

Before the Cock Crows

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[0 : 0 0] We're continuing our sermon series on the last chapters of Matthew's Gospel and you may like to follow in the Bible at page 809 from the reading that we've had from Matthew chapter 26.

And let's pray. Speak to us, Lord. Speak to us from your word. Strengthen us to give testimony and witness to the Lord Jesus and live for his glory.

And we thank you for him. Amen. Muntaza Al-Zaidi has been back in the news this week, as I'm sure you've all noticed and can roll his name off the top of your tongue.

I had to practice a bit last night to get that, I think, right. Why is he in the news? Muntaza Al-Zaidi wears size 10 shoes, both of which he threw at President George W. Bush.

And he's been in the news this week because his sentence has been brought down. Three years in jail. Now, for some people, he's a hero. And they think this is an atrocious travesty of justice.

[1 : 1 2] That's an injustice that's being done. Here is a man who simply threw two shoes at a man that they would allege has killed thousands of people and terrorised the whole world. Others think perhaps it's too little.

Three years jail. Fair or unfair. Just or unjust. It's the same length of jail term that William Scott Bloxham has been facing for flying his little plane into Papua for a long weekend holiday.

And he's still there, I think. It's a bit hard to work that one out. Compare that to five years jail for four young men who threw petrol and littered over a harmless old man in Rosebud some months ago.

And compare all of that with Sean Hodgson. He's been in jail for 29 years for alleged murder. And this week, it seems that the DNA proves that he's innocent.

That was in England. Every day, issues of justice and injustice confront us. People saying that this sentence is too long or this sentence is too short.

[2 : 2 4] That this is not fair. This is fair. Should Charles Zentai be extradited to Hungary to face war crimes? A man in his late 80s, I think. Or what about John Demjanjuk, who's just been charged again with war crimes, this time in Germany?

Will Omar Hussain al-Bashir ever face justice? The president of Sudan, who's been indicted by the United Nations War Crime Tribunal, whatever it's called.

There's debate about justice over our bushfires and whether the Royal Commission will actually lead to justice being done where it should be done. And what about a rugby player? Suspended for four weeks?

Is that fair or not? For drunkenness? That alleged rape followed? The list goes on and on. Issues of justice and injustice.

And it's not new. It's been going on forever. And as we read through the trial of Jesus, the issues of justice and injustice flow through as a strong stream through these verses in these last chapters of Matthew.

[3 : 3 5] It's late at night. Some say that it's illegal that the Jewish tribunal met at night. Led by the high priest, Caiaphas, Sanhedrin or council of 70 men was part of the Jewish council.

Whether every single one of them that was there here late at night, we're not sure. We're into the early hours of the morning by the end of this little section. So probably over the midnight sort of period through till maybe one or possibly two a.m.

They were under haste because they wanted this all dealt with before the Sabbath day came at sunset later in that day. And of course, it's the Feast of Unleavened Bread, the Passover festival. So it's a special day that's lying ahead of them. And you wouldn't meet as a trial over a Sabbath day. So at least they were trying to get it done before then. But all through there are questions of justice and injustice.

And the scholars debate a bit of that because sometimes the rules were allowed to be bent. Whether they're all allowed in this case is hard to be sure. They met at the house of the high priest. [4 : 48] It was in Jerusalem, probably up on the hill of Mount Zion, probably not all that far from where Jesus had had his last meal. Remember, he'd gone over the Jordan River, the Kidron Valley rather, and up onto the Mount of Olives as we've seen in the last couple of weeks, and now arrested as we saw last week, brought back into Jerusalem for this trial.

These people have made their mind up. There is no innocence presumed. They know in their minds that Jesus deserves death for blasphemy.

And so that's what they try to get out of this court. That is, it's misguided. It's biased from the start. It's not just or fair. So we're told, for example, in verse 59, that the chief priests and the whole council were looking for false testimony against Jesus.

