

The Politics Of Power

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 01 February 1989

Preacher: Harry Robinson

[0 : 00] Well, we're starting this series on Luke chapter 23 today, and we're going to, if you have this card in front of you, you will see that we work our way through the whole of the gospel of, the 23rd chapter of the gospel of Luke, and that ends just the week before Easter with the story of the crucifixion.

So, and this is really the build-up to it. The part that we're looking at today is Luke 23, 1-5, and you'll have that on a piece of paper in front of you, I hope.

And then I've added in the other two verses that have to do with Pontius Pilate, so that we can sort of look at him under the heading of today's talk, which is the politics of power.

However, the trouble with the Christian faith essentially, I think, is the person of Jesus Christ. Christianity has so many good concepts, so many ideals, so many patterns of moral behavior, so many really good ideas that many people are attracted to Christian faith because of its good ideas.

[1 : 15] I mean, its moral precepts, all those things are very attractive to people generally. The thing that stumbles everybody is the man, Jesus Christ.

And while we trace this through the 23rd chapter of Luke, you'll see something of why this is a problem. Yeah, I mean, most of the, most of the, I would like to make this just as a conjectural statement about which you can have any length of discussion that you want.

But essentially, I would say that Jesus Christ is the founder of most of the world's religions today, mostly because they object to him and think there must be a better way of doing it, and so they set out to do it.

But the stimulus comes from the fact of the man, Christ Jesus, so that, you know, when the Christian missionaries first went to India, they created a massive revival of Buddhism and Hinduism, simply because of the impact of Christian teaching on that country.

So I think he's a highly controversial character, and to see how controversial he is, we're looking at this particular passage, which comes from Luke 23. If you go back to the passage that just precedes this, the end of chapter 22, you will see that Christ is in the Garden of Gethsemane, and there he is in prayer, and there he is with some of his disciples, and the crowd come out to arrest him.

[2 : 43] Judas comes up and would kiss him to identify him, and then the chief priests and the elders gathered around, and they come in to arrest him and to take him away to the house of Annas, the high priest.

When I was in Jerusalem a couple of years ago, the only time in my life, on Maundy Thursday evening, we went to a little Russian Orthodox church, which was at the site of the Garden of Gethsemane, and they had a three-hour service there, of which I took in one hour, and they chanted 12 gospels during that time.

But then when that was all over, they left the Garden of Gethsemane and walked down into the Kidron Valley, which is now filled with a four-lane highway, and up along the highway, and then to the old city through the great stone walls, and then along the echoing walls of old Jerusalem, to the house which they think was the house of Annas, the high priest, and there they had a service to commemorate this event.

So it's easy to picture in your mind, or for me to picture in my mind, having been there. That was the process that took place, and when they got Christ there, there was a kind of night trial.

And in the night trial, they, I think, abused the person of Christ. They put a blindfold on him and struck him on the face and asked him who struck him, and in various ways they insulted him because they already had, in their own minds at least, found him guilty and were waiting only for the formal procedures to begin to have him put to death.

[4 : 35] So that the paragraph immediately before chapter 23 says, In the morning, and in the morning the whole of the Sanhedrin were gathered together, Christ was stood in the midst of them and asked the question, you know, are you the Son of God?

And he said, you say that I am. And this is apparently a somewhat enigmatic or idiomatic statement that he makes, but it's translated by J.B. Phillips and by, in his paraphrase, and by others as saying that Christ's answer is, Yes, I am.

Now you may know that modern scholars keep debating this point of whether Christ ever said that during the course of his life, you know, because part of the controversy that surrounds the person of Christ is whether he thought he was who we believe he was.

Or is. And so they ask him this question, Are you the Son of God? And he says, you say that I am. And you will see the Son of Man seated on the right hand of power.

And so he gave a powerful picture of himself as the man who was seated on the right hand of power.

[5 : 58] And of course, those who heard him said, We need to hear no more. We have the witness of his own lips. They had tried during the night to bring false witnesses in to witness against him.

Now they felt they had the evidence in terms of what he had said about himself. So off they went to Pilate. Look at your sheet. The whole company of them arose and brought him before Pilate.

And they began to accuse him, saying, We found this man perverting our nation, forbidding us to give tribute to Caesar, saying that he himself is Christ, a king.

Pilate asked him, Are you the king of the Jews? And he answered, You have said so. That same kind of enigmatic reply, which again is translated in some by saying, Yes, I am.

Which I think is what's contained in that. Pilate said to the chief priests and to the multitudes, I find no crime in this man.

[7 : 02] But they were urgent, saying, He stirs up the people, teaching throughout all Judea, from Galilee even to this place. So there you have the case against Jesus, as the Jewish Sanhedrin saw it, and how they brought it to Pilate.

Now this is where you begin to see how politics work. You see that the accusation they brought against him, we found this man perverting our nation.

