

# **Truth for Today**

*The Bible teaching radio programme*

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## **God's Servant in Mark's Gospel: A Miscarriage of Justice – Mark 15**

We often think of Jesus Christ in terms of His birth and the angels and shepherds joy; His baptism and His Father's voice from heaven; His ministry and the many who were blessed by it; His sacrificial death and the greatness of salvation; His resurrection and His victory over death; and His ascension and His reception into glory. Yet woven through His unique life as Immanuel, God with us, was His experience of injustice and poverty. At his birth there was no room - He was homeless. As a child He was at the centre of the murderous intent of Herod which resulted in the slaughter of hundreds of children. Consequently, as an infant, He became a refugee in Egypt. He grew up in the poorest part of Israel – “can anything good come out of Nazareth” asked Nathanael (John 1:46). He worked as a carpenter – “Is not this the carpenter” (Mark 6:3). He possessed neither home nor wealth – “Show me a penny” (Luke 20:24). He experienced rejection and hatred from very people who should have been the first to recognise Him as the Messiah. And, as we saw last week in Mark 14, Jesus was betrayed by Judas then denied by Peter, His closest disciple.

Mark 14 begins to describe the truth of John 1, “He came unto His own and His own received Him not”. Mark 15, this morning's chapter, concentrates on the miscarriage of justice inflicted upon the Son of God. The disgraceful Jewish trial, and its violence, is outlined in chapter 14. What followed, as we shall see, was the complete failure of the proud Roman system of justice and the crucifixion of the Son of God.

Our chapter opens with the Saviour being bound and led into the presence of Pilate. Pilate asked Him, “Are You the King of the Jews?” As Pilate listens to the accusations of the chief priests he is impressed by the dignity and silence of Jesus. Mark presents Pilate as one whom, although struck by the character of the Son of God and convinced of His innocence, was only really concerned with finding a practical solution to a local problem which had the potential to cause civil disorder. If he could, he would try to uphold justice but if the political cost was too great he would choose the most expedient route and allow the innocent to bear the cost. Pilate was completely unaware that he was at the centre of God's greatest revelation of His love and grace to this world and Pilate demonstrated the moral bankruptcy of its greatest power.

Pilate's guilt is compounded by the fact he knew why the chief priests had brought Jesus to him, “For he knew that the chief priests had handed Him over because of envy” (verse 10). He cleverly tries to use the custom of releasing one prisoner to the crowd at the feast of the Passover expecting Jesus to be chosen. To his surprise the people, influenced by the chief priests, ask for the Barabbas, the robber, to be released. Choices are vital and we cannot pass over this incident in regard to the miscarriage of justice. The opportunity for the choice was perverse. It was to allow a mob influenced by enraged leaders to release a violent criminal or a man Pilate publically owned to be blameless. The choice that was made was completely contrary to legal and natural justice. The responsibility for this immense miscarriage of justice fell firmly upon Jew and Gentile alike. The Jews had led Jesus to Pilate to be executed and Pilate had allowed an innocent Man to be crucified. These unjust acts condemn both religious fury and secular hypocrisy.

Mark briefly describes Pilate concern over the execution of an innocent man. “What then do you want me to do with Him whom you call the King of the Jews?” (verse 12) The answer was deafening, “Crucify Him!” Pilate asks, “Why, what evil has He done?” Mobs are not rational. There is no debate, just a louder insistence, “Crucify Him!” Here Mark explains, in his concise way, describes Pilate's course of action. “So Pilate, wanting to gratify the crowd, released Barabbas to them; and he delivered Jesus, after he had scourged Him, to be crucified.” (verse 15).

Upholding justice is vital to the well being of society. Once other courses are taken in an attempt to try and placate what should be rejected, injustice prospers. It is difficult to imagine what the Lord Jesus felt in His heart when He heard those awful words, “Crucify Him, crucify Him!” It is best described in the words of the Psalmist, “Reproach has broken My heart.” The rejection of His own people was a bitterness deeply felt by the One who had sought only their blessing.

