

Rough Justice

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Date: 17 March 2024

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[0 : 00] Thanks very much, Rachel. Good morning, everyone. Can I repeat, Alistair's welcome, whether you're here in the church or watching on YouTube or listening to the audio recording, you're very welcome with us this morning.

One of the most compelling TV series that I've watched recently was BBC Scotland's Murder Trial. Maybe that makes me one of the true crime addicts that Archie talked about last week.

But what was particularly interesting about that series were two things. One was that the cameras unusually in Scotland were allowed into the courtroom to film the trial.

So you saw that alongside commentary from the advocates and witnesses and so on. And the second thing was that all the murders involved were historical. Two of them went back to the 1970s. So the court was doing what I think is called a code case in the legal jargon.

And really interesting to look at how the evidence from long ago was pieced together using modern standards. And two of the cases, indeed, there wasn't even a body that had been discovered.

[1 : 07] So they were only suspected murders. I'm not going to spoil it for you in case you want to watch the series yourselves. But two things particularly struck me about them.

And there's nothing else flattering in these. You'd probably notice the same things in almost any trial that you saw. The first of these was the centrality of the defendant in the trial.

Now, the nature of the thing was that we were talking about elderly people here. I think there were three men, I think, all in their 80s, plus a woman. And they were all quite old.

And as you looked at them, sometimes they looked nervous. Sometimes they looked maybe a bit confused. Sometimes a bit defiant. But you thought they really look in many ways quite pathetic and powerless in the court.

Things are happening round about them. They're being talked about. Things from their lives long ago are being dissected. And apart from one opportunity, if they wish to, and not everyone did, to give evidence, they are absolutely powerless.

[2 : 13] They're in the hands of the witnesses, the advocates, the judge, and ultimately the jury. And yet they're still central to the case.

It is their guilt, their future, that is being discussed. And you looked at them and thought, could this person 40-odd years ago really have done the crime that they're accused of?

Is there anything that you can see would give you any indication of that? What is their demeanor like? Is it possible that they are guilty or that perhaps they are innocent and they are then very cruelly in their old age being brought to court?

As we come today to the trial of Jesus, then very much I want us to see that Jesus is central in it. We will look in some detail because we need to understand what's happening at the chief priests and at Pilate and what their actions and motivations were.

But ultimately it's about Jesus. It's about what is going to happen to him. It is about what he is here for. And it is about whether he really is the Son of God, the King that is being talked about in the trial.

[3 : 36] In verse 4 of our passage, Pilate brings Jesus in front of the crowd and he says, Here is the man. I've heard the older rendition, Behold the man.

Now what Pilate is doing there, he's trying to win the sympathy of the crowd by presenting someone who is totally powerless. Jesus has been flogged.

He suffered the scorn and the mockery of the soldiers. And Pilate is bringing him out and saying, You don't really think that this man here would be capable of leading a rebellion against Rome.

He's pathetic and powerless. Why do you think he might be a rebel? Now, of course, Jesus wasn't pathetic and powerless in any sense at all.

And we'll come back to that a bit later on. But Pilate was presenting, Here's the man who is in the centre of this court, at the centre of his case.

[4 : 37] I can't say anything wrong that he's done. Will you release? Of course, the crowd then said, No. So that's the first thing, that the defendant is the central person in a trial.

The second thing, and again, there's nothing air shattering here, is in a trial in a Scottish court or UK court generally and in civilised countries around the world, there are efforts made to be fair to the dependent.

In almost every trial, I suspect you'll hear someone saying something along the lines, It is for the prosecution to prove guilt. The defendant doesn't have to prove anything.

Remember, one of the advocates in one of the cases said how burdened he felt, because if he didn't do his job well, and if the defendant really was innocent, then he might be responsible for what he called a death sentence, that the man was ill and old and wouldn't survive a prison term. And there was a real thought, We need to make sure that justice is done. Don't assume just because someone's in court that they're guilty. How different that was from Jesus' trial.

