

Arrest & crucifixion (John's story)

Study Four



Giotto Scrovegni, *The Kiss of Judas*, 1305

Opening Chat...

Not a simple question for the start of a meeting, but where do you stand on the concept of the death penalty as punishment for wrongdoing in today's world?

Key verses...

The chief priests of the Jews protested to Pilate, 'Do not write "The King of the Jews", but that this man claimed to be king of the Jews.' Pilate answered, 'What I have written, I have written.'
(John 19:21,22)

Jesus arrested...

(Read John 18:1-40)

In the previous study we left Jesus and his disciples in Gethsemane, and now pick up the story as John tells it, and immediately we find Judas is missing, this being his opportunity to hasten a moment of betrayal.

The soldiers may have already been to the house where the Last Supper was shared, before moving on to Jesus' favourite spot in the garden. Whether a whole detachment of soldiers was necessary we are not told, but the temple authorities seem to have engaged the services of the local garrison in arresting Jesus.

John emphasises that at the moment of his arrest Jesus is very keen to protect his disciples, telling the soldiers twice that it is he, and he alone that they need to take, echoing a promise made earlier, 'And this is the will of him who sent me, that I shall lose none of all those he has given me, but raise them up at the last day' (John 6:39). They bring Jesus to Annas, a respected leader, possibly an expert in religious matters, prior to an early morning

appearance before members of the Jewish tribunal.

Peter and an unnamed disciple follow at a distance and gain access to the high priest's courtyard, and it's here, warming his hands by a fire, that Peter denies being a disciple not once but three times, as previously prophesied by Jesus. As this is happening, Jesus is undergoing a very physical interrogation before being sent bound to Caiaphas the high priest and onward to Pilate.

This is the longest account of the trial in the four gospels. The others deal mainly with legal matters, whereas John is more interested in Jesus' concern about Pilate and the difficult position he finds himself in. It is more of an interview than a trial, which emphasises the lack of a suitable crime for which Pilate might order an execution, because there is no evidence that Jesus poses a danger to Roman rule. But Pilate is also a politician. This awkward situation needs a satisfactory outcome, and Passover gives him that

opportunity with the custom of releasing a prisoner. Jesus seemed popular with people in the towns, so perhaps the way out would be to order the release of this so-called 'king of the Jews' after a simple thrashing?

But this crowd, drawn together specially by the priests, rejects that approach and call for the release of Barabbas, and the death of Jesus.

Discussion...

- 1: What do verses 6-8 say to you about Jesus and his accusers?
 - 2: John gives us a window into the character of Peter in verses 15-18 and 25-27. How does the disciple come across to you?
 - 3: Pilate struggles to understand who Jesus is and what has brought him to this place. Jesus said to him, 'Everyone on the side of truth listens to me,' to which Pilate answers, 'What is truth?' How would you answer that question, if asked?
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Sentenced to death...

(Read John 19: 1-16)

Once more it is almost as if it is Pilate at the centre of this story than Jesus as John paints a picture of a Roman governor keen to see that justice is not steamrollered away, but not at the expense of losing his job or worse. Whilst he can find no reason to declare Jesus guilty of anything deserving crucifixion, the comments of the Jewish leaders that to fail them was to label himself as 'no friend of Caesar' was a real threat to Pilate. Anyone calling themselves a king, as Jesus had done, was potentially a rival to Caesar.

It was becoming clear that if Jesus was released, then the high priest would send a report to Rome saying Pilate had refused to bring a potential rival to justice, and maybe was plotting a new alliance. That would lose Pilate his career, and with Tiberius as emperor it would almost certainly lose him his life.

To Jesus, this is a question of power. He understands the political pressure Pilate feels but sees him as an instrument of God's purposes, the actual guilt being with those who have manipulated the whole legal process and brought him to this place. In his conversations with Pilate, there is the opportunity for Jesus to reveal more about himself and the kingdom of God, but Pilate chooses what he considers is the safest path to follow. So, he presents the bleeding, bruised and suffering Jesus to the crowd as their king, to which the Jewish leaders respond, 'We have no king but Caesar.'



Mihály Munkácsy, *Christ in front of Pilate*, 1881

The irony of the situation is obvious to John, as the Jews, who long for independence, put themselves on record as being content to be subjects of a pagan emperor. It seems like John's description of Jesus at the start of his gospel was being fulfilled as they handed him over for crucifixion.

'He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not

recognise him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him.' (John 1:10-11)

The message John brings is that although Jesus died at the hands of Roman soldiers, it was the Jews who were primarily responsible for his death.

