judas, I don't think, had in mind that at all, even if he was privy to what the charges were.

He is speaking of Jesus as innocent in the sense that he knew him to be a righteous man, a morally upright man. He was innocent.

He wasn't guilty of anything to serving death. He knew that. Indeed, Judas knew that he wasn't guilty of anything, period. Or in any case, he would have had every reason to have come to that conclusion.

Judas, with the other disciples who were formed part of this inner circle of disciples, had walked with Jesus, had been with Jesus day after day, week after week, for a period of three years.

[ 4 : 53 ] And in all of that time, quite remarkable, in all of that time he had never had occasion to conclude that Jesus had done anything sinful.

And we know that's true because Jesus never did anything sinful. Now, Judas had witnessed that. And so, having witnessed that here, distraught because of what he has done, filled with remorse, he returns the money that he'd been given.

And, and this is our concern, he declares Jesus to be innocent. So, he's the first word of testimony, declaring the innocence of Jesus.

But then, secondly, we can think of Pilate. And really, this occupies the bulk of the passage. And of Pilate, we can say that Jesus was discovered to be innocent by Pilate.

Pilate, of course, didn't have the, the opportunity that Judas had had to, to see Jesus face to face and come to that conclusion. However, Pilate discovers in the course of the trial, in the course of the questions that are posed, in the course of his analyzing what is going on, he discovers the innocence of Jesus.

[ 6 : 08 ] From verse 11 onwards, we have the account. Now, when Pilate discovered Jesus to be innocent, what did he discover him to be innocent of?

Well, to be innocent of the charges that had been leveled against him. Now, in Matthew's gospel, we're not given the full list of charges that were leveled against Jesus by the Jews.

And, indeed, even where we do have that list in Luke's gospel, it's probably not exclusive, or exhaustive, rather, but simply the charges they thought might carry weight with the Roman governor.

But let's just see what Luke tells us concerning the charges that the Jews brought and presented before Pilate that he might judge on that basis and come to a conclusion.

In chapter 23 of Luke's gospel, and in verse 2, there's a whole list of charges there. We read, And they began to accuse him. This is before Pilate.

[ 7 : 08 ] We have found this man subverting our nation. You can see very much the political language that they felt might move Pilate. So, the first charge, subverting our nation.

The next charge, he opposes payment of taxes to Caesar. Well, again, they know what they're doing. They know who they're speaking to. They're speaking to the Roman governor. He'll be concerned about someone who is guilty of this.

They go on. He claims to be Christ, a king. Well, in the passage in Matthew, that is also apparent. In the question that Pilate poses Jesus.

So, three charges there. But then, if you move on in verse 5, really, once Pilate has very summarily concluded that they really have no ground for the charges they bring, there's another one in verse 5.

But they insisted he stirs up the people all over Judea by his teaching. He started in Galilee and has come all the way here. So, we have a fourth charge that is brought against Jesus.

[ 8 : 13 ] And what Pilate does is he considers the charges, but he does focus on one in particular, one that in all the Gospels mention is made of.

And we find it in our passage in Matthew 27, in the question that he poses Jesus in verse 11. Are you the king of the Jews? So, this is the particular charge that Pilate is focusing in on to try and establish if indeed Jesus is guilty as charged.

And how does Jesus respond? Well, we find Jesus giving what we might call a qualified assent to what Pilate says. Jesus is posed the question, Are you the king of the Jews?

And really what Jesus responds is, he doesn't say yes, though in our translation we find the word yes, and the reason for that is the translators understand it to be implicit in what Jesus says.

But what Jesus actually says is, It is as you say. Indeed, it could be understood that Jesus is posing a question, Is that what you say? And however we understand it, there is a certain cryptic element to it.

[ 9 : 22 ] It's not simply a yes, that's true. If anything, it's a yes and no. It's this qualified assent. There's truth in what you're saying, but not as you understand it.

Obviously, that's developing it more. But that's the idea of the answer that Jesus gives. Indeed, the fact that it is a qualified assent to the charge that has been presented to him is much more clearly confirmed in John's account where we have a dialogue really on this very matter recorded in John chapter 18 and from verse 33.