[5 : 51] Because there is no justice here. You have Pilate. Pilate is in charge. Pilate is responsible for dispensing Roman justice, and Roman justice generally aimed to be fair.

Pilate knows he is convinced that Jesus is innocent, and yet he can't bring himself to release Jesus in the face of all the shouting that's coming and the pressure that's being applied on him.

Ultimately, he buckles, and he gives the crowd their way in allowing Jesus to be crucified. He looks like the person who's in charge. Actually, he's one of the ones who's pathetic and powerless in this situation.

Then you have the chief priests, the leaders of the Jews. They know in their hearts to ensure that Jesus has not done anything that's worthy of death.

And yet they're determined to see him crucified. But their problem is they're not able to do it. But they need Pilate to condemn him before he can be executed.

[7 : 05] And they try all sorts of ways to achieve that. They start by accusing Jesus of planning rebellion, of claiming to be a king, of going against Caesar. When Pilate ultimately pours scorn on that, they change their accusation to it becomes a religious one, saying he's broken their law by blaspheming and claiming to be the son of God.

Ultimately, they put pressure on Pilate through a thinly veiled threat to his job, maybe even to his life. And they're even willing to say they have no king but Caesar, which in itself is a blasphemy because their king is God.

They too are pathetic and powerless. And standing above all this is Jesus. They're meekly submitting to everything that's given to him, but doing it with dignity, doing it knowing that what he is doing is God's will.

So as I say, we're going to come at the end and think particularly about Jesus. We'll also think a bit about the motives of the high priests and of Pilate and how they might apply to us.

But I want to just take a few minutes to walk through the story, walk through the narrative, because I think it's quite important that we understand it. If you were here last Sunday, you may remember that Archie took us through the first parts of Jesus' trials.

[8 : 29] There was one before the high priests, and then he was brought into Pilate and stood trial there. And Archie described it as having a number of scenes in it.

Because it was Passover time, the Jews didn't want to go into Pilate's palace, where the trial was taking place, and become richly unclean. So they stood outside, and Pilate shuttled backwards and forwards between his court inside and the courtyard outside, where the people were.

There were three scenes last week. The first of them were Pilate was trying to establish the charge. The second where he was interrogating Jesus, and they had the discussion about kingship and about truth.

And then the third one, where Pilate made an attempt to persuade the crowd to release Jesus in the traditional way that someone was released at Passover time, and they chose Barabbas.

Today we have four more scenes, two outside the palace, and two inside it. And the first of them, if you've got your Bible, is in verses 1 to 3.

[9 : 38] And we're inside the palace, and Pilate is having Jesus flawed. I've given this one the heading, inhumanity, because that's what it is, isn't it?

Pilate believes that Jesus is innocent. He's tried him, he's talked with him, he's heard the accusations against him, and he can find nothing that Jesus has done wrong.

And yet, he has him flogged, and he releases him to the soldiers to mock him. There are two floggings of Jesus recorded in the Gospel narratives of the crucifixion.

This one in John, which is in the middle of the trial, and then in Mark's Gospel, there's a flogging after the trial, before Jesus is taken away to be crucified. Now, that second flogging was terribly severe.

In fact, many people apparently didn't survive it. It was normal before a crucifixion, I think probably to make sure that the person being crucified wasn't too long on the cross, that they died relatively quickly.

[10:45] Probably this flogging wasn't quite as severe, but nevertheless very brutal. Maybe more akin to what we sometimes read about in the Middle East when people endure punishment floggings, that kind of thing, really brutal, really painful, blood flowing everywhere, but not life-threatening at that point.

But Pilate has the innocent Jesus flogged. And then the soldiers have their fun. They twist together the thorns to make a crown more agony for Jesus.

They put a purple robe in mockery, mocking his kingship, and they come up and say, Hail, King of the Jews, and they slap him in the face, I suppose, just to demonstrate how powerless this king is. Utterly no justice here. Nothing that is justified in terms of what happens to Jesus. And we might ask, well, why does Pilate do it?

