

Mark 15:1-20

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[0 : 00] Well, good morning, everyone. Nice to see you all. If you're visiting with us or you're new to St. John's, my name's Jeremy. I would love to meet you after the service. This is probably a good Sunday for us to meet, since I actually won't be here very much longer.

Do you know what? Today is my last sermon as a member of staff at St. John's before we launch King's Cross Church on May 14th. And it was 10 years ago on this very day, on Palm Sunday, that I had my job interview at this service.

Yeah, isn't that, that's what we used to do around here. We interviewed people at services. No, actually, so for the children and family minister position, the job interview involved writing a Sunday school lesson and teaching it while the search committee, while the hiring committee watched you. Isn't that terrible? But I guess it went okay. So I want to take a brief moment to say thank you to all of you.

Thank you. Thank you for loving me, for showing me the face of Jesus Christ in all of your kindness and your grace as I was stumbling along and growing up and learning in your midst.

[1 : 21] And thank you for loving my family, for showing my children Jesus Christ and for being our family. It's really been a tremendous privilege to open the Bible with you week by week and see the glory of Jesus Christ on every page of scripture.

It's why I went into the ministry. And it's why we're church planting. I want to make Jesus known to some of the 97%. Yeah, that's right.

97% of people in Metro Vancouver who don't go to church. That's why we're church planting. I want them to know, I want you to know this morning, the Jesus of Nazareth, who we discover here in Mark chapter 15.

So let's open the Bible together. If you turn to page 852, Mark 15 verses 1 to 20. You just heard this morning Jesus' second trial, which is before the Roman governor Pontius Pilate.

Now his first trial, which we looked at last week, was before the Jewish Sanhedrin, that is the religious leaders, and they found him guilty. Guilty of blasphemy, a religious crime. But they didn't want to execute him.

[2 : 33] So they brought him to the Romans, to Pilate, with the political charge now of treason, of being king of the Jews. Look at verse 1 with me.

As soon as it was morning, the chief priests held a consultation with the elders and scribes and the whole council, and they bound Jesus and led him away and delivered him over to Pilate. And Pilate asked him, are you the king of the Jews?

So that's the charge. And four times in our passage, we get this reference, king of the Jews, the king of the Jews. Mark loves irony. Mark loves irony.

So the ultimate irony is that this title is placed on the lips of the very people who mock and humiliate Jesus, and yet they unintentionally speak the bold truth. Jesus is the king.

And somehow, even as he's bound and beaten and spit on, Jesus remains royal and in complete control of the situation. He is completely unique, utterly compelling, isn't he?

[3 : 42] His silence before his accusers, his choice of words when he does speak. You see, everything we read is happening according to how Jesus predicted it would in Mark chapter 8 to 10.

Remember back in chapter 10, verses 33 and 34, Jesus said, See, we are going to Jerusalem and the Son of Man will be delivered over to the chief priests and the scribes and they will condemn him to death and deliver him over to the Gentiles.

And they will mock him and spit on him and flog him and kill him and after three days he will rise. So it's great if he can predict the future, but what does it matter?

It doesn't make it any easier to read the gruesome suffering that Jesus endured, does it? No, it doesn't. But it does. It does give us a glimpse of why Jesus willingly endured the condemnation and the shame.

So scholars have noticed how Mark seems to construct these chapters with thoughtful reference to Isaiah chapter 53 in the Old Testament. Isaiah chapter 53, the song of the suffering servant.

[4 : 52] And there are many examples of how he does this, but there's two in our passage today I want to draw your attention to that help us understand the meaning behind Jesus' death. First of all, that Jesus was rejected by the whole world, by all of us.

So we read in Isaiah 53, verse 3, he was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows acquainted with grief, and as one from whom men hid their faces, he was despised.

We esteemed him not. And Mark uses Pontius Pilate to highlight this theological point. Jesus was completely rejected by the world, by humanity, by all of us.

And then second, Jesus died in our place. Isaiah 53, verses 5 and 6, he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities.

Upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray, we have turned everyone to his own way, and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

[6 : 00] And Mark uses Barabbas, the terrorist, to highlight this theological point, that Jesus is innocent, and the innocent one takes the place of the guilty.

Jesus dies in our place. So those are our two very simple headings for Mark 15. First of all, Pontius Pilate, Jesus is rejected by the world.

And second, Barabbas, Jesus dies in our place. So let's have a look at Pontius Pilate. So do you remember last week in Mark 14 how Jesus was rejected and condemned by the religious leaders? We just talked about it. This is how Mark described it. They all condemned him as deserving death, and some began to spit on him and cover his face and strike him, saying, prophesy.

