

An Innocent Dies

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- [0:00] And Luke's Gospel is a great read. If you haven't read it, you ought to read it. And it's an account of Jesus Christ, especially of his royalty, the royalty of Jesus Christ, who's the Son of God. He's royal. He's the King of the Jews. He's the King of the world.
- In fact, Luke argues he's a King for the whole universe. It's from Luke's Gospel that we get our classic Christmas stories. So, you know, the great birth narratives of the stable and the manger, they all come from Luke.
- Have these great words of an angel saying to Mary, which has sort of become part of Western culture. The angel says to Mary, Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favour with God. You will conceive in your womb and bear a son. You will name him Jesus.
- And now listen for the royalty, the royalty. He will be great. He will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give him the throne of his ancestor David. He will have a throne and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever.
- And of his kingdom there will be no end. So the kind of great Christmas story that we get from Luke is about the royalty of Jesus Christ. And from this historical account, we get our Christmas carols, some of which also speak of the royalty of Jesus Christ.
- [1:18] So, for example, you should know these words. If you have the poor situation of saying what I had once, I had to work for Kmart and they just played Christmas carols all day.
- And even though I'm a Christian, I got sick of them. Though I do love these words. Hail the heaven-born Prince of Peace. Hail the Son of Righteousness. Light and life to all he brings.
- Risen with healing in his wings. Mild he lays his glory by. Born that man no more may die. Born to raise the sons of earth. Born to give them second birth.
- Hark the herald angels sing. Glory to the newborn king. That's a very famous song, isn't it? It's the Christmas carol by Wesley, I think. Hark the herald angels sing.
- Now, unusually, this is the funny thing about Luke's gospel. The king is born in a manger. The king is not recognised by the world, even though he is the world's lord.
- [2:19] The king is born in the poorest of places. And in terms of earthly politics, no one really notices him. And when they do, they want to kill him. So it's a very unusual and strange kingship.
- I suspect that something's gone wrong when we have made Christmas respectable. Because Christmas in Luke's gospel is something controversial or even just a bit weird.
- That God's true king will be born in such a strange place. It actually isn't very respectful at all. And so part of my goal in this short talk tonight is to strip Christianity of all its respectability.
- That's one of my goals. That you will leave unsympathetic. If you're not a Christian, you will leave unsympathetic to Christianity, unsympathetic to Jesus. That you will see that unless Christianity is true, it doesn't deserve any respect at all.
- Because what is awkward about the birth of Jesus, what is quirky about the birth of Jesus, as we get to his death, is going to be amplified and become pitiful and even idiotic.

[3:31] We're going to go from the quirky to the idiotic. What kind of man would walk into a city knowing that he's going to die? What kind of man would sit pretty much silent through his own trial, even though he's innocent, and allow himself to be killed as a criminal?

This is Luke's royalty of Jesus Christ. And tonight, I guess, we all have to decide whether Jesus really died as part of God's plan, as God's king, or whether this historical figure was in effect a kind of a deluded fool.

Whether he had these sort of plans of grandeur about himself, but really he was deluded about them, and therefore died as a criminal and one to be pitied.

So let's see what happens, and you decide what you think. He's been arrested, he's been put on trial, and now he's been sent by Pontius Pilate, the procurator of Jerusalem, to the cross.

As they led him away, verse 26, they seized a man, Simon of Cyrene, who was coming from the country, and they laid a cross on him, and they made him carry it behind Jesus.

[4:47] So the idea here is that Jesus has been beaten up so much, and the Romans were expert at this, that he cannot even carry his own cross, which was meant to be the final humiliation before a crucifixion.

So they grab a random passerby, and here Luke is showing us, I think in a very subtle symbology of the substitution of Jesus Christ, that a random man, a random kind of sinner is grabbed, and carries the cross for innocent Jesus, and Jesus dies, in effect, for the sins of sinners, for us, and so he dies as a substitute for this random passerby.

It's similar to last week, Barabbas, there was a murderer in jail, and he was freed instead of Jesus Christ. Pilate said, who do you want? And they said, we'll take the murderer, and the innocent man is condemned.

So again, there's the idea of substitution. Jesus dies for us. Now, unique to Luke's account is the story of these women, these wailing women who follow him to the cross.

And this is absolutely fascinating, I think. It's puzzling what Jesus does with these women. Verse 27, a great number of the people followed him, and among them were women who were beating their breasts and wailing for him.