If Pilate really believes that Jesus is innocent, why does he allow this to happen to him instead of just releasing him? Well, the most likely explanation is that Pilate is hoping to win the sympathy of the Jewish crowd for Jesus.

[12:02] To be able to say to them, hasn't he suffered enough? I've made an example of him. He clearly isn't a threat to the power of Rome. There's no reason for me to get him crucified.

Have I not done enough to him? And I think that's probably why he did it and why he then brought Jesus out to show the crowd.

So he brings Jesus out and he shows him to the crowd, says, Here is the man. Behold the man. And immediately the crowd, the chief priests and the officials, shout, crucify.

Pilate's plan has not worked. He brought Jesus out, his back streaming with blood, blood flowing from his head and his cheeks bruised from the slapping, that silly robe on him in mockery.

And he thinks that will win the sympathy of the crowd. And it almost does the opposite. They're even more determined to crucify him. And they come up with, as I said, with an alternative accusation.

[13:07] So they seem to have realised this accusation that Jesus is a revolutionary, is dangerous to Rome. That's not going to wash. Here's something that Pilate can't argue with.

Let's hit him with our own laws, with the Jewish laws, with our religious laws. Now the Romans, anywhere they occupied, were very aware of the sensitivities of the religious views of the occupied lands.

And they tried, where possible, to accommodate them. So the Jews thought, well, here's a plan that we can put into effect. And what Pilate should have done was to say, well, these are your laws.

They're not the laws of Rome. I still find Jesus innocent. He maybe tried to do that a bit obliquely by saying to him, well, you take him and crucify him then if he's broken your law.

Knowing full well that the Jews couldn't do that because they didn't have the authority. But what's happened here, ultimately, is that the Jews, their plan has backfired too.

[14:13] Because it says, Pilate was even more afraid when he heard this. Why was that? Pilate was a Roman, of course, or a Roman citizen. And Romans believed in many different gods.

They believed also that on occasion, gods might come down as humans. And I think in this situation, Pilate is really worried that maybe Jesus is who he says he is and who the Jews are accusing him of.

Is he a son of the gods because they believed in plural gods? Is he a son of the gods come to earth? And what will happen to Pilate if he kills someone who's one of the gods?

What dreadful fate is going to befall him as a result of that? So we have the next scene then where Pilate goes back in and he talks again with Jesus.

And he asks him first, where do you come from? Now I'm sure Pilate wasn't expecting the answer in Nazareth to that. He was asking a spiritual question. He was asking Jesus effectively, are you really a god?

[15:21] And Jesus doesn't reply, maybe because he's already given the answer. Back in chapter 18 that we looked at last week, Jesus says, my kingdom is not from this world.

So he was admitting the claim that he was a king, but saying he was a spiritual, a heavenly kingdom rather than an earthly one. So Jesus doesn't answer Pilate.

And Pilate then pushes and says, don't you realize I have power either to free you or to crucify you? And Jesus gives him a reply. That gives him two replies to that.

One is to say, you would have no power unless it was given to you from above. Now again, from above, I don't think means Rome. Pilate would have no power if it wasn't given to him by Rome. But Jesus means it's come from heaven. And then he says, the one who handed me over to you is guilty of a greater sin. Who was it who handed Jesus over to Pilate?

[16:23] I don't think he's talking about Judas here. He's talking particularly about Caiaphas, the high priest, and the chief priests of the Jews generally. They are the ones who bear the greatest guilt for this.

And as Pilate hears that, Pilate appears to be convinced by it. Because as he goes out again, John says that he made continuing efforts to get Jesus freed.

He wanted to be able to release Jesus. He just never could quite bring himself to do it. And as he goes out again and says, here is your king, and the Jews shall take him away and crucify him.

They also say, if you let this man go, you are no friend of Caesar. That's in verse 12, if you're following. Anyone who claims to be a king opposes Caesar.

