

**“FOLLOWING THE KING – 86”**

*Matthew 27:1-31*

It seems a little strange, perhaps, looking at the story of the trial and death of Jesus just after Easter, but it's where we've got up to in our journey through Matthew's Gospel. Having followed Jesus through his ministry in Galilee and now Jerusalem, having heard what he's had to say about the coming Kingdom of God, having watched as he's offered glimpses of that Kingdom to the desperate, the disadvantaged and the despairing, having seen the way in which Matthew has built him up to be the long-prophesied and long-awaited Kingly Messiah, we now witness him beaten and bound, at the mercy of the Jewish leaders, the Roman governor and the forces of evil. Is all that we have discovered about him now to be proved false? In the end, is this just a man, weak and vulnerable, as much a victim of fate as the next person? How can this be the King whom we now worship? Well, as we've said so many times already, we know the ending: we've read to the end of the book. There's still a cosmic twist in the tale. But the question still remains for all of us – and it's a question posed here by Pontius Pilate, the weak-willed but barbaric Roman Governor of this little province of the mighty Empire. He asks that question here in v22: “*What shall I do, then, with Jesus who is called Christ?*”

That's a question for us all, even now. What is our response to Jesus? What will we do with him? What effect will we allow him to have on our lives? There are all kinds of answers that we could give – some positive, some negative and many in between. What we cannot do, though, is ignore it. Whether this morning is the first time you've heard that question or the thousandth time, you've got to respond somehow. What are you going to do with Jesus? There are three examples here in the passage we've read this morning – three examples that we could easily adopt, but which could lead us away from Jesus rather than closer to him. Let's briefly reflect on each one of them in turn.

**1. JUDAS BETRAYED JESUS (vv1-10)**

We've already looked at the actual betrayal and how it came about. For whatever reason – and we can never really be sure what it was – Judas sold his teacher, master and friend for the price of a slave. He offered his services to the Jewish leaders and was entirely complicit in their capture and punishment of him. But now the awful horror of what he has done dawns on him. He knows what now lies in store for Jesus and recognises that he has “*betrayed innocent blood*” (v4a). He is filled with remorse and tries to atone for his deed by returning the blood money to the leaders. He has let his friend down. Unbeknown to him, he has also changed the course of history.

The leaders – whom we have already seen to be devious and cynical men – try to ignore it. They refuse to accept any responsibility for what Judas has done and so Judas, filled with remorse, goes off and hangs himself. His betrayal of Jesus has led to remorse, to regretting what he has done, but not, it seems, repentance, to asking forgiveness and resolving to put things right. Peter, as we've seen, also betrays Jesus and denies any knowledge of him, but is given the opportunity to repent and to be forgiven.

What did Judas do with Jesus? He betrayed him. And we can find ourselves in that position, too. In all kinds of ways we deny or betray Jesus. We let him down in the things we say – or don't say: in the things we do – or don't do: and in the attitudes we harbour. But, as Jesus showed with Peter, there is a way back if we are prepared to accept it, to move beyond remorse to repentance.

## **2. PILATE WENT ALONG WITH THE CROWD (vv11-26)**

Then, of course, there's Pilate himself – the man at the centre of this episode and the one who asks the question. I think Pilate is probably genuinely trying to get to the bottom of all this to start with. He'd like to get it sorted out, but soon loses interest and gives in to the pressure of those around him. He's under huge pressure from the hierarchy, from the Jewish leaders and their immediate supporters. He knows that they could easily get him punished by the Emperor if he doesn't do as they want. He knows that he has to keep the local leaders sweet if he is to continue in his post. In fact, if you read the accounts in the other Gospels, the Jewish leaders play the Caesar card fairly strongly.

But he's also under pressure from the crowd. And there is no doubt that a baying crowd can affect your decision making. I well remember refereeing football matches between schools when I was teaching and finding the pressure from very competitive parents on the touchline very disconcerting. In the end, he just gives in and goes along with what they want. Despite the pleas from his wife – who has had a very torrid time in her dreams on account of all this and whose words Matthew uses once again to insist that this is an innocent man (v19) – despite those pleas, he goes ahead. He refuses to take her advice and he refuses, in the end, to take personal responsibility for all this (v24). He is a man with no courage and no integrity.

