

**“FOLLOWING THE KING – 84”**

*Matthew 26:57-75*

Well, there's no way back now. Jesus has been led away from the Garden of Gethsemane. He has been betrayed by one of his closest friends. Most of his companions have run away. And he is taken under armed guard to the house of the chief priest, Caiaphas. The only one of the disciples who is now getting anywhere close to sticking with Jesus is Peter – and he is following at a distance. It's interesting to see here what the two men give away of themselves when they're under pressure.

As we saw last time, although he is surrounded by armed men, Jesus is still very much in control. The authorities, on the other hand, seem to be in a bit of a panic. Their hastily convened meeting in Caiaphas's home is ample testimony to that. What happens here is illegitimate on a number of counts. Firstly, a trial could not be held during the hours of darkness. This was for the same reason that you are not allowed to hold a wedding ceremony after sunset today – recognition. If it's dark there are issues of identification, and particularly if it is a capital trial (which this would have been), there is the danger that the wrong person could be sentenced to death. Secondly, the trial had to be held in the appropriate place, which was the court room – not in the High Priest's home. Thirdly, the witnesses had to agree. This was a fundamental tenet of Jewish law, which was in place to prevent miscarriages of justice. And it cannot be a preliminary hearing before a trial the next day, as this was the time of the Passover Festival, so a trial would not normally have been held the next day. All these irregularities tend to point towards a great deal of desperation on the part of the authorities.

Jesus, though, keeps quiet to start with. In v62 the High Priest asks Jesus to explain himself, to offer some kind of defence in the face of the various trumped up charges that are being brought against him. Eventually he puts a direct question to him and asks him if he is indeed “*the Christ, the Son of God*”. Only then does Jesus reply and finally we have from him a clear statement of who he believes he is. He uses three titles to communicate something of who he is. Here – he's not shouting down the forces of evil in the demonically possessed, he's not showing his mastery over the forces of nature, he's not rebuking the leaders of the people, but he's at his most vulnerable, standing before the Jewish authorities, bereft of friends and support, probably bound or chained – here Jesus proclaims his true status.

**1. THE CHRIST**

Firstly Jesus acknowledges that he is, indeed, the Christ, the Messiah. It's a word that we so often attach to the name of Jesus that we lose sight of the fact that this is not a name, but a title. Jesus the Christ, the Anointed One, the one chosen by God and appointed to bring the good news of God's new Kingdom into the world.

This is the title of Jesus that is most often used in the New Testament. It is a title given him by men and women. On more than one occasion in the gospels there have been reports that people thought of him as the Messiah – most notably Peter’s confession in *16:16*. It is a title that offers hope for humanity. The Messiah is one who comes to deliver, to liberate, to redeem. It was – and still is – a very potent title for the Jewish people. They longed for someone to come and restore things to the state that God originally intended. And for the people who gathered in the High Priest’s home that night, the acknowledgement of this title would have seemed very awkward coming from the lips of one who was so obviously to their eyes in a position of total weakness and defeat.

For the Jewish people who had for so long looked out for a Messiah, three things would have been particularly in their minds as far as this kind of talk went. The Messiah was firstly a **Davidic King**, someone from the line of David who would rule with the same kind of glory and authority that he did. Many of the prophecies in their scriptures (our Old Testament) pointed towards this figure. But they also pointed towards a **Suffering Servant**, especially in the words of the prophet Isaiah. And in the amazing visions of Daniel, the Messiah was also seen as a **Heavenly Judge**. With hindsight, of course, we can see just how that has come true, but these men could not see that as Jesus stood before them apparently tamed and desolate.

Jesus, though, is about to demonstrate the truth of the claim that he is the Messiah as he suffers on the cross for the liberation of all humanity from the power of sin and death and hell. He has shown his kingly status as he has proclaimed and demonstrated that good news of the kingdom of God. And he will return, as we shall see in a moment, as a divine judge to put right all that has gone wrong with God’s good creation. This title of the Christ, given and used by men and women, refers to a figure of hope and optimism.

## 2. SON OF GOD

Jesus also acknowledges that he is the “*Son of God*”. For the members of the Sanhedrin who are listening to Jesus, this is the ultimate blasphemy. But this is not a title that Jesus has taken for himself, nor one that has been conferred on him by men. This is the title that has been given him by God himself and, paradoxically, is recognised by the forces of evil. As Jesus’ ministry begins, the voice of God is heard at his baptism (*3:17*). And again God speaks it as Jesus is glorified before his three friends at the Transfiguration. Curiously, no human being ever calls him the Son of God, but the demons – the supernatural beings with whom Jesus joins battle for the souls and bodies of people in Matthew’s story – they recognise him for who he is: their deadliest enemy.

And that is because of the intimacy he has with God. The title of Son of God says something about the closeness that there is between Jesus and the Father. The mystery of this relationship has intrigued men and women down through the centuries, but whatever else it is, Jesus is so closely, so intimately linked to God that it is as if they are one. And so Jesus becomes a figure of obedience, one who is prepared to do the will of his Father whatever the cost.

