

Sentenced

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[0 : 00] up until just 1961, many people didn't even think he'd ever existed.

They thought he was a made-up name, but a name that only occurred in the Bible and nowhere else. But in 1961, a stone inscription was found at Caesarea Maritima, a seaside port in what is Israel today, and there's his name, putting the sceptics wrong or showing them to be wrong, as is so often the case when matters of the Bible are at hand.

He was a foreign governor. History is littered with foreign governors, current times, ancient times, people who are often little puppet-type kings and emperors, people who are at the beck and call of the senior leader, governor, king, ruler, despot, whatever, back in the empire's headquarters.

And this one, like so many, in current times as well as in ancient, was harsh, cruel and brutal. He'd massacred peaceful crowds.

He deliberately provoked the religious leaders with anti-religious sentiment and action. He was corrupt.

[1 : 29] He stole from the Jewish religious leaders' treasury for his own political purposes. He was self-important and self-serving.

He was probably promoted as a result of carrying favour back in Rome. It probably was a help that his wife was particularly well-connected socially and politically.

He certainly had a patron who looked after him for whatever reason. And this man could be one of dozens in world history, hundreds in world history, and many of them are completely unknown in history.

Names that have disappeared almost without a trace in the history books. So many are they, and so insignificant are so many of them. Indeed, as I said, up until 1961, there were plenty of people who thought he'd never really existed.

Just a biblical, made-up person and name. But he was known for one thing.

[2 : 40] He was the governor under whom Jesus Christ was crucified. Apart from that fact, he probably would be unknown.

And when the inscription was found at Caesarea Maritima in 1961, people wouldn't have batted an eyelid. An unknown name on a bit of rock. But he's world famous.

He's in the Bible many times. He's in the creeds that we say. When we say we believe in Jesus Christ, we come to the line, crucified under Pontius Pilate.

What remarkable fame he eventually achieved. But what notorious fame. The governor who put Jesus to death on a cross.

Why was he there anyway? In 63 BC, so close on 100 years before Jesus was crucified, Rome conquered Palestine, defeating the last bits of the Greek Empire before it.

[3 : 42] And Rome let Jewish or pseudo-Jewish rulers rule over the conquered Jewish territories of Jerusalem. And at the time of Jesus' birth, at the end of a long reign, Herod the Great was that person, ruling over Judea, Samaria, Galenitis further north, Galilee, as well as other parts of that Israel-come-Jordan area as it is today.

Herod the Great died about 4 BC and his realm was divided up amongst some of his living sons. Most of them had been killed by him.

And the one who ended up with a bit of Judea, for which Jerusalem is the capital, was perhaps his worst son, Herod Archelaus. So bad was he that even Rome got rid of him in 6 AD.

And so they put in their own prefect, they were called. Pontius Pilate was perhaps the fifth of those from 6 AD. And he became the prefect or governor of Judea in about 26 AD.

And in his first five years in particular, he was brutal, harsh, despising the Jews, provoking them and killing them.

[5 : 02] But about 31 AD, he lost his patron who was put to death back in Rome, deposed from his own high office. Sir Junus was his name. And thereafter, Pontius Pilate had to tread a fairly fine line trying to keep the Jews happy, whom he hated, because if there was too much unrest, then his job was on the line.

And so he was sort of torn between pleasing the Jews to keep them happy so that his job was safe, but the fact that he hated them and had a history of oppression of them. And that's Pontius Pilate's last five years.

We're not quite sure when Jesus was crucified, 3033 AD, it may have been before or after, Pontius Pilate became more vulnerable in his position as the governor of Judea. But eventually, in 36 AD, he was recalled to Rome in disgrace after a brutal assault on the Samaritans, part of his own territory to the north of Judea.

So when it comes to the trial of Jesus, and we find Pontius Pilate, the Roman prefect, in some ways in cahoots with the Jewish religious leadership, we're a bit surprised.

It's actually the Jewish leadership that's instigated this association, and it shows the depths of their hatred of Jesus and their absolute commitment to see him dead that prepared to do a sort of bargaining job, in effect, with Pontius Pilate.