[6:06] So they're sympathetic to Jesus. They're crying for him, you know, oh, it's really bad, you're dying, and they're wailing, and they're kind of, they're good at it in a sense.

And then Jesus stops the kind of procession, and he looks at the women, and this is what he says, daughters of Jerusalem, daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children.

Now, what's that mean? I thought it'd be nice to have some people sympathetic to you on the lonely path to the cross. Why would he rebuke these women and say, don't weep for me, weep for your children, daughters of Jerusalem?

Well, he goes on to say, the days are surely coming when they will say, blessed are the barren and the wombs that never bore and the breasts that never nursed.

Then they will begin to say to the mountains, fall on us and to the hills cover us. As Jesus approaches his own death, he warns these women around him of a coming judgment on the city of Jerusalem, of a coming judgment that will come 40 years later in AD 70.

[7:25] You see, just a couple of weeks ago, as we were looking in Luke, two chapters ago, there was a very important prophecy of Jesus Christ, where he said that he would rise as the Son of Man to the right hand of God and that he would execute judgments as the King of the world.

He would have all dominion. He would be the King of kings and Lord of lords and he would, in his time, execute judgment on Jerusalem for their rejection of him.

So he goes on in verse 31 to say, so this is what he's talking about, and when that day comes, you will wish you were dead, is what he's saying. You will cry out, it will be better for you to not have little babies because they're a lot of work and when judgment's coming, you don't want to be carrying a baby.

So he says, a day's coming when you will have to weep for yourselves, don't weep for me. And he goes on, for if they do this when the wood is green, what will happen when it is dry?

That is to say, if this is how the Romans treat Jesus, what will happen when Jesus, as ascended king, unleashes the Romans on sinful Jerusalem?

[8:35] And we know from the historical records that it was a very bloody kind of 18 month siege on Jerusalem in AD 70. And Jesus was the one who predicted it.

Now here's what we have to get. You cannot think Jesus is a respectful teacher anymore. Here he is, going to the cross, making the most ridiculous claims.

He's a criminal and he's saying to these women, watch out for when I come back, I'm going to judge you. How can he claim to have any power anymore? He's half naked, he's covered in his own blood.

On what basis can he claim that he'll one day be king? It's an absolutely stupid claim to make. Do you see how you cannot respect Jesus?

Either he is right and he will rise from the dead, he will be the king of kings and lord of lords, he will execute judgment, or he's an absolute idiot. It's not unlike the movie, a couple of movies.

[9:42] My favourite movie growing up was Return of the Jedi. You know that famous scene in Jabba's palace and Luke Skywalker, they're all kind of prisoners. Luke Skywalker comes in, they've got him, he's a prisoner and he says to Jabba, you'll bring Captain Solo and the Wookiee to me.

I'm going to take him, you can either profit by this or be destroyed. And you think, oh, isn't that an awesome Jedi? He's so courageous. He's the loser in this room and yet he's making such grand claims about himself.

So he says to Jabba, don't underestimate my powers. And of course, Luke Skywalker, you know, he does rescue everyone, he breaks out and everyone dies, all the bad guys die and all the good guys get away and they even get C-3PO and R2-D2.

Of course, that's not what Jesus is going to do, is it? Jesus is going to lose, he's going to die. And so you think, well, it's not like being a noble Jedi, is it? So what's another character from movies that we can relate Jesus to?

And I was thinking, the Black Knight. Do you know the Black Knight? Monty Python and the Holy Grail? Do you know what I mean? So, chopped off his arm, Arthur says, stand aside.

[10:58] He goes, it's but a scratch. A scratch, your arm's off. No, it isn't. Yes, it is. What's that then? I've had worse.

And the fight goes on, a few more limbs go off. You know, and Arthur's sort of, look you, I can't swear, I'd love to play it. Look you stupid bee, you've got no arms left. Yes, I have.

No, you haven't. It's just a flesh wound. That's how stupid Jesus looks, isn't it? He's claiming to be the judge of Jerusalem. Jerusalem's got him kind of, in effect, knackered.

He's going to die. Jerusalem's killing him and he's claiming to be the judge of Jerusalem saying, don't weep for me, weep for yourself. That just sounds stupid to me. I once met a man who claimed to be having an affair with Princess Diana.

This was in the 90s and he had the full story and I said to him, he was a homeless man who lived on the street saying he killed it. So clearly, it was a delusion but he had all the stories and he insisted on it to me.