If we just quickly notice, no doubt, only part of the dialogue, but certainly that part that's recorded for us by John. John 18 from verse 33.

Notice the same question. Are you the king of the Jews? And then, slightly different what we have recorded. Is that your own idea? That gives that idea of a qualified yes.

Is that your own idea, Jesus asked? Or did others talk to you about me? Am I a Jew? Pilate replied. It was your people and your chief priests who handed you over to me. What is it you have done?

[ 10 : 37 ] And then Jesus enters into this matter of whether he's a king. Jesus said, My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jews.

But now my kingdom is from another place. You are a king then, said Pilate. And Jesus answered, You are right in saying I am a king. In fact, for this reason I was born.

And for this I came into the world to testify to the truth. And he goes on. And then we have that famous question of Pilate. What is truth? But Pilate evidently focused on this charge.

Maybe because the others he could see so quickly were so ridiculous and without any foundation. But here was one where maybe there was a reason to find Jesus guilty.

But having considered the evidence, in as much as there was any evidence at all, Pilate reaches a conclusion. And he concludes that Jesus is innocent.

[ 11 : 37 ] Though the word isn't used by Pilate, at least it's not recorded for us that he uses the word, it is so clear that that is the conclusion that he has come to.

In verse 23, when he's really negotiating with the crowd, he asks the question, when they're calling for Jesus to be crucified, he says, Why?

What crime has he committed? And the question is clearly coming from the angle of, well, he hasn't committed any crime. You can't possibly answer that question and give me evidence of any crimes committed, because he hasn't.

It's clear to me that he is innocent of the charges that have been brought. Indeed, in this passage, we're told that Pilate had able to establish why the charges were being brought, because it begs the question, well, if Jesus wasn't guilty of these things, why is he being accused?

And Pilate had worked out why that was. In verse 18, we read, For he knew it was out of envy that they had handed Jesus over to him. Now, how did he know that?

[ 12 : 45 ] If he himself had established that, if some of his advisors had told him, oh, no, this is the man from Galilee who heals the sick, and crowds follow him, and he's very popular, and the Jews hate him, or the Jewish religious authorities hate him.

And he knew that. He thought, ah, that's why they're bringing these charges. It's out of envy. They're trumped up charges. Pilate was clear that that was the case. And not only Pilate, but that opinion was shared by Herod.

Matthew doesn't give us all that happened. He is selective. But in the middle of the audience before Pilate, you'll recall how in Luke's Gospel, Pilate sends Jesus to Herod.

On a matter of jurisdiction. Because Jesus was from Galilee, he determined that it was under Herod's jurisdiction. Well, Herod saw him, also came to the conclusion that he was innocent, and sent him back to Pilate.

And they would have won mind in that conclusion that this man was innocent. He wasn't guilty of anything deserving death. So that's the second witness, the second word of testimony.

[ 13 : 56 ] He was declared innocent by Judas. He was discovered to be innocent by Pilate. But then the third witness, and the most intriguing of the three, is Pilate's wife.

And Jesus is declared innocent by Pilate's wife. It is only Matthew who records this for us. And as I say, it is a very intriguing detail that Matthew gives us.

Intriguing and really tantalizing because it gives us a little, but it leaves so much unsaid. But then in verse 19, while Pilate was sitting in the judge's seat, his wife sent him this message.

Don't have anything to do with that innocent man, for I have suffered a great deal today in a dream because of him. We're told that she was clear that he was an innocent man.

We're told that she'd had a dream that had troubled her. But we're not actually told what the dream was. We're not actually told if her conviction that he was an innocent man was through the dream, though that would seem implicit.

[ 15 : 05 ] As I say, it's tantalizing because it gives us a little, but we're left perhaps with many questions. But recognizing that, I think there are two things that we can say about Pilate's wife and her testimony to Jesus' innocence.

First of all, we can comment on and suggest something with regard to the source of her conviction. Why was it that Pilate's wife was so persuaded?

And if we can say one thing about her testimony, it is a very vigorous one. She is clearly persuaded that he is innocent. That he's an innocent man. Why so?