And because of that obedience, he is also a figure of salvation. As Son of God, as one who is entirely devoted and obedient to the Father, Jesus can win for us the salvation that we all need. He and he alone is able to save us from the dreadful consequences of our wrong choices and selfish decisions. He alone, as Son of God, can ensure that we can stand before God on judgement day and be assured that our eternal future with God is guaranteed.

No wonder the High Priest is so angry! No wonder he rips his robes in a dramatic gesture of anger, frustration and sadness. Others may have claimed to be the Messiah and offered to give hope to an oppressed people. Others may have taken the mantle of a King like David or a suffering and misunderstood servant, but no-one would have had the gall, the sheer effrontery to suggest that they might be the Son of God and offer to mediate between humanity and their Creator. After all, that was the job of the priests. But that's just who our Jesus is. Our obedient Saviour who ensures our access into God's presence and assures us of our eternal destiny with him.

### **3. SON OF MAN**

But there's a third title that Jesus takes for himself here. The Messiah is a title conferred by men. The Son of God is a title conferred by God himself. Now Jesus uses once again his own favourite title – "*Son of Man*". Of all the titles given to Jesus in the New Testament, Christ is the most frequently used. Son of Man is the third most often used and in almost every case (I think bar two), it is used by Jesus himself.

Now, some may see this as a title that complements the Son of God designation, a way of emphasising that Jesus is fully divine and fully human. In other words, Jesus is stressing that he identifies with us in our frail and vulnerable humanity. But the overwhelming opinion of scholars and commentators down through the ages is that this a special title taken from the Son of Man figure in the Old Testament. This is language with which his audience in the High Priest's house would have been far more familiar than we are. The Son of Man is an especially strong motif in the prophecy of Daniel, which we mentioned earlier (particularly *Daniel 7*), and he appears many times in Jewish literature outside the Bible.

This title would refer to a heavenly being, a transcendent figure who will eventually come to earth in triumph and act as judge of all humanity. That's why Jesus uses this image of the Son of Man "*sitting at the right hand of the mighty one and coming on the clouds of heaven.*" The idea of sitting on God's right hand is from *Psalms 110:1* and it further strengthens the claim that Jesus is the Son of God as well. But he comes on the clouds as the ultimate Messiah figure, the one who will eventually set the world to rights and pronounce judgement on the forces of evil and all who follow them.

So here, in this hastily convened kangaroo court, Jesus stands apparently defeated. He seems to be at the mercy of his human opposition, those who have dogged his steps and criticised his ministry from the very beginning. It seems that they have triumphed and the forces of evil have had their way. But at the moment of his greatest vulnerability and weakness, Jesus declares his true identity and points to his ultimate mission. He takes upon himself titles given him by men, by God and by himself to declare that his is a mission of hope, salvation and judgement.

Those who watch him – no doubt incredulous at the arrogance of their victim – have no idea how what he declares can ever come to pass. But we look back, back through the lenses of crucifixion, resurrection and ascension, back through the pages of the New Testament, back through our own personal experience, to see a figure who stands at the crossroads of history. This is the man who stands above all powers and dominions, who loves us above all other things, who is at the heart of our faith. This is Jesus – the Christ, the Son of God and the Son of Man. This is the one we worship.

And as the story moves on, the focus shifts from Jesus to Peter. Peter has followed Jesus here, more out of curiosity than bravery, and finds himself in the courtyard of the house, where he warms himself by the brazier that is burning there. There's a crowd of other curious onlookers and some of the High Priest's staff. While Jesus is inside, facing the most powerful Jewish leaders and calmly responding to their questions and threats, here is Peter, out in the courtyard, scared stiff by a servant girl's questions.

As Peter tries to melt into the background, he finds that he suddenly attracts the attention of a servant girl who starts badgering him with questions, and others join in. He is clearly frightened by the turn events are taking and seeks to distance himself from anything that might lead to his being treated as Jesus is. And remember, this is only a few hours after he has declared his intention to stick by Jesus and never let him down – even to the point of death. But look at his reaction when he is put under pressure with these three questions.

**1. “YOU WERE WITH HIM” (v69)**

It might have been a half remembered glimpse of the group coming into the High Priest’s courtyard that sets the girl off on this question. Or maybe she is curious as to why Peter is behaving so furtively. Whatever the initial reason for her question, there was something that marked Peter out as a companion of Jesus. She knows that Jesus came in with a group of people; possibly she even knows that he came into Jerusalem a few days earlier with a band of followers. So she puts it to him that he was actually with Jesus. But Peter is vehement in his denial. He says he has no idea what she’s on about and retreats into what he thinks is the safety of the gateway. There’s no way he wants to be identified with the man who is at present being set up by the authorities.