Not that they said, who can give us a false testimony? But rather that any testimony that brought about an allegation that Jesus was a blasphemer is false.

Because in Matthew's mind, and truly, Jesus was not false. So it's not simply that they're blatantly and brazenly trying to say, can we get a false testimony?

[6 : 08] They are looking for testimony to back up their conclusion that they've already formed in their mind that Jesus is guilty. And so an act of injustice is being perpetrated.

Amazingly, for some time, they found none, verse 60 says, though many false witnesses came forward. And the whole point of it, as the end of verse 59 said, is so they might put him to death. That's their goal here. Their goal is not justice. Their goal is not a fair trial. Their goal is the death of Jesus. And for some time, even though some false witnesses came, it didn't stand in their minds, for whatever reason.

It may be that there was only one person who made such and such allegation. And in Jewish law, you need two. It may be that the false witnesses were so false and fantastical that they, even this trial, dismissed them.

We don't know. But at last, verse 60 says at the end, two came forward. Presumably some period of time has gone.

[7 : 18] The way it says at last, it's almost as though they breathe a sigh of relief. But finally, they've got two witnesses. Two, because you need it by Jewish law. And this is their accusation.

This fellow said, I am able to destroy the temple of God and to build it in three days. Well, what's wrong about that?

Is it a fair accusation or not? They're accusing Jesus of threatening to desecrate the temple, to destroy it. An act of terrorism, in effect.

And certainly the destruction of the temple or any sacred space was regarded by the Jewish authorities as a capital offence. So if indeed Jesus had threatened to do that, then indeed capital offence was what their laws and traditions, not an Old Testament law, but what their laws and traditions would bring about.

The question is, is their accusation accurate? This is what they said. I'm able to destroy the temple of God and to build it in three days.

[8 : 40] And many of us, if we know our Bibles well, think, well, yeah, that reminds me of something that Jesus said. In John chapter 2, for example, Jesus said, destroy this temple and in three days I'll raise it up.

But notice the differences. This is what Jesus said. Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up.

This is their accusation. I am able to destroy the temple of God and to build it in three days. It's different.

In one sense it's subtly different, but it is different. Jesus' words as he spoke them were not a threat to destroy the temple.

He said, destroy this temple. Let it be destroyed. If you or somebody destroy it, that's the thrust of it. Not that he would destroy it, but that it could be destroyed. The emphasis is on, I will rebuild it in three days.

[9 : 46] But they've placed all their emphasis on the condition as though Jesus is threatening to do the destruction himself, which he didn't. And so they're making a charge against him of threatening to destroy the sacred place.

Jesus hadn't threatened that. It's a subtle distinction. It may be that unwittingly and unintentionally they have misremembered what Jesus said. Maybe.

It may be that they are deliberately distorting his words. Whichever is the case, the accusation is a false one. But it certainly seems that others thought the same thing.

When Jesus a few hours later hangs on the cross, those who passed by derided him, shaking their heads and saying, you who would destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself.

Again, it seems they're misquoting and misunderstanding, deliberately or not, Jesus' words as recorded in John's Gospel. The context in John is of being asked for a sign.

[10:57] And Jesus is offering them the sign of his risen body as the new temple, the place in which the people of God meet with God. It was a profound idea, one that they didn't fully understand.

John, in fact, makes a note of that. But they didn't understand it properly. Here, in this trial of Jesus in Matthew 26, it's a similar sort of context.

They are looking for things to nail Jesus as an imposter claiming to be the Messiah. But they have to use distorted language to bring it about.

Well, how did Jesus respond to this allegation? He's silent, typically, in fact. The high priest stood up and said, Have you no answer?

What is it that they testify against you? It's a strange question in a way. What is it that they testify against you? But what he's trying to get out and draw out of Jesus is, in effect, the claim again.

[12:05] So that he doesn't have to quiz the witnesses, everybody would have heard him. If the witnesses' accusation is true and he says, What is it that they're testifying?