And the guards received him with blows. And then right after that, Jesus was rejected by his own disciples, including Simon Peter. So Mark 14, verse 71, but Peter began to invoke a curse on himself and to swear, I don't know this man of whom you speak.

[7 : 02] And now here in chapter 15, this rejection is made complete. So Jesus is rejected by the Gentiles, represented by Pontius Pilate and his soldiers.

And Jesus is rejected by the culture, by society, as represented by the crowds yelling, crucify him, crucify him. Religion, politics, culture, Jews, Gentiles.

Jesus was rejected by the whole world. And Mark brings this point home by focusing in on Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor.

He's mentioned 10 times in our passage. And he asks five questions. So look at verse 2 with me. We'll just run through these questions.

Pilate asked Jesus, are you the king of the Jews? He answered him, you have said so. Verse 4, Pilate again asked Jesus, have you no answer to make? See how many charges they bring against you?

[8 : 04] Verse 9, and Pilate answered them saying, do you want me to release for you the king of the Jews? Verse 12, Pilate again said to them, then what shall I do with the man you call the king of the Jews?

And they cried out again, crucify him. And finally, verse 14, Pilate says to them, why? What evil has he done? But they shouted all the more, crucify him.

So five questions in quick succession. Because Pilate is an experienced judge. He's done this a lot of times. He knows how to get a guilty verdict out of someone really quickly.

But his questions are surprising because, or surprise him actually, because he suddenly realizes that this man is different. This man, if I'm doing the just thing, this man is innocent.

So in verse 4, we read that Pilate was amazed by Jesus, amazed by the way that he doesn't defend himself. This amazed word is only used elsewhere to describe how the crowds respond to Jesus' miracles.

[9 : 02] Pilate, in other words, is thinking, it's a miracle that this man isn't begging for his life. I'm amazed by him. Verse 9, knowing it was out of self-interest that the chief priest had handed Jesus over to him.

Pilate knows their motives. And then verse 14, he says, why? What crime has he committed? But you also see here how he begins to lose control of the situation.

The chief priests, they stir up the crowds to demand Barabbas instead of Jesus. They begin to shout, crucify him, and the shouting grows louder and louder until Pilate finally acquiesces.

He sentences Jesus to death. Why would he do this when he knows it's wrong, when he knows that Jesus is innocent? Well, Pilate is a pragmatist, a career politician.

Pragmatists believe that meaning or worth is defined by practical consequences. The problem with pragmatists, writes David Brooks of the New York Times, is that they have no moral foundation or guiding light to make decisions, no right or wrong, if it works out in your favor, then it's probably right.

[10:20] And in John's gospel, we get to hear a longer conversation between Jesus and Pilate. So Jesus says to Pilate, for this purpose I was born and for this purpose I have come into the world to bear witness to the truth.

Everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice. And how does Pilate respond? What is truth? What is truth?

That's pragmatism. Pilate rejects Jesus and he commits him to death for his own comfort, his own protection. So in verse 15, if you look with me, so Pilate, wishing to satisfy the crowd, he released for them Barabbas and having scourged Jesus, he delivered him to be crucified.

So what does this mean for us? Well, Mark commentator David E. Garland, he shares this insight. He says, there's a French novelist named Anatoly France in the 20th century.

He wrote a short story called The Procurator of Judea. He imagines years later an old man, Pontius Pilate. When asked to recall the trial of Jesus of Nazareth, he can't even remember it.

[11:33] He did that kind of thing so many times he can't even remember it. Great evil, Garland writes, comes from moral indifference. In this text, we can see evil at work in the cunning chief priests who manipulate crowds to their end, the mercurial crowds who allow themselves to be manipulated and cry for blood, and boorish thugs who carry out orders with sadistic pleasure.

But a reluctant governor, unconcerned with justice, allows this evil to be unleashed. Now, my first instinct is to say that I'm nothing like Pontius Pilate.

But Mark's theological point here in chapters 14 and 15 is that Jesus' rejection was total and complete. He was rejected by the world, including by me, including by you.

Like Pilate, we have caused Jesus' death on the cross by our pragmatism, by our injustice, by our self-centeredness, by our sin.

I am guilty of the death of God. Jesus was rejected by the world. And yet, even as I say that, and I read Mark chapter 15, there's hope.

[12:53] There's hope right there in this darkest place where Mark deftly announces the grace of God in the most unlikely character, Barabbas. And that brings us, secondly, to Barabbas.

Jesus died in our place. So we know hardly anything about Barabbas. If you look at verse 6, this is about all we know.

At the feast, Pilate used to release for them one prisoner for whom they asked. And among the rebels in prison who had committed murder in the insurrection, there was a man called Barabbas. He's a right-wing nationalist, a terrorist, a murderer.