Discussion...

- 4: Why do you think the writer John spends so much time considering the role of Pilate at this moment in the story?
 - 5: Politics plays a part in Jesus' trial and its outcome. How easily do politics and Church get on in our own generation?
 - 6: What were the implications of the chief priests proclaiming, 'We have no king but Caesar'?
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Crucifixion...

(Read John 19:17-42)

And so, they lead Jesus out to his crucifixion. Normal practice was for the condemned person, accompanied by four legionnaires and a centurion, to carry the horizontal beam of the cross along with a placard displaying their name and crime. They walked from Pilate's judgement seat to a place outside the city called Golgotha where the crucifixion would take place.

There is no mention of the process itself, as early readers would have been all too aware of the immense cruelty in this method of execution, where the condemned person might hang onto life for up to thirty-six hours of increasing agony. The apostle Paul alludes to the cruelty of this practice when he says of Jesus, 'And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death – even death on a cross!' (Philippians 2:8)

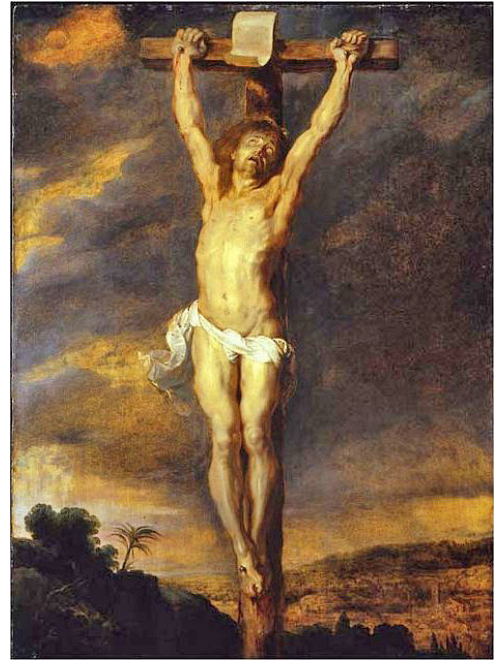
The message on the placard was in three languages so that all who passed by could see that they had crucified the king of the Jews as a common criminal. Pilate's refusal to amend this description at the chief priests' request is his final say on the matter, much to their annoyance.

As Jesus' clothes are shared and gambled over, we read that there were four particular women watching the tragedy take place; Mary, the wife of Clopas (who we know nothing of), Mary Magdalene (see Luke 8:2), the mother of Jesus and her sister (who was possibly the mother of James and John). Jesus hands over responsibility for his mother's welfare to a disciple thought to be John, who took her to his home in Jerusalem where she must have remained, as Acts tells us she was present at the pre-Pentecost prayer meeting (Acts 1:13).

Jesus' words before he dies, 'It is finished', signify the completion of his work, and in its context is a shout of triumph from the Cross. John gives us an eyewitness statement of the soldiers' actions in not breaking the legs of Jesus but using a spear instead to double-check that he was dead.

Burial would normally take place within twenty-four hours of death, so two friends intervene and take charge so that Jesus might have a proper burial, and the quantity of spices used shows the wealth of Nicodemus.

This was a courageous act, as it linked them publicly to Jesus. The grave was not in a public cemetery, but in a private garden, possibly just outside the city walls and easily accessible for the women after the Sabbath.



Peter Paul Rubens, Crucifixion, c1618-1620

Discussion...

- Even as Jesus hangs on the cross, there is argument over the wording on the placard nailed above his head, and the story switched briefly to Pilate again. What might John be saying to his readers?
- 7:
 - 8: Women feature throughout the gospel stories of Jesus. Mary Magdalene appears by name twelve times in the four gospels, more than most of the apostles. We find them in a supporting role, and drawn together at the death of Jesus, but do we acknowledge their true importance in the complete story?
 - 9: Most of the disciples had run away as they arrested Jesus, and Peter had already denied knowing him three times. Yet Jesus can cry out, 'It is finished!' which implies that all is in place for what happens next. What does that say about God's plans for our everyday lives?
 - 10: John describes Joseph of Arimathea as a 'secret disciple,' Mark calls him 'a prominent member of the Council waiting for the kingdom of God,' Matthew talks of 'a rich man,' and Luke 'a Council member who had not consented to their action'. How difficult can it sometimes be to openly admit to your faith?

For prayer...

Pray that the message of Easter this world hears is one of hope, that does not end with the fear of death but with the promise of life.