

Was It Really Unexpected?

Mark 15:1-20

Introduction

I know I may have a certain amount of jealousy of athletes because I'm not very good at sport but I don't think I'm the only person who gets a kick out of those videos of athletes who started to celebrate too early and ended up losing their race, football match or whatever else they're competing in. One of my favourites was of a motorcycle racer popping a big wheelie coming on to the main straight so as to go over the finish line in a dramatic way ... only to lose control of the bike and for a couple of competitors go past as he was trying to recover.

This dramatic change in fortunes isn't only limited to the sporting field. In business we saw the era of continued growth with unprecedented financial security turn into the Global Economic Crisis of 2008. In politics we saw The Liberal Party lose the un-lose-able federal election in 1996 and then two decades later Labour managed to achieve the same feat last year. And so the list could go on.

This morning we're continuing to look at Jesus being on trial and how his experience seems to be far removed from his popularity and success earlier in his ministry which continued right up to his triumphal entry into Jerusalem only a week or so earlier. As we look at Jesus' Roman trial we'll take time to think of whether Jesus' experience here is really unexpected or not.

Connection Between The Trials

The other Gospels give us a fuller account of what went on at Jesus' Roman trial but Mark's record is typically brief while including little details which point to its historical accuracy.

We start by reading, "Very early in the morning, the chief priests, with the elders, the teachers of the law and the whole Sanhedrin, made their plans. So they bound Jesus, led him away and handed him over to Pilate." Roman governors and officials normally started

work early in the morning at daybreak so that they could have the afternoons for their leisure activities. The Sanhedrin had previously convicted Jesus of blasphemy, a crime worthy of death according to the Jews, and they now needed to determine what crime they could charge Jesus with which would see him convicted and sentenced to death by the Romans who didn't care about blasphemy against Jewish religion. This all needed to be done very early so that they could go before Pilate before other cases were heard and so have Jesus tried and convicted that day.

We understand the charge that the Sanhedrin came up with by Pilate's question to Jesus, "Are you the king of the Jews?" Here the charge is of high treason, a sentence definitely worthy of death according to Roman law. Jesus answers in the affirmative but there must have been something about Jesus' answer which prompts Pilate not to immediately hand down a guilty verdict. In John 18:36 Jesus said, "My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jewish leaders. But now my kingdom is from another place."

We then have Pilate receiving accusations about Jesus but Jesus refusing to mount a defence. Following Pilate's offer to release Jesus or Barabbas, with the crowd choosing Barabbas, Jesus is handed over to the soldiers to be flogged and crucified. Jesus' time in the Roman trial closes with the mocking and brutalising which Jesus received at the hands of the Roman soldiers.

We should note that there are a number of similarities between this Roman trial and Jesus' earlier Jewish trial in the way Mark records them. First, in both records Jesus is accused of many things and yet Jesus doesn't speak up to defend himself; Second, Jesus is asked a specific question by the trial judge (the high priest at his Jewish trial and Pilate at his Roman trial); which leads to the third similarity of Jesus providing a brief affirmative response to the question; and fourth, we have a record of Jesus being mistreated by both Jewish and Roman soldiers following his conviction.

This shouldn't be thought of as lazy reporting, copying one account to the other, because Mark also records noticeable difference between the trials. As an example, The Jewish soldiers had attacked Jesus in connection to Jesus' claim to be the

Messiah, a prophetic figure, hence we're told in Mark 14:65, "Then some began to spit at him; they blindfolded him, struck him with their fists, and said, "Prophecy!" And the guards took him and beat him." In contrast the record of the Roman soldiers' mocking of Jesus is focused on Jesus' claim to be a king, "They put a purple robe on him, then twisted together a crown of thorns and set it on him. And they began to call out to him, "Hail, king of the Jews!" Again and again they struck him on the head with a staff and spit on him. Falling on their knees, they paid homage to him."

I think Mark records the two trials like this because he wants to highlight that there was an equal responsibility for Jesus being condemned to death. In the Jewish mind humanity is broken into two clear groups, Jews (descendants of Abraham) and Gentiles (everyone else) and here both the Jews and the Gentiles are recorded of convicting Jesus wrongly. We were told in Mark 14:55 "The chief priests and the whole Sanhedrin were looking for evidence against Jesus so that they could put him to death, but they did not find any." Whereas in Mark 15 Pilate recognised that Jesus was innocent, but made his verdict based upon the calls of the crowd, "Wanting to satisfy the crowd, Pilate released Barabbas to them. He had Jesus flogged, and handed him over to be crucified."

For us today do we recognise our equal guilt before God? It's easy to look at ISIS and see such extremists as really bad people who need to change, or more locally we regard the people who can't get through a day without a drink or drugs as people who should ask for forgiveness, but what about you and I with our respectable sins? Yes, we come to church and so trust Jesus but do we also recognise and are humbled by the truth that we are just as guilty in seeing Jesus crucified?

We can see from Mark's record of the trials the equal culpability of Jews and Gentiles but the record also poses two lingering questions. First, why did the crowd call for the release of Barabbas and the crucifixion of Jesus, especially when Pilate put the offer to the crowd because he recognised that it was the officials, not the general populous, who were opposed to Jesus, and there is also the fact that only a week earlier a crowd had welcomed Jesus triumphantly into Jerusalem in the event we call 'Palm Sunday'? Second, why did Jesus remain silent and accept this

miscarriage of justice? Answering these two questions will help us to consider whether what happened to Jesus really was unexpected or out of the blue.

Was The Crowd Fickle?