Well, you know, there's one other person who perverted the nation badly, and that was Pilate. So it was interesting that that was the accusation that they brought against him. Pilate had got into great trouble for their three things that are recorded in contemporary historical documents about Pilate.

One is that he brought Roman shields into the palace of Herod in Jerusalem. Jerusalem was a city which they had designated to be totally given to the worship of the Lord.

So anything that was brought into the city which was not of the Lord was blasphemy. And so Pilate had this great battle going with them because he said, there's no religious significance to these.

[8 : 22] The Jews said, there is tremendous religious significance to those. Get them out. Pilate said, there's no way I'll get them out until he got orders from above that they had to be taken out.

On another occasion, the Roman armies brought in the insignias of the Roman army, the kind of insignias that they carried, the regimental insignias that they carried in their parades.

And they brought them into Jerusalem. And again, he had the same reaction. And again, he was forced to take them out. So there wasn't a lot of love between this nation and Pilate.

The third thing he did was he had sent troops in on a particular religious festival when Galileans had come down from the north and were worshipping in Jerusalem, offering their sacrifices.

And Pilate's troops were turned on them and put some of them to death so that their blood was mingled with the blood of their sacrifices. And a bitter enmity arose between Pilate and Herod, who was the tetrarch of Galilee.

[9 : 25] And that enmity is spoken of later on in chapter 23. So Pilate was not getting along very well with this nation. But listen to what they say to him about Christ.

They said, we found this man perverting our nation, forbidding us to give tribute to Caesar, which must be a reference to the place, you know, that should we give pay taxes or not.

And Christ said, give me a coin. He was handed a coin and said, and whose superscription is on this? And they said, Caesar's. And Jesus said, give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar, and to God what belongs to God.

They took that and presented it here as Christ's teaching that they were not to give tribute to Caesar. Now, I don't think that that's what happened, but that's the way they chose to interpret it.

The third thing they did, they said that Christ is, he himself is a king, that he claims to be a king. And of course, this was sedition, and this was treason, and this was an overthrowing of the established authority, and that was the accusation they brought against him.

[10 : 35] And a very interesting accusation, because Pilate picks it up immediately and says to him, are you the king of the Jews? And he answered, you have said so.

Well, Pilate said to the chief priests and to the multitudes, I find no crime in this man. But they were urgent, saying he stirs up the people, teaching throughout all Judea, from Galilee even to this place, so that even the teaching of this man was unacceptable, and certainly his person was unacceptable.

Now, the interesting thing is that this first question that Pilate asks him ends up as being the superscription which is on the cross.

Remember that he says, are you the king of the Jews? And then he had a sign put up in Hebrew, Latin, and Greek on the cross saying, this is the king of the Jews.

So you have a fairly clear indication from the scriptures that Pilate regarded Jesus as being who he said he was, the king of the Jews.

[11 : 48] But Pilate was primarily a politician. So if you look at verse 13, you'll see how a politician handled the problem. My mind suddenly triggered on this one, but Bill Clark, who is an eminent Vancouver politician, comes to church and says St. John's has always given trouble to the politician.

I would like to suggest that it's not St. John's that's given trouble to the politicians, it's politics that gives trouble to the politicians. And that's just recorded here.

So I feel just a little sensitive about this point. But Pilate saw what the political issue was.

Now, I mean, what a politician has to do, whether it's George Bush or Brian Maloney or Mulroney. That was, I didn't mean to do that.

No matter who it is, their job is to gauge what they can get away with, to know the people they're working with, what they will respond to, what they will react to, and they have to know how to do that.

[13 : 11] And a successful politician is one who does it well. Well, Pilate, in verse 13, called together the chief priests and the rulers of the people and said to them, You brought me this man as one who was perverting the people.

And after examining him before you, behold, I did not find this man guilty of any of your charges against him. Neither did Herod, and this, we will deal with Herod next week, but he sent him back to us.

Behold, nothing deserving death has been done by him. I will therefore chastise him and release him to you. And so what you have is you have Pilate putting together a political solution to the problem.

And that's how he does it. He does it very well. He recognizes that Jesus is who he says he is, but he has to deal with his constituency.

And in order to deal with his constituency, he does it in, I think there's four ways that he does it. One way that he does it is he sends him off to see Herod, saying that this isn't under my jurisdiction, we'll send it to another court, so to speak.

[14 : 28] He sends it to Herod, and that doesn't pay off, so he comes back. The second way that he deals with it is that he says, I will chastise him and release him, which means that he will subject him to a scourging.

And that will satisfy the bloodlust of the people who are bringing this accusation against him. They will be satisfied, and then they will have seen that he has suffered and been terribly hurt, and perhaps that they will allow that to be sufficient.

And of course, that wasn't sufficient. And Pilate then, the third thing he did was to offer them Barabbas, or Christ, and Barabbas was a known murderer, and again, they chose Barabbas.