[12:06] I said, how does she even visit you? You live on the streets. She said, well, she sends a car for me and picks me up. I said, wouldn't this be on the news? He said, oh, well, the media are after me but I'm in hiding.

I mean, we've got to have sympathy because he knows what this guy's been through and what he's suffering but I'd never met, in effect, a lunatic before.

I was only about 19 and I felt a lot of pity for this man. It was very, very sad that he genuinely believed that he was in a relationship with Princess Diana.

Jesus is penniless, has no physical strength, he's half beaten to death, he's covered in his own blood, he's in chains, he's going to a cross, he's being pronounced that he's a criminal and he's saying that he will come back and judge.

That is a joke unless it's true. Jesus here is either a lunatic or he's Lord. Lord. You see, he cannot just be a wise, good moral teacher, he's either lunatic or Lord.

[13:15] The only way that these words of Jesus can make sense and the original readers would have known this in the first century, the only way it could make sense is if he did rise from the dead and he did execute the judgment of AD 70 and he is King of Kings and he is Lord of Lords and he will come back one day to judge the world.

But, of course, they don't believe that, the people who were there. So, they're not going to treat him like a good teacher. They're going to mock him. They're going to be disgusted with him. That's exactly what happens.

So, two others also who were criminals were led away to be put to death with him and when they came to the place that is called the Skull, they crucified Jesus there with the criminals, one on his right, one on his left.

And Jesus said, Father, forgive them. They do not know what they are doing. They cast lots to divide his clothes. The people stood by watching. This is, in effect, a mock coronation of Jesus Christ.

Everyone knows he's claimed royalty, he's claimed kingship, and so here's what they're going to do with it. They're going to enthrone him between two criminals hanging, just sort of wearing a linen cloth on a cross.

[14:29] The place is a shameful place. It's called the Skull. The King James Version gets it, well, it kind of gets it wrong because it uses the Latin word for this place which is where we get our word Calvary which then in due time in Christian history has kind of become a poetic name for this beautiful place where our Saviour died and we've kind of romanticised Calvary but actually it's an ugly place.

It's the place of the Skull. It's a place of death. It's a place of pain and great shame and here is the coronation of the King between two criminals.

It's a very, very ugly scene. It's intentionally trying to mock Jesus because what a fool he is for claiming to be a King and while he's on the cross we have these beautiful words Father forgive them for they do not know what they are doing which of course shows the character of Jesus loving your enemies he practised what he preached but also that itself is still a claim to be King.

So while he's hanging on the cross what does a Biblical King do? Well a Biblical King does two things he shows mercy to some people and he judges other people and so Jesus is here just showing mercy as well as judgement to others so he's sort of still playing the role of King even to the point of the cross I mean when will he drop it?

When will he drop the charade and as he ascends to the cross they keep mocking the claims so verse 35 the people stood by watching the leaders scoffed saying he saved others let him save himself if he is the Messiah that's a fair question if he is the Messiah of God the Chosen One the soldiers mocked him they offered him sour wine saying if you are the king of the Jews save yourself now why would you be trying to forgive people?

[16:27] why are you trying to save people? if you are really a king you should be able to save yourself and there was an inscription over him this is the king of the Jews so the inscription above him mocks his kingship the people mock his kingship they are saying to Jesus you claim too much give up your claim of kingship now it's a joke friends no one here can get away with saying something like this and I've heard people say this to me they say I'm not a Christian I don't believe Jesus was the son of God but I like Christmas I like Easter I like the sentiment of Jesus as a good moral teacher I like his example you cannot say that by his own measure of words Jesus is either Lord or a lunatic do you see?

but by the things he claims by the role he plays as king he doesn't give up the charade even to the point of death he must be deluded unless he's truly God's son he is a lunatic or he is Lord and in the midst of all this sort of chaos and taunting somebody gets it somebody surprising gets it in verse 39 one of the criminals who were hanging there who hanged there kept deriding him and saying are you not the Messiah save yourself and us but the other criminal that is on the other side of Jesus rebuked the first criminal saying don't you fear God since you are under the same sentence of condemnation and we indeed have been condemned justly condemned justly for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds they're probably thieves or they're criminals but this man in between us he's done nothing wrong it's amazing this is our model Christian this is the first person who's going to get into heaven it's a scummy kind of working class criminal he's the first