Now, to understand this, we need to know a little bit about Pilate's situation. Pilate was the governor of Judea. In many ways, he wasn't a very good governor.

[17:29] There was quite a lot of rebellion during his time, which Pilate crushed quite brutally. But even with that, he wouldn't be well regarded in Rome if his province was seen as being a bit unruly.

On top of that, his neighbor Herod, who was in charge in Galilee, was highly regarded. He was quite in with the people in power in Rome.

So, on that point, if two things were a bit shaky for Pilate, and the third thing was the house of Annas, the high priestly house of Israel, was very wealthy and influential.

And they were quite capable of going to Rome and saying, look, this man Pilate, he's not doing a good job. He's even letting someone who stands against Rome go free.

And Pilate would have been worried not just for his job, but probably also for his life, because Caesar Tiberius, who was the emperor at this time, was notorious, as many despots are, was notorious for his jealousy and for putting to death anyone who showed even the slightest sign of not being behind him.

[18:41] So, Pilate is feeling here that his life, certainly his job, is at stake. And ultimately, that is more important to him than doing justice.

He believed firmly that Jesus is innocent. But at the end of the day, what he's most interested in is his own welfare, his own safety, his own job.

He really is, in that sense, pretty pathetic and powerless as he gives in to the chief priests and the rulers. And so, he's a final effort to talk about Jesus as the king, and then he releases him to be crucified.

We'll follow that over the next couple of weeks. Let's go back, though, as we come towards the end, and let's just think about, again, a bit about the characters in the story.

And we'll take them in the reverse order from what we looked at them previously. So, first of all, we have the chief priests, the leaders of the Israelites.

[19:47] What do we make of them? Well, their minds were totally closed to the truth, weren't they? They had managed to convince themselves, or at least to try and convince others, that Jesus was a threat to Rome, but also to them.

He was a threat to them because he exposed their hypocrisy. And whatever happened, they were not willing to yield one inch in their determination to see him crucified.

Jesus made them uncomfortable. He exposed their hypocrisy. And they wanted rid of him, whatever happened. I think we can put a modern context on that too.

There are a lot of people around today who Jesus makes feel very uncomfortable and would really not want anything to do with him. They would rather he wasn't there.

They would rather forget about him. I'm not talking, by and large, about religious people. Certainly secularists, many of them, would be like that. Let's just get rid of Jesus. We don't want anything to do with him.

[20 : 55] Perhaps someone here is a bit like that. Jesus makes you feel uncomfortable. You don't know what to make of him, but you just want to blank him out, not have anything to do with him.

If you're like that, can I urge you not to close your mind the way that the chief priests and the Jewish leaders did. Read one of the books we've got in the foyer, perhaps particularly read the John's Gospels that are there.

Come to them with an open mind and read sincerely looking for the truth. Who is this man, Jesus? What happened to him? What did he do?

What relevance does he have today? See whether it rings true as it has for so many others here.

Perhaps I could also say to those of you who are Christians, who are followers of Jesus, you may have friends you think are like that.

They are never going to accept Jesus. They're so opposed to everything that you stand for, to any kind of faith, they are never going to become Christians.

[22 : 00] Well, can I encourage you keep praying for them and keep your witness to them active.

We don't know whose heart God is going to soften and it is often those who appear most opposed to Christian faith and to the Lord Jesus actually who come to be broken and moved by the Spirit and come to trust in him.

Keep praying for your friends or your family that God will draw them to himself. Secondly, in this we have Pilate.

Pilate, the one who seemed to be in power but actually wasn't. Pilate, the man who wanted to do what was right but actually at the end of the day because of his own self-interest he just couldn't bring himself to do that.

Perhaps people like here, perhaps someone here is in that position too. You've looked at Jesus. You see someone who's attractive. Perhaps you believe even that he's a son of God that he died on the cross for our sins.

And yet you've not taken that final step of trusting in him and committing your life to him. Perhaps it would mean too many changes to your lifestyle.