From verse 16 Mark relates the cruelty of the soldiers in the Praetorium. A Roman garrison would be between 300 and 1,000 soldiers and they were all encouraged to come and watch the violence, mockery and humiliation of the kindest man who ever walked on this earth. “Then the soldiers led Him away into the hall called Praetorium, and they

called together the whole garrison. And they clothed Him with purple; and they twisted a crown of thorns, put it on His head, and began to salute Him, 'Hail, King of the Jews!' Then they struck Him on the head with a reed and spat on Him; and bowing the knee, they worshiped Him. And when they had mocked Him, they took the purple off Him, put His own clothes on Him, and led Him out to crucify Him." (verses 16-20).

Men's ability to inflict abuse on others is the greatest shame on the humanity. Violence caused by heated argument or rage can be explained but the cold, calculated and systematic infliction of pain and humiliation on others is one of the most frightening aspects of human behaviour. The Lord Jesus was made a spectacle. The One who is the "Kings of Kings and Lord of Lords" was mocked with a purple robe and a crown of thorns. Thorns were the very evidence of a cursed earth and the dominion of sin (Genesis 3). At the Lord's baptism the Father's voice was heard from heaven saying, "You are my beloved Son, with you I am well pleased." Here heaven hears the voices of the soldiers mocking Jesus as the King of Jews. Heaven see the soldiers bowed knees in pretended worship. Heaven sees the Saviour repeatedly struck and spat upon. Contrast this with the day when every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father (Philippians 2). I am sure there were those who stood there watching whose hearts would have been melted by the intrinsic love of Christ just like the dying thief and then the centurion at the cross. But there would be others who, like Pilate, had no comprehension of what they were witnessing and no conscience in regard to the injustice of what was happening.

Mark gives us an insight into the weight of Christ's physical suffering when it appears the Lord experienced difficulty carrying His cross. It touches our hearts to see that the One who is described as having the government of the world on His shoulder (Isaiah 9:6) feeling the exhaustion of carrying the wooden cross on which He would be nailed to carry the sin of the world. In verse 21 Simon is compelled to help. He was from Cyrene. Simon's experience seems to have led him Christ and later his sons to Christ. The way Alexander and Rufus are described suggests they were disciples and known to Mark. There may be a connection with Romans 16:13 but it is uncertain. The thrust of Mark's comment is that Simon was affected by his close encounter with Christ on the way to the cross and it is possible he stayed to witness the Saviour's death.

Golgotha, the Place of a Skull, was where Christ was crucified. It is a Greek translation of an Aramaic word meaning "the place of a skull". Calvary comes from the Latin 'calvaria' meaning skull. It is likely the hill had a shape similar to a skull. It reminds us of death particularly as it was a place of execution outside the city of Jerusalem. But I think it is also a reminder of the wisdom of God. What Jesus was about to do in the sacrifice of Himself was beyond the mind and wisdom of man. By dying Jesus was about to bring in life. By going into darkness He would bring us into light. By being alone He would bring us into the fellowship of God. By being lifted up He would draw all men to Himself.

The Lord Jesus was offered wine mingled with myrrh to drink as a relief for the pain He would endure. But He did not take it. He experienced all the agony of Calvary – "Shall I not drink the cup that the Father has given me" (John 18:11). His refusal to drink the wine mixed with myrrh was evidence that He was drinking the cup that God the Father had given Him - a picture of His will to accomplish the work of salvation.

In verse 24, we read, "And when they crucified Him, they divided His garments, casting lots for them to determine what every man should take." The attitude of the soldiers during the crucifixion is a telling comment on human behaviour. Without compassion, driven by greed to gamble for what little Jesus possessed and indifferent to all that was happening, the soldiers give a brutal insight into how hard the human heart can become. It also shows that we can be so near to the demonstration of the love of God at its most powerful, yet be totally unaffected by it. The greatest danger to the human heart is indifference. Yet this indifference served to prove what Scripture had foretold, "They divided My garments among them, and for My clothing they cast lots" (Psalm 22).