And he says, That I can destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days, he might have nailed it. But Jesus is silent. As verse 63 says, And as indeed the prophet Isaiah predicted.

Then the high priest said to him, And now, in a sense, the tension rises another notch. I put you under oath before the living God.

This was a legal ploy that was certainly allowed in many legal cases. That silence was not an option. So the person, the accused, or the prisoner, would be put under oath to give an answer.

There's debate, though, that this was not a legal option in a case that had capital punishment as its potential outcome. And so therefore, potentially, this may be illegal.

[13:10] Maybe. I put you under oath before the living God. Tell us if you are the Messiah, the Son of God. That's the basic issue.

They know that Jesus, in effect, has been claiming to be the Messiah. They thoroughly don't believe that he is. And that anyone who claims to be the Messiah is therefore an imposter and therefore a blasphemer, in effect.

Tell us, the high priest says. And this is what Jesus says in reply. He's bound to reply by this legal being placed under an oath.

He cannot resort to silence. And he said to them, initially, two words. The same two words that he spoke earlier in this chapter, a few hours earlier, to Judas.

Remember at the meal, Jesus said, one of you will betray me. All the disciples say, surely not I, Lord. And then he reiterates that about the one who dips in the same bowl.

[14:24] And Judas says, surely not I, Rabbi. And Jesus' two words to Judas are the same as here. You said it.

They're your words. It's your way of putting it. Literally, you said it. You say so. Jesus is not denying it. It's actually a sort of roundabout way of affirming it.

But he's leaving the words in their mouth so that he himself is not then explicitly making the claim.

It's not that Jesus decrees that Judas will betray him.

Judas is going to do it. And Jesus said, you've said so. They're your words. You've said it. And thus he says back to Caiaphas as well. He doesn't disagree with the claim.

He's the Messiah, the Son of God. But then he goes on to speak. But I tell you. As it's translated here. Or even indeed I tell you.

[15:26] And now what he does is to clarify the nature of being the Messiah, the Son of God. Jesus is very careful in that initial response. You said it.

Not to incriminate himself. But what follows is even more provocative. For Caiaphas and for the Jewish leaders, the Messiah predominantly would be a political figure.

The whole goal of God for his people was that they would live in the land under a king descended from David whose dynasty would last forever, the Old Testament promised. But that was not the reality now and it hadn't been for a long time. For nearly a hundred years they'd been under Roman rule since the Romans defeated the Greeks in 63 BC under Pompey. And that Roman overrule was getting more and more difficult for the Jews. At first they had a nominally Jewish leader, Herod the Great, and then after his death divided into three territories and so Judea was under a son of Herod but that son was even worse than his father and the Romans got rid of him about 6 AD, Herod Archelaus and then they put in their own governor and that had created more tension.

[16:41] For now there was no real Jewish leader. It was the procurator or governor and at this time it was Pilate who was no good man either. And so there was this increasing sense of the Messiah coming and in particular with a political focus.

Overthrow the Romans it would be a son of David who would restore the throne of Jerusalem and we'd go back to an independent life as the people of God. But Jesus is not that political figure. He's not overthrowing the Romans. The initial adulation in some circles has dried up with frustration in others. Jesus then goes on to clarify what it would be to be the son of God the Messiah.

And he quotes from two Old Testament passages from the prophet Daniel chapter 7 and from the Psalms Psalm 110 and he says these words from now on or in the future you will see the son of man seated at the right hand of power and coming on the clouds of heaven.

Jesus uses the name son of man in the third person but he's speaking about himself. but again it's this slightly evasive way. He's not saying I but the son of man.

[18:02] It's clear for those reading and listening who've known what Jesus has already taught he's talking about himself but he uses that third person as a way of not incriminating himself directly.

Thus he's more or less simply quoting the scriptures but it's clear even to his accusers that he's speaking of himself. He doesn't say seated at the right hand of God he doesn't name God that would be offensive as well.