[6 : 31] It shows an awful situation, really, that people who ought to know what is good and true, when they reject it, become so fundamentally evil.

And that's what they were. Society started early in ancient Roman Empire, and it was no exception on the first Good Friday, as we've come to call it.

The beginning of chapter 15, we're told that as soon as it was morning, first light, that is, in the sky, the chief priests held a consultation with the elders and scribes and the whole council.

The Sanhedrin is what it was called. It was the religious council, 70 members from various sorts of Jewish religious traditions. And in a sense, their job, it seems, on that morning would have been simply to ratify or rubber stamp the verdict passed earlier in the night in what was perhaps a sort of kangaroo court.

But when a capital conviction was involved, there was supposed to be next day some ratification of that before it could be carried out. And that seems to be what's happening here.

[7 : 42] Probably a speedy consultation. So at first light still, we're told then they bound Jesus and led him away and handed him over to Pilate.

That is because the work was done early in the day and they didn't want to miss out. Pilate would have occupied what had been Herod's palace before or after Herod the Great had died and then after Archelaus, his son, had been deposed.

First, the Roman prefect would have used it as his Jerusalem residence. He would have spent his time in Caesarea Maritima, the place where the stone inscription was found, how many?

40 kilometres or so further west on the Sea of the Mediterranean. But here he is in Jerusalem at the time of this feast and in Herod's palace, which is probably just inside what is Jaffa Gate today, inside the old walls of Jerusalem.

Now the tricky thing for the Jews is that the issue which has stirred up their antipathy and hatred to Jesus is that they regarded him as a blasphemer for claiming in effect to be divine, to be the Messiah, the Christ, the Son of God and so on.

[8 : 56] But for the Romans, that's not a crime. They had a lot of gods. So one more wouldn't make much difference in their economy. And so no one would be put to death for claiming to be divine.

So they had to twist the accusation and the accusation became treason that Jesus was a traitor against the Roman Empire because he claimed to be the king.

And there is no king but Caesar. And that's behind this Roman part of the trial of Jesus before his crucifixion. Pilate asked him, are you the king of the Jews?

That clearly has been what has been alleged about Jesus. It's hard to know some of these statements here quite what is the vocal intonation. Is Pilate simply asking the question, are you the king of the Jews?

I mean, that's what they say you are. Are you? Tell me. After all, in a Roman trial, the defendant had the opportunity or right to defend himself. Some suggest that it might even be, are you the king of the Jews?

[10 : 05] As though, look at you. How can you claim to be the king of the Jews? What a ludicrous suggestion. We just don't know quite the intonation behind Pilate's question.

And Jesus answered him, you say so. Jesus is not denying that he's the king of the Jews. In a sense, he's forcing the issue back to Pilate.

You decide. You say so. You've just asked the question. It's up to you to work that out. Also, perhaps Jesus, in not denying it, is also not totally accepting it because in Roman eyes, that would be a political claim to be king of the Jews.

Jesus, of course, was king in a deeper and bigger sense. And so he's, in a sense, not going to accept the title as a sufficient title for who Jesus is.

That's not the only accusation that the Jews levelled against Jesus and relayed to Pilate. We're told in verse 3 that the chief priests accused Jesus of many things. Mark doesn't tell us what those many things are, but in Luke, we're told some of them that he wouldn't pay taxes.

[11 : 22] Therefore, that's treason because he's refusing what is due to Caesar. That he's stirring up the nation. He's claiming to be king. There's some of the things that Luke lists in the parallel passage in Luke 23.

Jesus makes no defence when these accusations are levelled against him. Pilate asked him again, have you no answer?

See how many charges they bring against you. It suggests that as each one was levelled against Jesus, his mouth remained sealed. And Jesus made no further reply so that Pilate was amazed.

Amazed because he can't understand somebody not defending themselves. Probably he's amazed because he realises that these are trumped up charges. So why, when they're such trumped up charges, why aren't you defending yourself?

I can get you off here. Amazed. As so many have been through Mark's gospel at the miracles, the teaching, the authority of Jesus. Especially in those early chapters, it's a resounding theme.

[12 : 30] The people were amazed for he taught as one with authority. They're amazed at the miracles. And here in a completely different context, Pilate is amazed at his silence.