How was she so persuaded? Well, it would seem that this has something to do, without doubt, with the dream that had troubled her. What does that dream tell us?

Or what does it, at any rate, suggest to us about the source of her conviction that Jesus was innocent? I think it probably is relevant.

[ 16 : 05 ] I think so in any case that in Matthew's gospel, there are a number of occasions where we read of dreams and invariably, they are means that God used at that time for the purposes that he had to communicate truth to those he was seeking to communicate truth to.

If that was true, and the other occasions in the gospel, it seems reasonable to conclude that it is the case here. That this dream had been used by God to communicate to Pilate's wife this reality concerning the innocence of Jesus.

That conclusion, I think, is further confirmed by the language that Pilate's wife uses. And that leads us on to the second thing we want to think about concerning Pilate's wife's testimony, and that is the content of her conviction.

We're suggesting that the reason she is persuaded is because God has made this known to her in this unusual way. But what about the content? What is it that she actually is persuaded of?

In verse 19, we're told that she sends the message to her husband that Jesus is an innocent man. Well, the instruction is to have nothing to do with him, but the reason is because Jesus is, according to Pilate's wife, an innocent man.

[ 17 : 30 ] Now, the word innocent there, I said that we were really going through the passage with that theme of innocence, but the word innocent or translated innocent there is different to the word that is used, translated innocent, on two other occasions in this passage.

The one we'd have already seen when Judas, in verse 4, says, I have betrayed innocent blood. And then also in verse 24, where Pilate, and we'll come to that in a moment, declares, I am innocent of this man's blood.

Then in verse 4, and in verse 24, the word that is translated innocent is a word that if we were to translate it or attempt to translate it literally, would be something along the lines of unpenal.

Well, that's not a word. But the idea is of unpunishable. We might even paraphrase it and say not guilty. And so it's a word that is very much related to the idea of a charge that had been made.

And it could be used to say, well, this person is innocent of that charge. They're not guilty of that which they are accused of. They ought not to be punished because they're not guilty. It can carry a broader idea of innocent also, but that's the idea of the word.

[ 18 : 43 ] But Pilate's wife doesn't use that word. Pilate's wife uses a word, and indeed that's the word that is often used to translate it in other versions of the Bible. She uses the word translated ordinarily as righteous.

It is a word that in context can mean innocent. But the word she uses, the word righteous, have nothing to do with that righteous man. Now, if the dream came from God, as we're suggesting that it did, hence she was so persuaded and rightly persuaded, it seems reasonable to assume that the language that Pilate's wife uses is also directed by God.

Even if, in the case of Pilate's wife, it may have been unwittingly, she may not have understood the significance of the language that she was using. But she has a dream, and as a result of that dream, she uses this language to speak of Jesus, that he is a righteous man.

Now, that word righteous is a key New Testament word in connection with Jesus, and it's a word that points to his identity and to his character. The word righteous is a word that is used in the connection with his messianic status.

If we just think of one occasion, one example of that, in Acts chapter 7 and in verse 51. Acts chapter 7 and in verse 51.

[ 20 : 12 ] Notice what we read there. You stiff-necked people with uncircumcised hearts and ears, you are just like your fathers. You always resist the Holy Spirit. Was there ever a prophet your fathers did not persecute?

And then notice what it said. They even killed those who predicted the coming of the righteous one. A messianic title. Speaking, of course, of Jesus. The righteous one.

And so the language that Pilate's wife uses points in that direction to the identity of Jesus as the righteous one. But not only to his identity, but to his character. That he was indeed a righteous man.

And not only not guilty of particular charges, but in the fullest sense of that word, a man who was righteous, unsullied by anything that would take away from this perfect righteousness.

Now I'm not suggesting for a moment that Pilate's wife understood all of that and the significance of the word that she uses, but I am suggesting that she is directed in the use of language that she employs to give a picture of the one of whom she is declaring that he was innocent, that he was righteous.

[ 21 : 30 ] Three testimonies to the innocence of Jesus. But then, much more briefly, notice the innocence in inverted commas of the one judging.

