

**“HUMILIATED (Mark 55)”**  
*Mark 15:1-20*

This story of Mark's which follows the three years of Jesus' ministry has given us some amazing glimpses of the power and authority of Jesus. As we have read through the first fourteen chapters and now approach the last two, we have been given a portrait of a man whose life has been outstanding in every way. Although we don't read of it in Mark's account, Matthew, Luke and John tell us that his birth was heralded by angels and accompanied by all kinds of strange goings on. Mark takes up the story as Jesus begins his itinerant ministry, firstly in the northern region of Galilee and then in and on the road to Jerusalem.

We have read of a man who exercised power over nature, calming storms and providing bread for thousands from a couple of small loaves. We have seen him defeating the forces of evil as he has driven demons from the bodies and minds of the possessed and has outfaced the very Devil himself in the encounter in the desert. As he has preached and taught in synagogues, on hillsides, by the lake and in the Temple itself, crowds have hung on his every word and recognised his awesome authority. He has debated and argued with the people's leaders, the most powerful religious and political leaders in the land, getting the better of them each time and reducing his arrogant questioners to silent fuming. He has been noisily and enthusiastically cheered as he has ridden into Jerusalem on the back of a donkey. And he has pointed towards a bright future for all people as the Kingdom of God, which he has so insistently proclaimed, is inaugurated in his own life and ministry. What a great leader! What a powerful king! What an invincible Messiah!

And yet now we see him totally humiliated. Try and forget what you know about the end of story. Imagine you are one of Mark's first readers, discovering this story for the first time. You can see there aren't many pages left in the book, so the triumphant climax must be about to happen, but instead we read of a man who is defeated, broken, at the mercy of the very people who he had said were finished. His confident claims to be the Messiah are shown to be so much hot air – just like all the other so-called Messiahs who tried to worm their way into the people's affections. It's over.

The Jewish leaders, about whom he has been so harsh, now have him just where they want him. He is bound and led away from the High Priest's house – the man who claimed to lead others, the man who has previously walked serenely through the groups of those wanting to kill him, the man who has identified himself with God Almighty, is now a pitiful figure, unable to exercise any freedom whatsoever. And he is led off to the Roman procurator, the governor Pontius Pilatus. That doesn't bode well, either.

Mark's portrait of the governor gives the impression of a vacillating crowd-pleaser, a harmless Roman functionary caught up in circumstances beyond his control. This insignificant official, doing his time in a troublesome backwater of the Roman Empire – who has nevertheless achieved the distinction of being the only person apart from Mary who is mentioned in the historic creeds of the Christian Church – was actually a cruel and barbaric character. He had ordered more than one massacre of Jews during his time in Judea. He had constantly provoked the Jewish people since the idolatrous display of Roman gods and pagan banners which heralded his arrival in the province. Contemporary historians write of his brutality and his lack of sensitivity to the people he was supposed to be governing. In fact, not long after this episode he was summoned to Rome to answer for his conduct before Tiberius Caesar (who unfortunately happened to die before Pilate arrived).

Jesus is led before this man and stands in almost total silence in his court. He utters one ambivalent sentence and then the voice that calmed the storm, the voice that rebuked the demons, the voice that proclaimed the coming Kingdom is silent. It's pretty certain that this hearing was held in public, probably in the courtyard of Pilate's residence, so here is Jesus, the so-called King of the Jews, the self-proclaimed Messiah, bound and speechless between the might of Rome and the baying of his own people and their leaders. Humiliated.

But there is just a chance that he might be freed. Pilate is reminded of his prerogative of freeing one of the people held in prison at this time. Mark refers to it as a custom, but apart from the mention of it in the Gospels there is no evidence at all for a custom of this kind. There is, however, evidence that Roman governors from time to time granted amnesty to prisoners (although not in these circumstances), and Pilate here sees an opportunity to get out of the situation in which he finds himself – he has a prisoner who appears to have done nothing criminal for which he can be sentenced and a very hostile crowd who are clearly out for this man's blood. So he offers them the choice between Jesus the Christ and Jesus Bar-Abbas (we know his first name was Jesus from other sources). Which one do they want freed? This apparently inoffensive Galilean, whose only crime seems to have been upsetting the religious sensibilities of this volatile mob? Or a criminal, a political terrorist who has committed banditry and murder in open defiance of the might of Rome? Pilate, in offering the choice, clearly expects that Jesus the Christ will be the one to be released. But the mob, who sang his praises to the skies only five days earlier, now yell for his death. Pilate puts political expediency before principle (it was ever thus!) and releases the terrorist. Jesus the Christ, the spotless Son of God, finds himself in second place behind the murderous bandit. Humiliated.

And as Pilate bows to the will of the mob, he sends Jesus off to be crucified – but first orders that he should be flogged, which, when you stop to think about it, is a totally unnecessary punishment. But once again Pilate is sitting very loose to Roman justice. Jesus has not been condemned. He has not been found guilty. As Paul later protested, flogging someone who has not been formally found guilty is a clear breach of Roman law. Jesus is not even considered worthy of common justice and he is once again led away. This time his cloak is ripped off and he is chained to a post in the middle of the courtyard. Two Roman soldiers, one working from each side, flay his bare back with whips made of leather into which were embedded sharp pieces of bone and metal. As each stroke landed, the shards would cut into the flesh, ripping it off as the whips were pulled away. Many people actually died from being flogged in this way. Here is Jesus, whose ministry has involved making people whole, slumped in the courtyard before a crowd whose hatred of him is almost tangible, with his own body being ripped to pieces by a couple of sadistic soldiers. And he cannot do a thing about it. Humiliated.

