

What Glasses Do You Wear?

Mark 14:53-72

Introduction

Alison recently has started wearing reading glasses. The optometrist told her that because her eyesight is in a state of change she shouldn't get bifocals until her eyes have stabilised. This means Alison sometimes needs to quickly switch between her distance glasses and her reading glasses and there can be a confused look on her face when she chooses the wrong glasses.

It's interesting that in English we sometimes talk about people seeing things through glasses or other objects which are coloured. We have the expression, "She remembers school with rose coloured glasses," or "When the topic of his team's loss in the final came up you saw the red mist descend," or "They look at their neighbour's pool on a hot day like a green eyed monster."

It's worth noting that these expressions demonstrate that our attitudes influence what we see. It is because the lady looks on her time at school with rose coloured glasses that she regards her time there positively. It is because the man is angry that his team lost that the conversations turns to the worse when the topic of his team's loss come up. It is because the people are jealous of their neighbours having a pool that they look on it with envy.

This doesn't mean that we can't look at things with at least some measure of objectivity but it does remind us that we sometimes find only what we expect to find or see only what we were already looking for.

This morning we're going to see such a scenario as Jesus is brought to trial before the Sanhedrin, the Jewish court.

What Are You Looking For? (vv. 53-59)

Mark here presents a simple succinct report of the trial and he notes that Peter is in the area but not in the immediate location of Jesus. By Mark flagging Peter's

presence he is helping us to know that that what he reports of Peter's experience in verses 66 to 72 happened at the same time as Jesus' trial. It is also fairly typical of Mark to link two stories together for a particular emphasis. Here Mark brackets Peter's experience of failing as he undergoes his trial with Jesus' faithfulness, obedience and willing endurance of unjust suffering as he is tried first by the Jews and then by the Romans (which we'll look at next week).

We'll come to Peter soon enough but we start with Jesus being brought before "the high priest, and all the chief priests, the elders and the teachers of the law." This group is coming together in an official capacity as the high court in Jerusalem, the Sanhedrin.

This group is not looking at Jesus with neutral glasses, there is no blindfolded Lady Justice guaranteeing impartiality here. We're told in verse 7, "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."

Put simply, this group of Israel's leaders see Jesus as a trouble maker and a threat to their authority and influence and so they're looking for evidence which agrees with their prejudice (their pre-judicial verdict).

Now it probably doesn't need to be said but I'll take the risk of being redundant to say that I find anti-Semitic, that is anti-Jewish, attitudes and behaviour obnoxious, wrong, and sinful. That Christians would use the Gospel accounts and records of the trial of Jesus to justify such attitudes is even more abhorrent. However, while anti-Semitism is wrong, we deny the clear meaning of the the Gospel accounts of Jesus' trial, as well as other records of history, if we try to deny or explain away the involvement and even responsibility of the Jewish leadership in this miscarriage of justice. The Gospels are very clear that both Jews and Gentiles were responsible for condemning Jesus to death

With that clarification stated, we note that while the Sanhedrin was happy to be selective and biased in their calling of witnesses, they are still seeking to have an appearance of following the correct proceedings and so won't pass down a guilty verdict when, "Many testified falsely against him, but their statements did not agree." Jesus

doesn't help them at this point by seeing no need to answer such weak and conflicting accusations and so doesn't risk being trapped in their questioning. "Then the high priest stood up before them and asked Jesus, "Are you not going to answer? What is this testimony that these men are bringing against you?" But Jesus remained silent and gave no answer."

Before moving on to how the Sanhedrin came to a guilty verdict, I wonder if it's worth considering if we ever do this? No, I don't think we're going to look at Jesus with accusatory eyes with an intent to reject him full-stop (though we may know some people who do that), but do we ever simply ignore what Jesus has to say? I remember when I was a teenager and young adult that highlighting Bible verses was a big thing and people even had whole systems in place with one colour being used for promises, another colour for commands, another for miracles, etc., etc. I remember one speaker in church suggesting that we should make sure that we read the non-highlighted sections of our Bibles. Let's not just stay with those words of Jesus which make us feel all warm and comfortable, let's look at Jesus' teachings which challenge us, which correct us, which cause us to wrestle with the priority which Jesus has in our lives. Let us not prejudice what Jesus has to say by assuming that he's just like us and would never take a stand against anything our current culture values.

How Deep Do You Look? (vv. 60-65)

We should keep wrestling with our own prejudices when it comes to reading the Bible and Jesus' words going forward but let's turn back to the problem the Sanhedrin had in condemning Jesus, which was their intent. Starting from verse 60 we read: Again the high priest asked him, "Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?" "I am," said Jesus. "And you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven." The high priest tore his clothes. "Why do we need any more witnesses?" he asked. "You have heard the blasphemy. What do you think?" They all condemned him as worthy of death.

It appears that Jesus gives the Sanhedrin what it needs to condemn him to death but why does the high priest say that Jesus has committed blasphemy? There are two possible ways of understanding the charge of blasphemy here.

First, it may be that Jesus is being condemned because he accepts the title of Messiah, Yahweh's Anointed One. If we look at the account with this understanding, the issue is that Jesus was so contrary to the Messiah that they were looking for that they found the very concept of a captured and powerless Messiah to show contempt of Yahweh.