Pilate declares himself to be innocent. Verse 24, we read, when Pilate saw that he was getting nowhere, but that instead an uproar was starting, he took water and washed his hands in front of the crowd.

I am innocent of this man's blood, he said. It is your responsibility. As we have already seen, Pilate knows that Jesus is innocent, but the pressure of the crowd and indeed self-interest, no doubt, is such that he decides to satisfy their blood lust.

But he wants to shift the blame and so evade moral responsibility. He had already tried to do that when he had sent Jesus to Herod, and now he has another strategy.

He washes his hands and declares himself innocent. Now this doesn't seem to have been a common practice, but it was possibly a Jewish custom that Pilate adopts given who are before him.

[ 22 : 38 ] In the Psalms, we sometimes come across the language of washing one's hand in innocence. But futile though his gesture was, it does seem at least to demonstrate Pilate's recognition of the need for washing the stain of sin.

he declares himself to be innocent, falsely, without foundation. It's a futile attempt, but nonetheless he attempts to do so. But of course, the reality is that he is guilty.

The passage ends, or the passage that we've read, ends by identifying what he does. Then he released Barabbas to them, but he had Jesus flogged and handed him over to be crucified.

He is guilty. He shares his guilt with the religious authorities, indeed with the crowd, but he is guilty. So what do we have? We have the one judged is innocent.

There's threefold testimony to his innocence. And the one judging is guilty. But the one who is innocent dies, and the one who is guilty lives. And that leads us to the final question with which we will close.

[ 23 : 46 ] Why did the innocent one die? Why did the righteous one die? His innocence is beyond dispute. There's this threefold testimony to his innocence.

Why then did he die the death of the guilty? And I think that Pilate's wife, wittingly or unwittingly, points us in the direction of the answer to that question.

Jesus was, she assures us, a righteous man. Have nothing to do with that righteous man. And with that description of Jesus in mind, listen to what Peter says in his first letter.

In chapter 3 and verse 18, for Christ died for sins once and for all, the righteous for the unrighteous to bring you to God. Now we're not going to preach a sermon on that text, but simply draw out three truths concerning what Jesus secured by his death as a righteous man in the place of unrighteous men.

And I think we can say this, that by the death of the innocent one, by the death of the righteous one, we who put our trust in him are cleansed, clothed, and carried.

[ 25 : 01 ] We're cleansed. Christ, the righteous one. He did not die for his own sins, but for our sins. And so by his death, he's able to cleanse us from sin.

But not only cleansed, we're also clothed. By his death, Christ not only secured our forgiveness. On the cross, a sweet exchange took place.

Our sin on Christ's shoulders and his righteousness credited to our account. And we who put our trust in him are clothed in the righteousness of Christ.

The righteous dying for the unrighteous. His righteousness given to us as a gift. Cleansed, clothed, and picking up on the theme of what Peter says, I think we can also say we're carried.

Peter speaks of the death of Jesus bringing us to God. As we are forgiven, as we're clothed in the righteousness of Jesus, so we can be brought. Or if you wish, carried.

[ 26 : 02 ] Because ultimately, we're carried by Jesus. Carried into the very presence of a holy and just God. To be welcomed and embraced as sons.

We recoil, and it is a good thing that we do. We recoil at a scene presented to us of a just man being condemned.

Our sense of justice that is part of who we are made in the image and likeness of God. Our sense of justice is offended by the reality of an innocent man being condemned.

And yet we thank God that this innocent man, this righteous man, was condemned and was sent to death to die in our place, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring us to God.

Well, let's pray. Heavenly Father, we do thank you for your word. We thank you for your son. We thank you for Jesus. We thank you that he did indeed live a perfectly righteous life.

[ 27 : 08 ] Though he was tempted in all ways as we are yet without sin. So we thank you that when the time came for him to be condemned and to be executed, he did so not for his own sins, for he had none, but he died for our sins, the righteous for the unrighteous that we might be brought to you.

And we thank you that even as we come now at the close of our service and pray to you, we know that that is only possible because of what Jesus did on the cross, because of the way that he opened up for us unrighteous sinners to come into the presence of a righteous and holy God.

And we thank you for that way and we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.