I said earlier that the Lord Jesus experienced injustice and poverty throughout His life. The poverty of Lord was demonstrated by the little he possessed. It is very interesting that at the beginning of the Lord's life He was given three very valuable things – gold, frankincense and myrrh. I have often thought of these gifts as illustrating the great aspects of His person and work. The gold illustrates Who he was – The Son of God. Frankincense the fragrance of Who He become - the Son of Man. And the myrrh – the value of His death as the Saviour of the World. These three illustrations remind us of the pathway He took from heaven to earth and ultimately, as we see here, to the cross itself. At the end of His life, His only possessions were his clothes. John explains, John 19, that after sharing the clothes of Lord between them the soldiers discover a He had a tunic. It was seamless woven from the top to the bottom. Rather than tear this valuable tunic into parts they drew lots to decide who should have it. The fact that John takes time, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, to record this is very interesting. It seems to me that the three valuable gifts given at the beginning of life of Jesus illustrate who He was as God and Man and what He came to do by the sacrifice of Himself, have a connection to this woven tunic. At the beginning of His life on earth He was given riches. Now at the end of His life on earth, in poverty, His most valuable possession had the characteristic of being woven from the top to the bottom. When my first grand daughter was born my wife knitted her a shawl on one circular needle. When it was finished it had no seam. Christ's tunic reminds us of His life seamlessly expressing His coming from heaven, the top, then down to earth and finally down into death itself – see Philippians 2. This wonderful seamless display of love,

grace, truth and finally complete sacrifice remind us of Paul's words in 2 Corinthians 8:9, "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor, that you through His poverty might become rich."

Mark records the hour of Christ's crucifixion and part of the inscription of His accusation written above His head - THE KING OF THE JEWS. John tells us that Pilate wrote a title and put it on the cross. It read, JESUS OF NAZARETH, THE KING OF THE JEWS. The name of Jesus was given before His birth and marked Him as the Saviour, "For He will save His people from their sins". The cross was the place where this prophecy was fulfilled.

Equally the prophecy in Isaiah 53:12, "And He was numbered with the transgressors" was fulfilled in the Lord's crucifixion between two robbers.

In verses 29-30 we read of those who passed by and also the chief priests and the scribes who wanted to be there. These groups joined together to express pitiless blasphemy against the One who had demonstrated the greatest compassion. The children's hymn reads, "Those hands which did so much good, they nailed them to a cross of wood." But was not sufficient to gratify the cruel hearts of some that Christ be crucified but that He must be subjected to a constant stream of hatred until He died.

Abuse and cruelty can be both physical and emotional and Jesus suffered both – what a response to a ministry of love and healing. The miscarriage of justice was not simply the wickedness of the Jewish show trial and the Pilate's cowardice but the administration of unremitting hatred towards One who only loved. "He saved others; Himself He cannot save. Let the Christ, the King of Israel, descend now from the cross, that we may see and believe." Even those who were crucified with Him reviled Him. (verses 31-32). The only words recorded that Jesus heard, as He suffered on the cross, were words of abuse until Luke tells us that one of the dying thieves defends the Saviour and appeals to the Lord to remember him. As result, in the midst of all the horror of Calvary, Jesus speaks of the reality of paradise – "And Jesus said to him, 'Assuredly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise'" (Luke 23:43).

Jesus made seven statements from the cross and the central one is found in verses 34, "And at the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice, saying, 'Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?' which is translated, 'My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?'" The Bronze Altar of the Tabernacle is described in Exodus 27. In the centre of the altar, halfway down was the grating where the sacrifices were burnt. It was in the very midst of the fire – the fiercest flames. It has always impressed me that the central cry of Christ from the cross was, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" This was the place of sacrifice. All the Old Testament sacrifices were simply pictures of this one perfect sacrifice – the sacrifice of Christ as the great mediator bearing the sin of the world. "But this Man, after He had offered one sacrifice for sins forever, sat down at the right hand of God" (Hebrews 10:12).

