

Arraigned

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[0 : 00] Well, over the last few weeks, you may have heard about this man, Abdul Rahman, who was arrested for being a Christian in the country of Afghanistan.

He was a Muslim for the first 25 years of his life, but more than 15 years ago, he started working for a Christian aid agency in Pakistan, and after working there for a couple of years, he became a Christian.

He converted from Islam and became a follower of Christ. Now, over the next 10 or so years, it seems like he wasn't back in Afghanistan, but his family was still there, but more recently, he returned to seek the custody of his two daughters, and when he returned, his relatives turned him over to the police on the charge of being a Christian.

When the police came to arrest him, they found the evidence that they needed to convict him, which he's holding there, his Bible. He was given numerous opportunities to recant, to turn away from Christianity and to become a Muslim again, but he would not.

His lawyers asked if they could use the plea of insanity, but he wouldn't let them. Eventually, last week, under the pressure of significant world leaders, this man, Abdul Rahman, was released, but he was not out of danger.

[1 : 28] However, the clerics and some of the politicians had been calling on the everyday people to tear him limb from limb if he was released, because he was an infidel or an apostate to Islam.

Now, we know now that the Italian secret police have got him out of the country, and he now has asylum in Italy.

But despite the happy ending to his story, the Western world has been really appalled at these events. John Howard is reported as saying that he literally felt sick in the stomach when he heard the news.

There's been outrage, a sense of injustice, of irrational religion, of dangerous radicalism that shows no respect for human rights.

And yet tonight, we are looking at the record of the trial of a man who was also sentenced to death for his religious claims, and yet whose story rarely causes outrage today, rarely even raises an eyebrow in the West.

[2 : 47] We are numb to the impact of this story. Yet, it's a sickening story, the trial, the execution.

This innocent man, Jesus, would find no pardon, no asylum, no secret police to whisk him away to safety. Those who should have been his support, well, they betrayed him.

They sold him out for 30 pieces of silver. They fell asleep. They all deserted him. Even his greatest mate, Peter, wouldn't journey with him, except at a distance.

And as we read this story tonight, we find Peter mingling with the opposition, warming himself with them at the fire. Jesus is alone.

His arrest came under the cover of darkness. No media spotlight, no international watchdog, no accountability. The verdict was a foregone conclusion.

[3 : 54] The evidence was fixed. The witnesses were false. The final condemnation couldn't have been more wrong. And yet, the sentence of death was carried out swiftly and fully within a day.

And so tonight, we must ask the question, if Abdul Rahman's arrest and trial can cause such a reaction today, how should we respond to this account of the arrest and trial of Jesus Christ?

How can we help those around us to emerge out of their apathy towards the proceedings of this unjust court, towards the unambiguous claim that Jesus makes, and to the unmitigated condemnation of this man who claimed to be the saviour of the world?

Well, if you want to turn with me in your Bibles, if you haven't got it open already, to chapter 14 in Mark, verse 53.

Let's start having a look. Mark writes, So just a bit earlier in this chapter, Jesus tells us that while, Mark tells us that while Jesus was speaking to his disciples in the Garden of Gethsemane, Judas, one of the twelve, arrived to betray him.

[5 : 33] And with him, there was a crowd with swords and clubs from the chief priests, the scribes and the elders. So these are the they who have now taken Jesus to the high priest.

And it's still evening, and the normal legal chambers are shut. But they're so desperate to get this trial underway that they meet at the home of the high priest.

Now, as readers of Mark's gospel, we know that the elders, the chief priests, the scribes, are the three groups who have been trying to catch Jesus out and find a way of putting him to death over the whole story of Mark's gospel.

And so as their evil plans finally look like they're coming to fruition here, it's a very dark, heavy scene, isn't it? Full of details that just don't sit right.

First of all, the trial, as we said, is being held at night, which was very irregular, if not forbidden. Secondly, as it was a capital trial, that is, they were trying to get the death penalty for Jesus.

[6 : 45] It shouldn't have been anywhere, according to Jewish law, but the proper meeting rooms of the council, the Sanhedrin. Plus, it's taking place, as we know, during the Passover festival.

And such trials weren't allowed during religious feasts. But there's one thing in particular that doesn't sit right. The trial was fixed.

Verse 55 says that they were looking for testimony against Jesus in order to put him to death. There's no innocent until proven guilty here. No defense. They know the outcome they want.

They've been organizing for days, weeks, months to ensure that it happens. Witnesses have been lined up, ready to testify whenever they could get their hands on Jesus.

And they had to make sure that they had evidence that would lead to the death penalty. But there's a problem. Even in such a set-up trial, the rules about witnesses had to be followed.

[7 : 44] It was absolutely fundamental to the Jewish system of law that for a conviction to be made, there must be at least two witnesses who agreed on every detail when questioned separately.