[23 : 20] Or perhaps you're worried about what others, your family, your friends or whoever might say about it and it's just you feel too much for you to do. Again today can I urge you look at Jesus, look at all that he has done for you.

If he has done so much for you then you must be willing to trust him and to commit your life to him. Yes, there may be difficulties, it's not easy always being a Christian but ultimately it's worthwhile as our sins are forgiven, as we have a relationship with God as we know our future is secure.

And again if you're a Christian you've got family or friends who you think are in that kind of position again keep praying for them, keep your witness consistent to them, help them to see in you that it is worthwhile following Jesus in spite of any sacrifices you might need to make.

And let's end with, as I said, we would with Jesus. Fix your eyes on him, behold the man says Pilate, behold your king.

Don't you notice in last week's reading and this week's how often the kingship of Jesus is referred to? I think 11 times it talks about the king or the kingdom or whatever.

[24 : 44] 11 times often an accusation, sometimes said in mockery, perhaps said in sarcasm by Pilate as he says, behold your king.

And yet John is wanting very much to direct our thoughts to the fact that Jesus is a true king. He is the king of the universe.

He might not have looked like it but his kingdom is not of this world. And it's actually in Jesus' suffering we read in John's gospel that we really see his glory.

he says, if I be lifted up, that's on the cross, I will draw all men to me. He talks about being glorified. And in this scene of weakness, which we'll see continued over the next week or so, in this scene of apparent weakness, we see actually Jesus the king being glorified.

[25 : 43] And one day, one day, and it may not be very long, Jesus will return and everyone will see that he is the true king. He will return to reign in his rightful place.

We need today to fix our eyes on Jesus the king and to own him as our king. As Graham Kendrick said, meekness and majesty, manhood and deity in perfect harmony, the man who is God. But there's more than that. If you look at the end of the passage today, towards the end of the passage and towards the beginning of last week's passage, Archie took us through on the trial before Pilate, there are references to the Passover feast.

It was Passover time. And John again is wanting to present to us Jesus as our Passover lamb. The one who bled.

We see the bleeding today in the flogging in the crown of thorns and the one who ultimately would bleed and die on the cross. He was the one who willingly gave himself as God's sacrifice for us.

[26 : 55] Enduring the pain, enduring the scorn, ultimately taking God's penalty for sin as he was separated from his father on the cross.

We need to look at him and see the king, the king of kings, but we also need to see the perfect lamb of God, the sacrifice given for us.

And as we do, as we see these two things in Jesus, we should trust in him and we should fall down and worship him. This Easter lets all of us make sure that we understand who Jesus is, what he's done, that our trust is in him and that we truly worship him as our king, as our God.

I want to finish by reading some words that Peter wrote in his first letter in chapter 2. We'll then have a short pause for reflection and then I'll pray and I'll hand back to Simon to lead us in our closing worship.

Verses from 1 Peter chapter 2 from verse 22. He's writing about Jesus and it says, he committed no sin and no deceit was found in his mouth.

[28 : 06] When they harrowed their insults at him, he did not retaliate. When he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly.

He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross. So that we might die to sins and live for righteousness, by his wounds you have been healed.

For you were like sheep going astray, but now you have returned to the shepherd and overseer of your souls. Let's just think on these words and on the Lord Jesus for a few seconds and then I'll lead in prayer.

Lord Jesus, we thank you for your sacrifice for us. We thank you that you were willing to go all through what you suffered before Pilate, the indignity, the mocking and scorn, the agony of the flogging, the crown of thorns placed on your head.

And ultimately you were willing to go all the way to the cross and to take our place there. And we recognise that you did it knowing everything that was going to happen to you and determined to do God's will.

[29 : 24] That what happened was not some kind of accident, it was the will of God being fulfilled, albeit through sinful men. We thank you Lord Jesus for all that you have done for us.

Help us to trust in you. Help us to love you. Help us to worship you. Help us to live our lives for you. We thank you for our time together this morning.

We commit ourselves to you. In Jesus' name. Amen.