The second way of understanding the charge of blasphemy is because Jesus didn't just accept the title of Messiah but went on to say "And you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven." The title 'Son of Man' picks up on imagery of the divine figure in Daniel 7 and Jesus also refers to the Messiah's heavenly role of Judgement from Psalm 110, which was read for us earlier. Reading the account this way means that Jesus is being condemned for blasphemy because he has claimed a divine position with Yahweh.

With either of these two readings, if what Jesus claims is not true then he is rightfully condemned for his blasphemy. He would either be deluded and so in need of help and should be put away so as to not cause problems for the people who followed him, or he would be a liar and so deserving of severe punishment.

It could be argued that the reason why the chief priest and the Sanhedrin were so quick to condemn was because of a problem of perception. We commented earlier that people often see only what they're looking for and the Sanhedrin were looking for a reason to condemn Jesus, now this intention is compounded by the question of how deep they were willing to look?

The Jewish leaders had their perspective as to what the Messiah would be like and they weren't willing to look more deeply. They focused on the imagery of a victorious ruler who had vanquished opponents of Israel and would now judge the nations. A Messiah at the mercy of his opponents had no place in their thinking. And yet, if they had read passages like Isaiah 53 they would have realised that Jesus was

fulfilling the role of the Suffering Servant that Yahweh had promised. Years later when Peter was writing the letter we know as 1 Peter he recounted how Jesus was fulfilling this role, right down to Jesus' silence at the abuse he was about to receive.

We read about the mocking and the abuse in verse 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." Jesus' abusers are calling upon him to do something which God's agent should have been able to do, that is to judge without needing to see what was happening and also to prophecy. Part of the tragic irony here is that Jesus' abusers are doing this while Jesus' prophecy about Peter's denial is taking place.

The Sanhedrin's problem wasn't just in what they were looking for (evidence to support condemning Jesus to death) but also how deep they were looking (refusing to understand more deeply the promises and work of God as well as who Jesus was and what he was doing).

Do You Gain Perspective? (vv. 66-72)

Let's turn then to Peter's own trial, the testing as to whether Peter will acknowledge that he is a follower of Jesus.

Why did Peter follow Jesus after his arrest? What was Peter hoping to see? Was Peter hoping to do some sort of rescue? Was he going to prove wrong Jesus' prophecy about his approaching denial? We don't know exactly what Peter was thinking beforehand but upon arrival, perhaps struck by the situation he sees Jesus in and the reality of the stakes, Peter self-confidence seems to melt away.

To start with Peter is just dealing with a servant girl, you'd think that he could have been honest with someone of comparatively little significance but he denies to her that he knows Jesus and moves away from where she was. Things only get worse when she follows him to where others are and this time says to others around, "This fellow is one of them." Peter again denies it only for "After a little while, those standing near said to Peter, "Surely you are one of them, for you are a Galilean."

He began to call down curses, and he swore to them, “I don’t know this man you’re talking about.””

Peter is effectively saying here, “May God strike me dead if I ever followed this Nazarene. I assure you, I don’t know the bloke.”

We don’t know what Peter had hoped to see by following Jesus into the home of the high priest but it appears that he certainly gained some perspective. In verse 72 we read,

Immediately the rooster crowed the second time. Then Peter remembered the word Jesus had spoken to him: “Before the rooster crows twice you will disown me three times.” And he broke down and wept.

We can read through this little story quickly and barely feel the weight of what’s happening but imagine how crushing this was to Peter. Here is Peter disowning the man whom he had declared to be the Messiah and whom Peter knew had the words of eternal life. Now Jesus’ prophecy had rung true, Peter had disowned him three times. This was no mere slip-up, Peter intentionally abandons Jesus even as he is physically close to him.

We of course know the end of the story and know that this isn’t the end of Peter’s story or Jesus’ story. Peter did indeed gain perspective from this bitter experience and went on to look more deeply at Jesus and what it meant for him to be God’s Messiah.

As I mentioned earlier, the way Mark has positioned Peter’s failure here at his trial is to contrast it more starkly with Jesus’ faithful obedience during his Jewish and then Roman trials. This contrast isn’t just to make Peter look worse, it is to highlight Peter’s need for the One who is faithful and obedient to the very end.

This account would have been a source of challenge to Mark’s readers, knowing that one of the main leaders in the church had failed, and if Peter had failed how easily might they fail? But this wouldn’t have just challenged Mark’s readers, it would have been a source of comfort for them too. We understand that Mark was writing to Christians in Rome and his readers had already suffered persecution for

their faith. How many of those early Christians had failed under such persecution and denied being a Christian? The record of Peter's failure on this occasion would have reminded Mark's readers that forgiveness and restoration is still available.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the Sanhedrin chose to condemn Jesus because they only looked for what they wanted to find and didn't look deeply enough at Jesus. Peter followed Jesus to the high priest's house but, whatever he wanted to see, he ended up with greater perspective as to himself and his need for Jesus who remained faithful and obedient. Peter learnt, despite his earlier self-assuredness, that he couldn't be what he so desperately wanted to be, faithful, true and obedient and in so doing gained perspective as to his need for grace from the One who was and is.

And if Peter, one of the greatest as well as one of the most flawed disciples of Jesus needed this perspective, how much more did the rest of the disciples who also abandoned Jesus and didn't even follow him to the trial? How much more did the readers of Mark's Gospel, some of whom had also denied Jesus during times of persecution ... and how much more do we for those times when we know we didn't stand up or speak up to declare our trust in Jesus and our love for him?

We're going to sing a classic song to help us reflect on our own need for grace, a grace which comes to us in Jesus, a truly Amazing Grace.