Matthew calls him a notorious prisoner. He's guilty. And now he's waiting in a prison cell to die on this very day on a cross between two of his fellow robbers.

His name, Barabbas, literally means son of the father, Barabbas. And in fact, when you read the early manuscripts of Matthew's gospel, it tells us that his full name was Jesus Barabbas.

[14:03] Did you know that? Amazingly, we have two Jesuses, two Jesuses placed side by side before Pontius Pilate. Jesus of Nazareth and Jesus Barabbas.

One certainly guilty and one certainly innocent. And shockingly, the crowd, stirred up by the chief priests, they release the guilty Jesus of Barabbas and they condemn the innocent Jesus, son of God.

And of course, Christians have seen in this exchange a perfect illustration for the substitutionary death of Jesus in our place. So Simon Peter wrote in his first letter, he himself bore our sins in his body on the tree that we might die to sin and live to righteousness.

By his wounds you have been healed. And in this gospel we're reading, Mark, in chapter 10, verse 45, Jesus declared his own mission this way. Even the Son of Man came not to be served, but to

serve and to give his life as a ransom for many.

You know that to be ransomed means to be bought for a price. So in the first century, ransom wasn't a theological word, it wasn't a churchy word. It was a crass term used for buying a slave out of slavery.

[15 : 22] And now mockery and scourging and death on a cross, I mean, that would be costly enough price to pay to ransom us from judgment, wouldn't it?

But Jesus paid a steeper cost still, even steeper than that. The innocent Son of God, perfect and blameless, Scripture tells us he became sin for us.

St. Paul writes, for our sake, he made, God made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. And it's hard to imagine how surprised Barabbas must have been when his cell door swung open and he was called out not to an execution, but to freedom.

He stumbles out dumbfounded into the bright spring light. He's not only released, but in a sense he's been redeemed. And maybe he felt the strangest of the situation.

We don't know. But Jesus, the one who had given sight to the blind, who befriended the poor, who welcomed little children to come, he was the one that was going to be crucified instead.

[16 : 34] And the terrorist who deserved death was going scot-free. And this, friends, is the grace of God that's available in Christ Jesus.

You and I are sinners. We're guilty like Pilate of rejecting Jesus. We're guilty like Barabbas, rebels, deserving death. And we sit in a spiritual prison, bound, helpless, waiting for the day when we'll receive just punishment which we deserve.

And the good news is that when you repent of your sin and you trust in Jesus to save you, Jesus goes to the cross in your place. He gets what you deserve.

You get what he deserves. It's the greatest exchange in all of history. Jesus gives up his life so that you can have life in his name. So a writer in the second century church expressed the sheer joy of it in these words.

For what else but his righteousness could have covered our sin? In whom was it possible for us, the lawless and the ungodly to be justified, except in the Son of God alone? Oh, the sweet exchange, the incomprehensible work of God, the unexpected blessings, that the sinfulness of many should be hidden in the one righteous person, while the righteousness of one should justify many sinners.

[17 : 58] sinners. And many literary giants have tried to illustrate this beautiful truth in fiction. So Charles Darnay takes the place of Sidney Carton in *A Tale of Two Cities*, and Aslan takes the place of Edmund in *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, and Katniss Everdeen takes the place of her sister in *The Hunger Games*.

But no story or illustration can fully capture the magnificent beauty of the substitutionary atonement of Jesus Christ. And we don't know how Barabbas responded to this amazing good news.

But that's not really the point, is it? Mark's point is, how will you and I respond? And you may be struggling to accept this diagnosis of the human heart revealed in Scripture that I've described.

I mean, surely we can't be guilty like Pilate or anyone else that did that to Jesus so long ago. But if I'm honest before God, my pragmatism, my self-justification, places me among those who rejected the Savior.

And so I turn to the loving Heavenly Father. I respond. I turn to Him in repentance for my Pilate-like guilt, and He forgives me. And if we're truly like Barabbas before a holy God, rebels without a hope of parole, and we let the full weight of God's loving forgiveness sink in just for a moment now, Christianity isn't about negotiating a plea deal with God, factoring in your good behavior for a reduced sentence.

[19 : 43] Barabbas did not have another day to live before Jesus took His place. If Jesus did this for me, the only reasonable response is thanksgiving. Thanksgiving for my Barabbas-like pardon.

And then, of course, the final response to those, repentance and thanksgiving, naturally just leads to joy, doesn't it? Joy in the new life which begins with the empty tomb.

So, brothers and sisters, keep your eyes fixed on Jesus. Follow Him through this Holy Week. Isn't it good that we're going to move slowly, as Jordan pointed out?

That we rehearse His rejection, we rehearse His death in our place, only in anticipation of that joy that's found in the risen Christ. Amen.

Amen. Amen.