The Jews were very careful not to use the name of God so he says here what's translated power or perhaps better mighty one or almighty one. Again that element of distance that Jesus uses but he's clearly saying I'm the Messiah I'm the one that Daniel and the Psalms anticipate and predict but his words in quoting that are even more provocative than what he said in John chapter 2 about rebuilding the temple and no wonder therefore they're outraged in verse 65 the high priest tore his clothes that's a sign of grief but also a sign of outrage and disgust at the words that Jesus uses applied to himself he has blasphemed he says why do we still need witnesses you've now heard this blasphemy what is your verdict it's a bit artificial because the high priest has already declared his verdict he has blasphemed so hardly anyone's going to object to him in the middle of the night he deserves death they answered and then their outrage continues they spit in his face and strike him and slap him and no wonder in one sense because his words are highly provocative what Jesus is doing in using these two

Old Testament passages brought together is to make it clear who he is and what the nature of the Messiah is it's not simply a political figure to overthrow Roman rule firstly he's saying I am the true king the quote from the prophet Daniel says this I saw one like a son of man coming with the clouds of heaven and he came to the ancient one that is God and was presented before him and to him was given dominion and glory and kingship that all peoples nations and languages should serve him his dominion is an everlasting dominion that shall not pass away and his kingship is one that shall never be destroyed in the context it's clear that this is one who would be a son of David descended from David and it's an everlasting and universal kingship and what Jesus is saying I am not just going to overthrow

Romans and establish a little kingship here he's saying about himself I'm the universal king the king of all the nations I have dominion over all the world far bigger than their conception of what the Messiah would do but it's more than that and if they physically slap him in the face this is a verbal slap in the face of greater dimension back to Caiaphas the high priest in front of Jesus is the high priest a very powerful man and Jesus by quoting Psalm 110 is slapping him in the face verbally that Psalm says the Lord said to my Lord David is writing sit at my right hand until I make your enemies your footstool and then it goes on to say the Lord has sworn and will not change his mind you are a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek an obscure character from Genesis but what

it's saying is what

[21 : 58] Jesus is alluding to is that he is the Lord that David and that same Lord is not just a king but a priest a priest of a better order of priesthood than the chief priest and the Aaronic Zadok priests around him and so therefore to the high priest who is judging him Jesus is in effect saying I am a greater priest according to the order of Melchizedek it's implied by quoting the psalm all the time the New Testament does that when it quotes a bit of the Old Testament it implies the rest it's like me saying to you the Lord's my shepherd and most of you in your mind will think oh therefore I shall lack nothing that is the rest of the context flows from the little quote so by referring to Psalm 110 he's actually implying the rest of the psalm I am there's even more

Psalm 110 anticipates that this figure this Lord this priest is also the judge he will execute judgment among the nations and again think how provoking that is to Caiaphas who thinks that he is judging Jesus and Jesus is saying I am the one with universal judgment not you and you will see me coming on the clouds to judge you think you are judging me as a blasphemer but the tables will be turned soon the other role of the Messiah one that those verses don't explicitly pick up was that the Messiah would be a prophet it was a common theme in Jesus day we see it in other parts of the gospels where they say who do people say that I am are you the prophet all because of the expectation that the prophet like

Moses would come one day when they ridiculed Jesus they blindfolded him according to Mark's gospel and that it makes sense then of what's going on here in verse 68 they slap him and they say to him prophesy to us you Messiah who is it that struck you it implies he's blindfolded how humiliating they tie up prophecy and Messiah together rightly but Jesus will have none of that trivialisation of being the prophet at all the true prophet he was he quotes from the prophet Daniel and from the Psalms showing he fulfills real prophecy he issues the prophecy that he is coming on the clouds a prophecy we also look forward to but earlier on we saw a couple of weeks ago he prophesies that