But these ring-ins, these hired helpers, these false witnesses couldn't even get their stories to agree. And so we read in verses 56 to 59. For many gave false testimony against him, and their testimony did not agree.

Some stood up and gave false testimony against him, saying, We heard him say, I will destroy this temple that is made with hands, and in three days I will build another, not made with hands.

But even on this point, their testimony did not agree. What a shambles. You can imagine the high priest's blood beginning to boil.

Maybe he was one of those people that kind of starts to go a bit red and blotchy, you know, when he's getting hot under the collar. If they could only get Jesus on a charge of threatening the temple, then they'd have what they need to put him to death.

[8 : 51] You see, because in Jewish circles, making a threat against the temple was like making a terrorist bomb threat against the White House. It was treasonous, and it would land you in serious, serious hot water, like we're talking Guantanamo Bay hot water.

People were known to have been stoned for predicting the destruction of the temple, and it was considered a threat against God's very order for the Jewish nation.

The Romans, too, knew the potential that such threats had for destabilising the society, and so they would happily cooperate by enacting the death sentence for anybody who threatened the temple.

So there's a significant danger here. And although Mark hasn't mentioned Jesus making this claim before, we do know from John's Gospel that Jesus did actually say something very much like this.

And he certainly made enough of a fuss in the temple with turning things over and chucking people out that a lot of people would believe that he would say this. So why couldn't the witnesses agree?

[10 : 05] Why are they false? Well, it seems that Jesus never actually said that he would destroy the temple.

What he did say was that if the temple were to be destroyed, destroy this temple, then he would be the one to raise it up in three days.

But it's interesting that the witnesses used the language of made with hands and not made with hands. You see, even though they couldn't agree on the details, there is a sense that they're right.

Because of Jesus' death, the man-made temple, with all the implications of idolatry and self-sufficiency that that language contains, would be brought down.

His death would bring to an end the sacrificial system once and for all. His rejection by the leaders of his own people would ultimately result in God's judgment upon Jerusalem, seen in the destruction of the temple in 70 AD by the Romans.

[11 : 14] And Jesus would, in fact, build another temple, a spiritual temple, both in his body, raised three days after he was killed, but also in us, the body of believers, that Paul says are God's temple.

So there's a significant irony, isn't there, in the fact that these false witnesses ultimately couldn't agree upon something which would turn out to be quite true, but not in the simplistic sense in which they're imagining it.

But of course, this irony is lost on Caiaphas, the high priest, who's getting blotchier by the minute, and he is seriously losing his cool. We read in verse 60, Then the high priest stood up before them and asked Jesus, Have you no answer?

What is it that they testify against you? But he was silent and did not answer. Caiaphas just wants Jesus to incriminate himself. If all those present hear it from the horse's mouth, so to speak, they won't need any witnesses.

But Jesus refuses to be pulled into the dealings of this unjust court. He won't let his death be seen as something out of his control, as the result of unwise words or recklessness.

[12 : 36] And so he is silent. But, something changes when Caiaphas asks him the next question.

Again the high priest asked him, Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One? Jesus said, I am. And you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of the power and coming with the clouds of heaven.

Now I think if Mark's Gospel was a movie, this would be the aha moment. See, Mark's Gospel has kind of been like one of those arty movies which starts with the end at the start and then the rest of the movie, like 90 minutes, or it's an arty movie, so, I don't know, 200 minutes, is you finding out how you get to the end, which was at the start and hopefully at the end as well.

I think you know what I mean. Mark's Gospel, you see, begins with the words, the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

And as the story has unfolded, that's what we've started to see being revealed. People are healed. Demons are cast out.

[13 : 58] The disciples begin to grasp Jesus' identity. But the whole way through, Jesus has never directly affirmed this statement about himself, the Christ, the Son of God.

And so we're like, you know, watching Pulp Fiction or something and going, huh, when? What? When will we find out? But now, with a bit of translation, we can see that the high priest actually asks Jesus to confirm exactly what Mark starts his Gospel with.

See, the high priest says, Are you the Messiah? The Hebrew word for Christ, which is translated Christ. The Son of the Blessed One, which is just a really holy way of saying Son of God.

So he says, Are you Jesus Christ, the Son of God? And so finally, Jesus' answer is an absolutely unambiguous yes.

He not only says, I am, but he makes the most mind-blowing claims anyone present there would ever have heard. He uses language from two passages from the Old Testament, which they would have known, which talk about the future Messiah of Israel, and he applies them directly to himself.

[15 : 16] First of all, he uses Daniel chapter 7, which is the record of a vision, which Daniel, who was a Jew living in exile, sees a battle between kingdoms of the earth and against God and God's people.

But then Daniel sees one which he describes as like the Son of Man. Approach God's throne on the clouds of heaven, and that Son of Man is given, Daniel says, a dominion that won't pass away, glory, kingship that will never be destroyed.

All peoples, nations, and languages should serve him. That's the first image that Jesus is referring to. That's the first blow.