What did Pilate do with Jesus? He gave in and he gave up. When it comes to what we do with Jesus, don't we all find it easier to go along with the crowd very often, to give in to the pressure that is all around us. We don't want to take the advice of others, to listen to what others might have to say – in conversation, through reading, through listening to talks and sermons. We'd rather just take what appears to be the easy route and follow everyone else. Our culture can sometimes make it difficult for us to do what Jesus really wants of us. Our friends and colleagues – our families, even – can put pressure on us to

conform to the prevailing trends and fashions in thought, speech and behaviour. And, you have to admit, it is so much easier just to go with the flow. But we are called by Jesus to stand out, to refuse to be pressed into the world's mould, to follow where he leads and do as he teaches. We need to pray for the help of God's Holy Spirit to be strong and resist the pressures that are put on us by others.

### **3. THE SOLDIERS MOCKED JESUS (vv27-31)**

And finally in this section, we see what the soldiers did with Jesus. For them I suppose, he was just another prisoner waiting to be executed. Why not have a bit of fun with him? They may not even have been party to most of what had preceded this. Nor, as occupying soldiers in a strange environment, would they have had much knowledge of or sensitivity to local customs and ideas. But they had obviously been told enough to grasp that this was someone who had ideas of kingship. So they dressed him up in a parody of royal robes and a crown. They rip off his own clothing and replace it with a makeshift scarlet gown. They carefully clip a few branches from the spiny bushes around the Praetorium and weave them into a crown with great long spikes pointing inwards towards his head. They find a stick and put it in his hand to represent his sceptre. Then they kneel down in front of him and offer him a mockery of reverence and respect – although they were about to crucify him and assume that he is completely in their power.

Am they're happy to kneel before him, happy to acclaim him as a king – all the right words: all the right actions – because for them it means nothing. They think they have got him just where they want him, he will do whatever they want, he is no threat to them at all. Because of that, their worship of him, their submission to him is a total sham. What did the soldiers do with Jesus? They mocked him in their worship. But they were very mistaken.

And how about us? We can easily worship Jesus like that. We might think we know a bit more about him than did those Roman soldiers, but we can still end up doing just what they did. We use all the flowery language that goes with reverence and respect, but it is all so familiar that we no longer really mean it. We make a show of bowing before him, of doing all the stuff that's expected, knowing that it's only for a little while, then we can get out of here and get on with our lives without too much of an acknowledgement of his claim to kingship over us. We think we have got him where we want him, cut down to size, imprisoned in our traditions and habits, tied up in our dogmas and doctrines, not really likely to do anything to challenge us. But we are very mistaken if we think that. If we just want a dressed up Jesus that we can worship as we want, a Jesus who doesn't challenge us or confront us or chasten us – a Jesus who makes us feel nice and comfy, and who massages our egos by making us think

we are truly worshipping him when, like those soldiers, it's just something we do as a matter of routine – if that's what we want, then we have really got the wrong end of the stick about the Kingly Messiah. It's just prelude to getting rid of him completely, dismissing him from our lives – as those soldiers did when, having mocked him in worship, *“they led him away to crucify him”* (v31).

*“What shall I do, then, with Jesus?”* Ask yourself that this morning. As, in a few minutes, you hold in your hand the bread and wine of communion, ask yourself again what this is all about. When, before that, you sing those lines of Stuart Townend, *“Ashamed, I hear my mocking voice, call out among the scoffers”*, ask yourself if that might really be true of you. If it's not true, fine – keep up the good work! If it is, then ask God to give you a greater sense of the kingship and worth of Jesus – not just here and now, but in all that you do in the week ahead. And next week we'll have a look at how Jesus responds to all this.

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Judas sold his teacher, master and friend for the price of a slave. But now the awful horror of what he has done dawns on him. He knows what now lies in store for Jesus and recognises that he has "*betrayed innocent blood*" (*v4a*). He is filled with remorse and tries to atone for his deed by returning the blood money to the leaders. Peter, as we've seen, also betrays Jesus and denies any knowledge of him, but is given the opportunity to repent and to be forgiven.

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Pilate knows the Jewish leaders could easily get him punished by the Emperor if he doesn't do as they want. And he's also under pressure from the crowd. In the end, he just gives in and goes along with what they want. Despite the pleas from his wife (*v19*), he goes ahead. He refuses to take her advice and he refuses, in the end, to take personal responsibility for all this (*v24*). He is a man with no courage and no integrity.

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**Questions for discussion**

- 1) Is there a difference between remorse and repentance? What is it? Why does it matter?
- 2) What are the pressures on us to try and ignore or reject Jesus? Are those pressures increasing in today's world? What makes you think that?
- 3) In what ways can our worship become a mockery? How can we prevent that happening?

- 4) Is there anything in this passage that sticks out for you – something that you haven't noticed before or that has struck you with renewed force?
- 5) What are you going to do about all this?