So the terrible vindictiveness of this group, this crowd that was confronting Pilate, kept pressing for the death sentence.

The final thing that Pilate did was to take, remember, that silver bowl and to wash his hands in front of them all, saying, I disagree with you all, but for political reasons, I will therefore submit him to your will, and he commanded him to be taken out and to be crucified.

[15 : 46] Now there you have a powerful, clear, political decision and how it's made. He was under pressure, he had to make the decision, but the difficulty is, of course, that it's a personal issue.

And for all of us, it's a personal issue what we have to do with the person of Jesus Christ. You can't make it a political issue. Now what happens then is that you get these kinds of problems.

You see, what happens with, there's four things that Charles Colson points out about political power, which I think are, perhaps throw some light on this.

He said, political solutions are not personal solutions. You know, he says, when you go to fight with dragons, be sure you don't become one.

And that's how he described his own life when he went into the White House to fight with dragons and he became one of them. And that's what happens as the, that's the sort of picture of the corrupting influence of power.

[17 : 03] And that's how politicians develop. If you're going to fight with dragons, be sure you don't become one. The second thing that he points out is that you're going to be judged by the one whom you judge.

I mean, this is the particular poignancy of reading the story of Pontius Pilate who stood with Christ on trial before him. And you recognize that this man who is standing on trial in the light of subsequent revelation in the New Testament is the man whom God has appointed to judge the world.

So you have, in this instance, you have Pontius Pilate standing or sitting in judgment on the one who ultimately will judge him. Now, I think that's a very important kind of principle of human existence.

And that is the probability that the people whom you and I judge will ultimately end up judging us.

And that gives to the whole human community a dynamic responsibility one for another.

Because the one whom we judge will ultimately judge us. and God, in demonstrating his authority, did it without exerting his power.

[18 : 21] In other words, he didn't come in and say, I am the judge. He came in and said, I am prepared to be judged and to be condemned. But ultimately, I will judge you.

And the authority I will have in passing judgment on you is that I will myself have submitted to judgment. And that's why this sort of the personal dimension of this is so important.

I think a third thing, which I don't think I can blame this one on Charles Colson, but it really struck me as forceful as I was thinking about this. One of the things you should do is listen to your wife.

You remember that Pilate's wife had a dream on this night and she sent word to him, have nothing to do with that just man.

Now I think in our male-female society sometimes, we become used to making political judgments. You know, we see the expediency, we balance the powers that are at work, we see the influence of the people we're working among, and we come to a political conclusion.

[19 : 32] While close beside us is one who isn't aware of all those things, but has an entirely different sensitivity to the same problem, to the same issue.

And I think that one of the things we need in moving from making, living in a sense behind a political facade, coming to some kind of personal encounter, is to be able to listen to that person who is closest to us, who knows us best, and whose advice we generally respect least.

That's not the case with me and my wife, but I suspect it is with you and your... No, no. There's something there that helps to reduce us, I think, to the recognition of when you're confronting this person of Jesus Christ, you need to be very sensitive.

This thing then, just in conclusion, that the Christian goal is not power, but justice. You see, the whole system from the Jewish courts, the Jewish chief priests, the Jewish Sanhedrin, and then the Roman governor, the Herod, the Tetrarch of Galilee, the whole legal system was entirely in place, but came to absolutely the wrong conclusion when they committed Jesus Christ to be crucified.

All the machinery was in place, all the accumulated wisdom about human justice was given expression to in the structures of the judicial system to which Christ was subject, but they came to the wrong conclusion.

[21 : 22] Quite obviously, they came to the wrong conclusion. And you see, the difficulty, of course, I think, is that there is, at the heart of this, a personal element.

And that personal element is why I think Christianity is so very difficult for people. Not difficult in terms of being complex, difficult because it demands a personal encounter with Jesus Christ, a

personal response to him.

You can't hide from him behind your political authority, behind your prestige, behind your power, behind your wealth, influence, or success. You have to, at a very deeply personal level, be confronted by the person of Christ, even as Pontius Pilate was.

And he was quite incapable of being. He just didn't. He wasn't there at the moment he needed most to be there. He wasn't there as a person.

And only by the grace of God is it going to be possible that for us, in our lives and in our circumstances, that we can be there when we are confronted with the person of Jesus Christ and not hide behind the various facades of legal structure or political power or self-aggrandizement or whatever it may be that make us think that we can pass judgment on him without ultimately being subject to judgment by him.

[22 : 51] Well, we'll go on and look at Herod next week. Let me say a prayer. Father, that which has been according to your will and word in what's been said and thought here, we ask that you will, by your Holy Spirit, work into our hearts and minds and help us to work out in our lives.

And we ask this in the name of him whom you have appointed to be the judge of all the world, even Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen. Amen.