The question Jesus cried out was just one. Why? There was nothing in the Saviour that deserved the judgment of God. But this is not a miscarriage of justice. This was the sacrifice of divine love in the words of Peter, "For Christ also suffered once for sins, the just for the unjust, that He might bring us to God" (1 Peter 3:18).

Mark, who writes of Jesus as the Servant of God, records the death of Christ soon after the three hours of darkness. He also records that straight after Christ's death the veil of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom (verse 38). This veil, thought to be some 30 feet high and of great thickness, separated the Holy Place in the temple from the Most Holy Place. In the Tabernacle and in Solomon's Temple the Most Holy Place was where the original Ark of the Covenant was placed. It was the place where God's presence had rested after Moses had erected the Tabernacle and after Solomon's temple was completed. Only the High Priest could enter this place on the Day of Atonement. But when Jesus died God's first act was the tearing of the veil of the temple. It was torn from the top to the bottom demonstrating that atonement for sin had been met completely by the death of Jesus and God was now moving out in grace to the world on the basis of the greatness of sacrifice of Christ.

If God, upon the death of His Son, acts by giving a sign of His grace we also see the effects of that grace. Mark, a Jewish disciple, records the immediate effect of the grace of God on a gentile, a person who was naturally so far from God. In verse 39 we read, "So when the centurion, who stood opposite Him, saw that He cried out like this and breathed His last, he said, 'Truly this Man was the Son of God!'" It is interesting that at the beginning and the end of Christ's life on earth we have gentiles coming to Jesus. First it was the wise men, here it is the centurion. His own people in the context of the crucifixion may have rejected Jesus but it is those who naturally had no claim on the Son of God who are the first to worship Him.

Mark also does not forget the women at the cross. Although we know John was present other disciples are not mentioned but the faithfulness of the women who cared for the Lord is recorded (verse 40-41).

What is so appealing at the end of our chapter this morning is the response in the heart of one man who had witnessed the miscarriage of justice against the Saviour. "Joseph of Arimathea, a prominent council member, who

was himself waiting for the kingdom of God, coming and taking courage, went in to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. Pilate marvelled that He was already dead; and summoning the centurion, he asked him if He had been dead for some time. So when he found out from the centurion, he granted the body to Joseph. Then he bought fine linen, took Him down, and wrapped Him in the linen. And he laid Him in a tomb which had been hewn out of the rock, and rolled a stone against the door of the tomb." (verses 43-46)

It is Joseph who takes the initiative to ask for the body of Jesus. Matthew and Mark in their Gospels also record this event. Pilate releases the body of Jesus to His disciple. It is interesting that Pilate, who would not release the innocent Jesus, now releases His body to Joseph. Scripture does not comment on the effect this had on Pilate. But he would have been left with the contrasting and abiding memories of the hatred of the Jewish mob and gentleness of noble Joseph.

In Isaiah 53:8-9 we read of the Messiah, "He was cut off from the land of the living; for the transgressions of My people He was stricken. And they made His grave with the wicked - but with the rich at His death, because He had done no violence, nor was any deceit in His mouth." Christ was imprisoned, unjustly judged and then crucified alongside common criminals. Pilate had publicly declared the innocence of Jesus and the Lord had offered His perfect life to answer for our sins. Having died, we now see Him buried by the rich in a new grave. Christ had substituted Barabbas on the cross; He also substitutes the rich owner of a new tomb. In this way the substitutional work of Christ for us, whatever our condition, is illustrated.

The Lord's disciples, as we see in other Scriptures, were overwhelmed by the arrest and death of Christ it left them powerless. But Joseph instead of being overwhelmed by the situation, was overwhelmed by the Saviour's love and sacrifice and he responded. He committed his life and resources to the Saviour - the One who loved him and who Joseph now served. We should never be surprised by miscarriages of justice in a world which crucified Christ. But we should be surprised if we do not follow the Saviour who gave so much for us. We shall never truly serve the Saviour until, like Joseph, the depth of Jesus' love and sacrifice profoundly affect us. A love that, in the final words of Isaac Watts hymn, "When I survey the wondrous cross", are "so amazing, so divine" and a love that "demands my soul, my life, my all."

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