Christian he's a model Christian he's convicted of his sin he comes to Jesus he says please remember me please forgive me when you come in your kingdom despite all the chaos and the mocking he believes that Jesus is the king and this is God's plan so he says Jesus remember me when you come into your kingdom what a model Christian we could do with more scummy people like this joining our church that's you welcome tonight Jesus says to him now again listen to the self-belief of Jesus Jesus replies to the man in verse 43 truly I tell you today you will be with me in paradise who is Jesus to dispense tickets to paradise when he's being hung on a tree he's not a he's not a good teacher anymore is he you see there's not again

Luke's making this point he wants you to decide or reaffirm your decision if you're a Christian that Jesus is Lord otherwise this whole thing is pitiful like my friend who was in a relationship with Princess Diana and in fact the man on the cross next to Jesus who becomes a Christian he himself becomes a bit of a fool as well doesn't he because what everyone else it seems like most people are bagging Jesus and yet he has the courage to say remember me Jesus he makes a public confession of trust in Jesus not unlike what Marcus will do later in a service and that man himself becomes a fool for believing in Jesus at that time unless he goes to paradise unless it's true and then he's vindicated and finally Jesus dies about noon there's a lot of symbolism here darkness comes over the whole land until three in the afternoon which is symbolic of God the father turning his face away the light of God just turns aside and Jesus crying out with a loud voice said and again he had the faith of

Jesus father into your hands I commend my spirit having said this he breathed his last now Jesus by any objective measure is not in the good books with the father at that point that's what it looks like it looks like he's under the curse of God it looks like God hates Jesus at that point there is no rescue there is no help it goes dark how can he pray to his father with such trust and love when it looks like God hates him lord or lunatic in fact someone else becomes a Christian at that point because there's a Roman soldier there who watches him die and he says whereas in verse 47 when the centurion standing by saw what had taken place he praised God and said certainly this man was innocent and then when all the crowds who had gathered there for this spectacle saw what had taken place they returned home beating their breasts but all his acquaintances including the women who had followed him from

[22:01] Galilee stood at a distance watching these things and there is a group of good women I think and they're the ones who see where he's laid and become the first witnesses to the resurrection but along the way this Roman centurion he also sees below the surface and sees that no he's not a lunatic he's Lord he's God's son he's innocent and becomes a Christian well friends I'll conclude we're all affected by this we're all affected by this you may want to respect Jesus but not worship him as God but you can't do that you see you can't do that you can't respect a man who says things like that on his deathbed you either have to worship him as God as it being true or just say look this guy is a lunatic some people believe in him but he's a lunatic Easter is either the biggest failure of history or that first Easter is the biggest victory of history this sermon is either called an innocent dies or it's called an idiot dies you see you cannot sit on the fence you cannot sit on the fence you may need to take some time to read Luke's gospel to investigate it to think about it to weigh it up but at the end of the day you have to conclude that he's either truly Lord or he's a lunatic if he's truly Lord then when he died on his mind he had the plan of the father the fulfillment of the prophecies that have been given he had in his mind the salvation of nations he had in his mind world domination

Jesus Christ does not want anyone's sympathy he doesn't want your sympathy he wants you to become a Christian Jesus doesn't want your sympathy he wants you to believe that God raised him from the dead he wants you to confess publicly that he is Lord he wants you to bend the knee to turn from selfish living from living for yourself as if you are God and to live for him as the world's true Lord and if you make that step the world will think you are crazy the world will think Marcus is crazy for what he's doing but we know that Jesus Christ rose from the dead we believe that it is true we believe that the evidence stacks up in favour of him being God's son and believing that we know we'll one day be vindicated even though in this life we'll be mocked as they mocked him I don't know how you could ever conclude that Jesus was deluded

I just don't think that that just seems impossible to me to see the effect of this man in the world and then to say that he was a lunatic you can't conclude that and yet on the surface it looks like that the only logical conclusion is that he's God's son that he's the world's true Lord and so friends we ought to be mindful even now that if he's the world's true Lord then today is a good day to cry out to him and to seek his mercy to ask to be remembered today's a good day to reaffirm with Marcus in effect your faith in the Lord Jesus Christ and so I'm going to pray now I invite you to bow your head and in your heart pray with me Lord Jesus Christ we joyfully address you as our king who has achieved your mission to die in our place to fulfil the plan of the father and so we ask Lord

Jesus that you would remember us when you return in your kingdom Lord Jesus we ask that you would have mercy on us as our king of kings and lord of lords all honour to you Lord Jesus we give you much thanks in the power of the Holy Spirit and we ask that we would live lives for you and to the glory of God your father Amen