**2. “SURELY YOU ARE ONE OF THEM” (v73)**

Another girl asks the same question, then others join in. “Yes, you are. You’re one of those people who were with Jesus. You’re one of them.” It’s always helpful to label people as “one of us” or “one of them”: it makes life so much simpler, whatever the categories: you know what to think about someone who is not one of us but one of them. Peter is now thought to be one of the group. He keeps company not only with Jesus, but with his followers. He’s implicated in it all – whatever’s going on in the house, Peter’s caught up in it. Another denial. Once more Peter is not willing to be lumped together with people who may turn out to be losers if this trial really does go pear-shaped. There is no way in which he wants to be identified with Jesus’ followers.

**3. “YOU SPEAK LIKE THEM” (v73)**

Although the region of Galilee is relatively close to Jerusalem, in those days there weren’t that many people who travelled between the two places, except at festivals like the one which was going on at this time. People from “up north” were just as easily identifiable by their speech then as they are now. It was known that Jesus and his followers came from “up north” in Galilee, so the now suspicious crowd in the courtyard see Peter’s accent and dialect as further indication that he is part of the Jesus group. In the works of contemporary writers there are many references to the urban population of Jerusalem making fun of the accents of Galileans, just as today comedians can get cheap laughs by mimicking Geordies, Scousers and people from the Black Country or rural Somerset.

But Peter comes out with his third and strongest denial, actually calling down curses on himself to emphasise his point. And then, as dawn begins to break, he hears a cock crowing and Jesus’ prophetic

words (v34) suddenly come back to him and he bitterly regrets what he has said, bursting into tears with the shame and the stress of the moment.

How might we respond? We know what happened. We know Jesus is alive. We know we have the power and confidence of the Holy Spirit. But we still find ourselves prevaricating, don't we? We all have things that identify us as followers of Jesus, even if we might try to hide them from others at times. When other people pick up on the fact that we are Christians, how do we react? What is our response? However much you might try to conceal the fact that you're a follower of Jesus Christ (and I must admit, I'm not entirely sure how you can claim to be a follower if you keep it secret), there will be tell-tale signs.

People will say "*You were with him*" as they see you coming out of church or disappearing off on Sunday morning in your best clothes. Maybe you have a fish badge or a cross that, however discreetly you may try to hide it, gives you away.

People will say "*You're one of them*" when you're spotted out with someone they definitely know to be a Christian, or a Christian friend rings you at work and leaves a message about the prayer meeting. You are invited out by a colleague or a neighbour and you have to decline because you're already committed to something at the church. The company you keep can give you away as well.

People will say "*You speak like them*" when you use an odd phrase or some little quirk of Christian vocabulary, when you stand out at your workplace or sports club because you don't swear as often as everyone else.

How will you respond? Will it be something along the lines of "Well, I only go now and again" or "I just go to keep my partner and kids happy" or "I try to do my best, like we all do" – some bland and inoffensive response that gives the impression that being a Christian is an odd little habit you have that doesn't really affect your life? You don't really want to get into a discussion about it and you certainly don't want anyone thinking they can take the mick out of you for it. It's much safer just to deny that it's anything important, isn't it?

Or you do reply, "Well, since you mention it, yes, Jesus has transformed my life in all kinds of ways, and he's the focus and goal of all that I do and all that I am. And he can do the same for you too." That's what Peter was getting at when he wrote those words in *1 Peter 3:15*.

When Peter realised what he'd done there in the High Priest's courtyard, he broke down and wept. As it happened, there was plenty of time for restoration. Despite this and other failures, Peter was forgiven by Jesus and commissioned to take on the work of building the church that Jesus saw as the herald of his kingdom's arrival. He had time to bounce back and he was used in amazing ways by God.

But we don't know how much time we have left. When we lose an opportunity to witness for Jesus, we can't be sure how many more opportunities there will be. We cannot be sure if that person to whom we should have spoken more positively about our faith will get another chance to respond. And, rather chillingly, Jesus has said that if we're not prepared to speak out for him, then he won't speak out for us when we stand before his Father at the end of our life. Remember what he said in *Matthew 10:32,33*: "*Whoever acknowledges me before others, I will also acknowledge before my Father in heaven. But whoever disowns me before others, I will disown before my Father in heaven.*" What's your response? You have a Saviour who was prepared to stand up for you in the face of enormous opposition, who was ready to die for you. And now you have the benefit of hindsight: you know what happened. Will you stand up for what you believe?

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This may be a way of emphasising that Jesus is fully divine and fully human. More likely it is a special title taken from the Son of Man figure in the Old Testament (look, for example, at *Daniel 7*), a transcendent figure who will eventually come to earth in triumph and act as judge of all humanity.

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**Questions for discussion**

1. Why do you think Jesus initially remained silent?
2. Do any of these three titles of Jesus particularly strike you as appropriate? Why?
3. What are the kinds of questions people ask us today? How would people know you are a follower of Jesus?

4. Why do we sometimes try to hide our relationship with Jesus from other people? What gives you confidence to share your faith?