Jesus' silence can be interpreted in different ways. It could show his disdain or contempt really for the trumped up charges.

They're not worth answering. They're totally unjust. It could be silence because he knows where he's heading and what's the point arguing. His silence also shows a patience under trial that provides an example for his followers in the future.

For just back in chapter 13, Jesus had warned his followers that they also would be brought before kings and councils. Although there he'd said, don't worry about what you're going to say when they bring you to trial and hand you over.

Do not worry, but say whatever is given you at that time for it's not you who speak, but the Holy Spirit. So maybe Jesus' own silence is in a sense providing an example for those who follow him when they, in years to come, would find themselves in similar situations.

[13 : 45] But the silence also has a more distant but more profound echo. In the Psalms, the psalmist, when facing unjust accusations, when facing strife or troubles, is often silent, apart from praying to God, that is.

But perhaps even more significantly, there is that one passage in the scriptures about the silence of God's servant.

He was oppressed. He was afflicted. Yet he did not open his mouth. Like a lamb that is led to the slaughter and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth.

Usually in the Bible, when there is an allusion or a quote of a bit of the Old Testament, it's not so much plucking out a handful of words to prove the case, but it's meant to echo in the ears and mind of the reader more than just those words.

For example, if I was to say to you, remember the Lord's your shepherd, those four words, the Lord's your shepherd, are not all that I'm meaning you to remember. If I say to you, remember the Lord's your shepherd, you're meant to remember, therefore you'll lack nothing.

[15 : 18] God, he'll lead you by green pastures. He'll let you lie down beside still waters. He'll feed you. His rod and staff will guide you and protect you. You see, the opening words of Psalm 23 convey the whole of the psalm.

And so when we read or hear this echo at least of Jesus' silence before oppression, before affliction and before his slaughter, then we're meant to remember not just that verse I read from Isaiah 53, but the wider and profound and significant context of that verse in Isaiah 53.

It's often called the fourth of the suffering servant songs. It's essential understanding or background understanding for Jesus' death on a cross.

It's important, therefore, to grasp what it says. It goes on in Isaiah 53 in the next verse to say, by a perversion of justice he was taken away. Who could have imagined his future?

A perversion of justice. Isn't that what's happening here? For he was cut off from the land of the living, stricken for the transgression of my people. That is, this is not just an act of injustice, but the transgression of God's people.

[16 : 45] Here are the Jewish leaders representing them, bringing Jesus to death. It is for their sins that he will die. And a bit before the verse about the silence of the lamb about to be slaughtered, surely he has borne our infirmities and carried our diseases.

Yet we accounted him stricken, struck down by God and afflicted. He was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities. Upon him was the punishment that made us whole and by his bruises we are healed.

Or we, like sheep, have gone astray. We have all turned to our own way. And the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

The silence of Jesus before this unjust or perversion of justice trial reminds us why he dies.

not because he's weak in the face of injustice, not because he's not strong enough to give a defence for himself, but because he's going to die for our sins and thereby bring us forgiveness and healing.

[18 : 06] It was the will of the Lord to crush him with pain. When you make his life an offering for sin, he shall see his offspring and shall prolong his days through him the will of the Lord shall prosper.

You see, what looks to be totally defeat and gloom and impotence and futility as Jesus is taken away ultimately to die, beyond, the will of the Lord will prosper.

All of that is the background to this passage. For indeed, the silence of Jesus is not the only echo of Isaiah 53.

There are some others as well. Yes, it's a miscarriage of justice, but it's foreordained by God. And 750 years before Jesus was crucified, Isaiah the prophet was given words from God to predict exactly that.

in that passage of Isaiah, just as Mark has already made clear through the words of Jesus in chapter 10, for example, Jesus' death was to bring ransom, redemption, substitution for the sins of the sinful people of God.

[19 : 28] And that substitutionary idea now comes striking to us in the events of the verses that follow. Now, at the festival, Pilate used to release a prisoner for them, anyone for whom they asked.

Now, a man called Barabbas was in prison with the rebels who'd committed murder during the insurrection. We're not told what that was. Presumably it was just in a few days, weeks, months before Jesus' crucifixion.