So then, was the crowd fickle? Was the same group of people celebrating Jesus' entry to Jerusalem a week earlier and then calling for his execution at his trial? While it is not uncommon to point out how easily human opinion is swayed and consider this crowd, baying for Jesus' death, as an example of this, I think there's evidence that we may have something else at play.

First, the people who were entering into Jerusalem with Jesus were pilgrims, coming on religious pilgrimage to the most holy city for Jews. It has been pointed out that those who go on pilgrimage are often more spiritual and religious than those who live in these holy places. Martin Luther experienced such a contrast when he visited Rome and this was one of the prompts for the protestant reformation. I was reading recently:

In 1511 Luther headed to Rome with another monk of the Augustinian Order. Luther had been enthusiastic to see the Eternal City and the Capital of Christendom. But his expectations were overthrown by his disappointments: Rome was a city where every aspect of the Divine was to sell. "If there is Hell, then Rome is built over it!", he says, calling it a "cesspit of sin".

So it may be that the crowd before Pilate is a more cynical, jaded and politically savvy group than the enthusiastic pilgrims who had entered Jerusalem with Jesus and who had a simple yet genuine faith, longing for God to act.

Second, we're told, "Now it was the custom at the festival to release a prisoner whom the people requested. A man called Barabbas was in prison with the insurrectionists who had committed murder in the uprising. The crowd came up and asked Pilate to do for them what he usually did." And so it could be that this crowd were there specifically to ask for the release of Barabbas. It may be that this crowd was very pro-Barabbas rather than

explicitly anti-Jesus but they could be swept up in the fervour of the chief priests who were calling for Jesus' execution.

Third, the members of the Sanhedrin had likely been busy, making sure they had stacked the crowd with friends and servants who would call out what they wanted them to say should Pilate hesitate in condemning Jesus to death. Remember, Jesus had only been arrested the night before and the vast majority of Jesus' followers were from outside of Jerusalem. Jesus' followers had been outmanoeuvred by people who were very skilled at this political game.

When I take these three factors into consideration I think that it is unlikely that the same crowd which cheered Jesus' entry into Jerusalem were the same people who called for his execution a week later. Indeed, rather than seeing the events recorded here as being an unexpected turn for Jesus, we see the outworking and culmination of plans of the Jewish leadership who now had Jesus on their turf and caught in the environment that they were comfortable with.

For us today, while we should be on guard against a rapid fall from a close relationship with God, I think a challenge for us is to reflect on whether we're at risk of going down a slow path of cynicism and allowing structures and traditions to get in the way of our relationship with God. Is the right performance in our churches services, or knowing the right words to say, more important than pursuing closeness with God and humble service of God's people? Do I want to impress people more than shepherd people? That's what I'm wrestling with, I wonder if you can associate with that?

Connection To Isaiah 53 (and Mark 10:32-34)

But, turning back to our passage, if the crowd's behaviour wasn't actually too surprising and indeed is part of the plans of the Jewish leadership, why did Jesus remain silent and accept this miscarriage of justice? Is Jesus caught off guard and surprised here?

To answer this question we can start with looking at what Jesus earlier had to say and a good summary is in Mark 10:32-34:

They were on their way up to Jerusalem, with Jesus leading the way, and the disciples were astonished, while those who followed were afraid. Again he took the Twelve aside and told them what was going to happen to him. “We are going up to Jerusalem,” he said, “and the Son of Man will be delivered over to the chief priests and the teachers of the law. They will condemn him to death and will hand him over to the Gentiles, who will mock him and spit on him, flog him and kill him. Three days later he will rise.”

Jesus accepted what was happening in silence precisely because he wasn't surprised by the events. Jesus repeatedly predicted his own death at the hands of both Jews and Gentiles. Not only did Jesus know that this was what would take place, he also used the phrase “as it is written” to describe this. Jesus ties his upcoming experiences with what Yahweh had declared through his prophets and which were recorded in the Old Testament.

We mentioned this briefly last week and it's why we had Isaiah 53 read to us this week. Isaiah 53 is one of the most powerful statements as to how God will deal with sin and that is through a servant voluntarily taking on such suffering. Listen to these words again:

He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; he was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before its shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth. By oppression and judgment he was taken away. Yet who of his generation protested? For he was cut off from the land of the living; for the transgression of my people he was punished. He was assigned a grave with the wicked, and with the rich in his death, though he had done no violence, nor was any deceit in his mouth.

One of the great ironies of what's going on here is that in the charge about Jesus to Pilate, that of claiming to be a king, the Jewish leaders were accusing Jesus of being the kind of political Messiah that they wanted and yet Jesus refused to be. Jesus refused to be that kind of political Messiah because he knew the type of Messiah they needed and that was the kind of Messiah which God had promised to send, if only they'd looked more closely at prophecies like Isaiah 53.

Conclusion

In conclusion, yes, we do need to be recognised that we are equally guilty, together with the rest of humanity, in sending Jesus to the cross and this should give us humility. Likewise yes, we do need to watch out that we are not becoming cynical and seeing church as a performance more than a service or Christianity as about rituals rather than relationships, and this should give us reason for caution. However, finally we have seen that Jesus was not taken by surprise by his trial and upcoming crucifixion but rather Jesus willingly endured this, knowing that he was fulfilling the will of his Father which had been made known centuries before by the prophets and this should give us humble confidence. Jesus has achieved for us what we cannot achieve ourselves.

In our humility and caution let us not become fearful but thankful and humbly confident.

[we're going to sing now about who Jesus is and what he's done for us and how we should live in return]