Secondly, he uses Psalm 110, a psalm that talks about King David and the future king that would come to save and rule Israel. And this future king would sit at God's right hand, the position of honour, power, influence, and God would make his enemies a footstool for his feet.

So by putting these two images together, the Son of Man coming in the clouds of heaven and the Messiah, the King, sitting at God's right hand, Jesus was making the most unambiguous claim in their presence to be the rightful King of the Jews, their Messiah, not only God's chosen one, but in fact the Son of God, sharing God's divine authority.

[16 : 52] Furthermore, because they knew the background to these images, they would know that he was also saying he had been given authority to judge and that God would make his enemies his footstool.

Really, really bad news for anyone planning to put him to death. And so Caiaphas just goes ballistic. He tears his clothes and he says, why do we still need witnesses?

You have heard this blasphemy. What is your decision? To the council. All of them condemned him as deserving death.

Some began to spit on him, to blindfold him and to strike him, saying to him, prophesy. The guards also took him over and beat him. All condemned him.

An unmitigated condemnation by everyone there. And this is the second irony. The high priest has charged Jesus with blasphemy because the high priest understood the full impact of Jesus' words, claiming divine authority is God's son and Lord of the universe.

[18 : 05] And it was a crime worthy of the death penalty. Yet, as we read those terrible words, that some began to spit in his face, to shame him, to tease and humiliate him by blindfolding him and challenging him to identify who hit him.

And the guards beat him up. We can't escape the terrible blasphemy that their actions are committing. They are humiliating God the Son, the saviour of the world, and they're making a game of it.

They've put him through an unjust court. They've pronounced unmitigated condemnation. But they have refused to evaluate his unambiguous claim for themselves.

But the tragedy was not just on that night, friends. In hearts around the world today, Jesus Christ is still on trial. He is still in the dock and men and women are still in the judge's seat.

And just as in this trial in the high priest's house, his unambiguous claims are not being evaluated against the true evidence of his perfect life and sacrificial death and glorious resurrection, but instead unjust and unmitigated condemnation is being given over and over again.

[19 : 32] Many of us have at one time or perhaps even still tonight continue to set ourselves as judges over Jesus, refusing to come to him on his terms, refusing to let his claims change our lives.

We convince ourselves perhaps that his claims are blasphemous. He's claiming more authority in our lives than what is rightfully his. But we're wrong, aren't we?

We're wrong and the world is wrong. Abdul Rahman was arraigned as an infidel and an apostate, but the Afghani Muslims were wrong.

Fifteen years ago, Rahman recognised the rightful rule of Jesus and he took himself out of the judge's seat and put himself at the mercy of Jesus. That is what we must also do.

If you know in your heart that you haven't done that or you're finding it really hard to live it out, can I encourage you tonight to ask for help?

[20 : 44] God loves to hear that prayer and he loves to answer it. And if you want to talk to someone about it, then you are more than welcome to talk to myself or Paul, Rod during the week, Lisa, I encourage you to do that.

But if we have made Jesus our rightful Lord and Master, then we must be prepared to follow in our Master's footsteps. Jesus said, if they persecuted me, they will persecute you.

Abdelrahman's story is only one of thousands and millions of Christians who have and are being persecuted and even executed for their faith, even today. And we will come under fire in our families, in our workplaces, at our unis, and in the media, in politics.

But if we take up the call to serve Christ, to let him be the Lord of our lives, then we know how to act in these circumstances because we have the record of how Jesus acted.

When false charges were being laid and unjust process was taking place, he was silent. However, when he was asked a direct question and given the opportunity to testify clearly who he was, then he answered directly and without fear.

[22 : 12] He made the good confession. And this is what we are called to do whenever we are questioned for our faith. If we're questioned directly, we must make the good confession, testify truly to the person and work of Jesus Christ, what he's done in our lives.

And again, if we don't feel confident about that, then it's great to ask for help from God and from those around us. But it takes courage to testify.

And it isn't something we're expected to do in our own strength. The very claims of Jesus in this trial are there to give us confidence, to give us comfort, and to give us courage in whatever our life of faith brings.

See, even though they don't see it now, every person who has ever lived will one day know without a doubt that Jesus Christ is King of the universe. But we don't need to wait until that happens.

We have that knowledge now, and so we know that when he comes, we will be vindicated in whatever we've had to go through. It will be okay. But we also know that Jesus is even now seated at the right hand of God, ruling and interceding for us now, giving us his power now, showering us with his mercy every morning.

[23 : 38] We're not alone. And so in whatever struggles we go through, whether persecution, temptation, doubt, despair, we need to take Jesus out of the dock, make the good confession, and turn our eyes to our King and Saviour, Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns and without a doubt, friends, is coming again to usher in the fullness of his kingdom.

That is our response to the trial of Jesus Christ. Amen. Amen. Amen.