But he survives. His bloody body, now looking like a side of meat hanging on a butcher's stall, is dragged off to the cells where he will await his execution. And on his torn and raw back they put a purple cloth to act as a royal cloak. One of the soldiers has cut and twisted some branches from a thorn bush to make a rudimentary crown. It wasn't a couple of twigs off a brambles bush, but a supple branch from a bush with stiff thorns over an inch long. As it was pressed on to his head the blood would have poured out and down his face to mingle with the clotting blood from the wounds on his shoulders and back. There he is, the King who had lived in the most unimaginable splendour, who left behind the glory and majesty of heaven to live as a human being in our broken and hurting world, now dressed in a cruel parody of earthly kingship, his mortal blood soaking into the dirty old robe the soldiers had found in a corner of the cell. Humiliated.

Caught up in the atmosphere of scorn and brutality, the soldiers then start to hit Jesus and spit on him. Then they relent and in mock homage bow down to him and pretend to offer him their respect and reverence. Whether they get fed up with it or a superior officer comes in and tells them to stop, they eventually give up and prepare Jesus for his execution. The purple robe, which by now would be beginning to stick to the wounds on his back is ripped off, like a sticking plaster from a raw knee, and they put his own cloak back on ready for the long walk to the place where he will be executed. The Son of God, once worshipped by angels, who had won the respect of those who had heard his preaching and whose authority was so often admired, is now mocked and scorned by common soldiers. Humiliated.

Of course, some of those reading this for the first time might well have had a nodding acquaintance with the Hebrew Scriptures (our Old Testament) – and some of you might have as well – so they might have heard the distant tinkling of bells in the back of their minds as they recalled what the prophet Isaiah wrote several centuries before Mark. In the fifty-second and -third chapters of his prophecy he writes about a

figure who has become known as “The Suffering Servant” and who is considered by many to be the Messiah. What we read there concerns a person who is utterly humiliated and who is treated very much as Jesus is here. Listen to these verses – *Isaiah 52:14; 53:2b,3,7-9*. And if you look carefully at the rest of those chapters, you’ll find that there was actually some point to it all.

Jesus was humiliated for you. All the cruelty and barbarity which he had to undergo was for you. He took those beatings and floggings for you. He was mocked and mistreated for you. It was somehow all part of God’s plan to give you an opportunity to experience the benefits of the Kingdom of God, for you to be involved in his plan to restore creation to what he wanted it to be. There’s more to come – as we all know, because we’ve read to the end of the book – but this morning, as you eat and drink this bread and wine, don’t do it lightly. Remember what Jesus went through, reflect on his humiliation. He did it because he loves you. I don’t know why. It’s a love beyond my understanding, but it’s nonetheless real. Thank God!

(House group notes follow on next page)

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The Jesus whom Mark has described for us in his story is one who has exercised power over nature, who has defeated the forces of evil, who has outfaced the Devil himself, who has taught with authority, who has debated with the finest scholars and most powerful officials in the land, who has been cheered as he has entered Jerusalem. He is an awesome figure for whom nothing seems to be impossible.

And yet we know see him totally humiliated. He is bound and led away. There is no opportunity for escape. His followers have left him. He seems to have nothing whatsoever to commend him. Pilate (whom we know from other sources to have been a brutal ruler – procurator or governor) manages to get only one short sentence out of him before he releases a convicted murderer instead of Jesus at the insistence of a baying mob.

Jesus is then led off to be flogged, in clear contravention of Roman law. The flogging was a horrific form of punishment which would have left Jesus' back raw and ripped to shreds. After that he is mocked by the soldiers in a parody of royal reverence and respect, involving a purple cloak and a crown of long, sharp thorns.

This whole episode serves to emphasise the utter humiliation of Jesus. But there are clear echoes of Isaiah's prophecy. Look at *Isaiah 52:13 – 53:12* and identify the parallels between the prophet's description and Mark's account (see question 4 below). The words of Isaiah make it clear that this humiliation was part of the plan which God had to enable us sinners to be redeemed. For that, we praise God.

**QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION**

1. Try to imagine that you are reading Mark's gospel for the first time and that you do not know the ending. Having read the first 14 chapters, how do you feel about what is happening here?
2. A crucial factor in what happens here is the behaviour of the crowd. Have you ever been in a similar situation? Why do crowds behave like this?
3. What do you think Jesus means by his reply to Pilate (v3)?
4. In what ways today is Jesus mocked and humiliated? Why do you think that is?
5. Identify the parallels between Isaiah's words in chapters 52,53 and Mark's account here.
6. How does this passage make you feel about what Jesus has done for you?
7. Do you have any new insights into this passage you'd like to share with others in the group?

If you have an opportunity (and think you could stomach it) watch Mel Gibson's film *The Passion of The Christ*, which graphically depicts the events of this chapter in some detail.