There were several in the first century AD, culminating in eventually the Romans destroying Jerusalem in 70 AD. They got sick of all these little insurrections. Barabbas was a murderer, a rebel, and in prison, and on death row, it seems, for that crime.

So, Pilate offers to them in verse 9, Jesus, the king of the Jews. Do you want me to release for you the king of the Jews? Perhaps he's trying to irritate the Jewish leaders because they'd come asking for Barabbas, it seems.

Pilate knew that Jesus was innocent. He knows that it's the jealousy of the Jewish leaders that has led Jesus to death row. Verse 10, we're told that Pilate realized that it was out of jealousy that the chief priests had handed him over.

[20 : 42] Pilate, in some ways, is trying to cling to Jesus' innocence, but he's certainly being bullied by the crowd. Verse 12, what do you wish me to do then with the man you call the king of the Jews?

They'd wanted Barabbas, so he's trying still to save Jesus' skin, in a sense, sacrifice. But it backfires. He's sort of washing his hands of responsibility, something that he literally does in the account in Matthew's gospel.

And the crowd shout back, crucify him. Pilate's final attempt at justice in verse 14.

Why, what evil has he done? And there's no answer. He's done none.

Pilate knows that. The crowd knows that. The Jewish leaders know that. They don't answer. But they shout out again, crucify him.

[21 : 59] A bit like the old Jerusalem market still today. It's full of haggling. You never buy something at the price you first offered.

Pilate, in a sense, has been haggling to keep Jesus alive. The first trial didn't work, partly because of Jesus' own silence, which is almost self condemnatory.

But he's tried again with this substitution thing that happens at Passover when he releases somebody, come on, let it be Jesus. He's innocent. What evil has he done? But he's bullied by the crowd.

He's far too weak to confront them, as we know from the beginning. And he's lost out. A murderer they save. The prince of life they slay.

Pilate, Pilate, Pilate, not wishing for justice, but wishing to satisfy the crowd, released Barabbas for them.

[23 : 08] And after flogging Jesus, he handed him over to be crucified. He doesn't even decide to keep Jesus locked up for a bit, as though somehow it might die down and he might be able to let him off later, not at all.

He's thoroughly capitulated to the crowd. He's wanting them to be satisfied, maybe to save his own skin. And so he has Jesus flogged and then handed over.

It doesn't take much for evil to become rampant when it's restraints and shackles are cut. It happened in Auschwitz and other parts of Nazi Germany.

It happened in brutal totalitarian regimes like Pol Pot's Cambodia, Idi Amin's Uganda. We've seen it in the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq, to a small extent in Cronulla beach.

Here it happens in the Praetorium, the governor's headquarters in Jerusalem. And as we read, it seems that indeed the Lord of the flies is Lord indeed.

[24 : 33] Jesus is flogged, most probably with leather strips, with bone and stone entwined within. bone and stone that would tear apart his flesh into the muscle, the tendons, exposing the bone, and sometimes such people flogged would die.

It was vicious, unrestrained, maybe unlimited in number sometimes, often deadly. Added to that is the degrading humiliation at the hands of these soldiers who are let loose, evil, unrestrained, clothing him in a purple cloak, twisting some thorns into a crown, saluting him, hail, king of the Jews, further beating him with reeds, spitting on him, kneeling down in mock homage to him.

Disgusting, unnecessary behaviour. But evil goes rampant when the shackles are loosened. And yet again in those very events, there are echoes that are even closer to home than the echoes of Isaiah the prophet.

For just a few passages before this in Mark's gospel, in fact three times Jesus had predicted his death and resurrection, each time with a little bit more detail, so that the third and final prediction in chapter 10, we find being fulfilled to the letter here in chapter 15.

Jesus saying, see we're going up to Jerusalem and the Son of Man will be handed over, the exact word that's used several times, they handed him over to Pilate, Pilate handed him over to the soldiers to be flogged and crucified.

[26 : 28] He'll be handed over firstly to the chief priests and the scribes, they'll condemn him to death and they will hand him over to the Gentiles, exactly what happens when they pass into Pilate a Gentile, they will mock him, spit on him, flog him and kill him.