Peter would deny him before the cock crows very specific prophecy and in a few minutes it's fulfilled and indeed as we saw last week all of these events leading up to his death are fulfilling prophecy here is the great king the great priest the great judge and the prophet the servant of Isaiah silent and dumb before his slaughterers counted among the transgressors all the themes of anticipation of a Messiah figure all come together in Jesus the strand of a priest of a prophet of a king of a judge of a servant all they're coming together in these last hours on earth before his death blasphemy is their charge but under Roman rule they can't put someone to death and so as we'll see in the next week or two the charge gets changed to imply treason for that will get the Romans backs up the Romans have lots of gods blasphemy is nothing to them so they need to portray this in a way that will get the

Romans on side and that's coming notice how calm Jesus is through all this remember how he prayed a few minutes before a few hours before in the garden three times for maybe even three hours and strengthened by God he faces this ordeal with calmness and control but what a contrast to Peter at the beginning of this section in verse 58 we're told that Peter follows at a distance to the courtyard it's probably a wealthy house that's built around its own little internal courtyard and outside there'd be a fire and Peter goes there but no further mixture of cowardice and bravery in a way Peter's forgotten through the verses that we've just been looking at but now he comes back again in verse 69 deliberately beginning and ending Jesus Jewish trial section and portrayed by way of contrast where Jesus is silent and speaks the truth unflinching and unafraid how different from Peter

[27 : 32] Peter in the courtyard is approached by a servant girl and she says simply to him you were also with Jesus the Galilean it's hardly much of an accusation so what if he was and it's not made by anyone like a high priest who carries great weight of power she's a girl female young and just a servant the bottom of society in a way complete different from Caiaphas and yet Peter doesn't simply dismiss it he denies it before all of them saying I do not know what you're talking about that is I was never with him and Jesus of course is inside so he may even be implying I don't even know who's here what on earth you're talking about another servant girl Peter goes out to the porch he's perhaps expressing a bit of fear here so he moves slightly away maybe away from the crowd but another servant girl saw him and she said to the bystanders this man was with

Jesus of Nazareth again it's merely a servant girl but now Peter's denial is racked up a notch he says or he denies it with an oath this time I do not know the man not merely that I was not with him

but I don't even know the man and then after lapses the bystanders generally now come up and say to Peter certainly you are also one of them for your accent betrays you yes he has a Galilean accent he's from the north in fact many of the rabbis ruled that in the synagogues a Galilean could not do the readings because of their poor primitive backward sort of accent lots of Galileans in Jerusalem for a Passover festival just because he's accusation but Peter's denial moves up even another notch not only an oath but he even curses in some way and he says

I do not know the man and at that very time the cock crowed probably 1.30 maybe up to 3.00 in the morning and Peter remembered what Jesus had said before the cock crows you'll deny me three times they'd just been mocking Jesus come on prophesy who hit you but the prophet had predicted and the cock crowing fulfilled his prophecy and Peter went out and wept bitterly three times in the garden Jesus prayed and strengthened by God stood firm in his trial and while he prayed Peter dozed with the other disciples and three times he denied him within hours of saying

I will never do it when you think you're standing firm be careful lest you fall how weak he must have felt as he went out weeping bitterly to he did to see the Bible is how the heroes and leaders of the Christian church are not glossed over or looked at with rose colored glasses at all Peter became the rock on which the church built the Catholics would call him the first bishop of Rome certainly a significant leader in the Acts of the Apostles but no perfect person denying Jesus three times mercifully reinstated after the resurrection as we know but it all leads us back to Jesus by contrast despised, rejected, mocked, humiliated spat upon, subjected to injustice all the time fulfilling scripture all the time obeying God and carrying out the will of God the one judged is the judge who's coming the one under the high priest is the great high priest the one ridiculed saying prophesy is the great prophet to come the king of the Jews mockingly they'll put that sign above his head as he hangs in a few hours on the cross little knowing that he is indeed the great and universal king thanks be to God for Jesus our innocent Lord a surprising saviour thanks be to God that he submitted himself to the Father's will even to death on a cross

Amen Amen Thank you you