But again, as we get echoes of earlier statements, the full context is meant to be there before us and two things in addition are implied.

One, the end of the prediction is resurrection. This is not the end, just as in slightly more obscure ways that prophet Isaiah, also look forward to the time that beyond this death of the suffering servant, he will live long, he will be vindicated and rise in effect is what he's predicting there.

But moreover, the purpose of death is implied. For at the end of that prediction and then the discussion with James and John about the best seats of heaven, Jesus finishes that section saying, the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many.

So when we read these sad events and we're appalled by the evil and the injustice, we know that God remains sovereign, he foreordained these events long before Jesus was born in Bethlehem even, for the purpose of ransoming many from their sins.

- [28 : 04] The allusion to Isaiah, the allusion back to Jesus' predictions, and the mention of Barabbas, whose life is spared when Jesus is actually crucified, direct us to the substitution of Jesus' death that is so crucial in our understanding.

Jesus, the innocent one, dies in our place, dies for others as our substitute. In one sense, and astonishingly, Barabbas is physically at least, the first beneficiary of that substitution.

But more profoundly, and just as astonishingly, so are you and I, if we place our faith and trust in the Saviour Jesus Christ.

Guilty, vile, and helpless we. Spotless Lamb of God was he. Full atonement, can it be?

Bearing shame and scoffing rude, in my place condemned he stood, sealed my pardon with his blood. Mel Gibson's film of the last couple of years has made much of these events, the passion of the Christ, the word passion that's still used, literally meaning suffering.

- [29 : 30] And that scene of Mel Gibson's, which is relatively faithful to the scriptures as a film, that showed the gruesome flagellation, flogging of Jesus, still sends shivers down my spine.

Very graphic. And I remember seeing that film twice and both times almost turning away in revulsion. Lots of Christian traditions make much of the suffering, pains, that Jesus undertook.

Mel Gibson's film does that, I think. So do Christian hymns, Wesleyan traditions and others, make much of the suffering of Jesus. In the end though, the Bible makes little of it.

We're not told here of the pain of the flogging, but that he was flogged. The level of physical suffering is in one sense not so important. Because in the end what matters is that he died.

It's the death, more than the suffering, that ransoms many. Jesus' whole trial, as we've seen it here and in recent weeks, oozes a sick irony in a sense.

- [30 : 47] The key theme in this passage tonight is king of the Jews. It's there in verse 2. Are you the king of the Jews? And later on in verse 9, Pilate answered them, do you want me to release for you the king of the Jews?

And then they began saluting him, the soldiers, in their mockery, hail king of the Jews. And I realise I missed one out in the middle of all that.

What do you wish me to do with the man you call the king of the Jews? And as we'll see on Good Friday morning in the next passage in Mark, as they hang him on a cross, the inscription above him reads, king of the Jews.

king he is. Ironically true. And in a far bigger, deeper, more lasting way than they could ever have imagined.

More than that, a king who will judge. For as we've seen in recent weeks, the irony is that Jesus is the judge, not the victim. It's the others who are in the dock, not him.

- [32 : 01] They think they're judging, they think they're in control, but short-lived indeed will be their pretense of rule and judgment. For one day, real justice will be done.

And on that day to come, those chief priests and elders will be brought before Christ's judgment seat, who will be stirring up the crowds then.

And on that same day, Pilate will be whimpering weakly before Christ's throne, who will be silent then. And those same soldiers who went to the extremes of evil in their mockery and abuse and degradation of Jesus the innocent one, will be kneeling not in ridicule, but awestruck, before the real royal robe, who will be mocking men.

And on that same day, you and I will be before the throne of Jesus the judge. what verdict will you hear then?

God's son stood trial that we might stand without fear before his throne on judgment day.
God's son was scourged so that we might be healed by his stripes.

[33 : 21] God's son was mocked so that we might be honoured. God's son was condemned that we may be declared innocent. God's son wore a crown of thorns so that we may wear crowns of glory.

God's son was stripped of clothes so that we one day would be clothed in righteousness.
God's son died so that we might live.

hallelujah. What a saviour.