

## THE TRIAL

During these services you have been following a series looking at The Creed and today we are going to look at The Trial of Jesus.

Have you noticed that when Christians share the story of Jesus the paramount question we often seek to address is Why did Jesus Die? I don't know how you would answer this, but common responses gleaned from the Bible might be that Jesus died to set us free from guilt, shame and fear, or he died to open the way to heaven.

However the Bible is equally clear that those who had Jesus killed did so for very different reasons. They did not execute Jesus in order for humanity to be set free from guilt, shame and fear, for good to triumph over evil, or as the means for our salvation. So looking at The Trial today gives us an opportunity to ask the question: 'Why was Jesus killed?'

But why does this matter to us? There may be contextual and historical reasons for the crucifixion, but surely the most important reason is that he died to forgive us from our sins, right? Jesus may have been killed as a threat to the system of the day, but those who killed him didn't realise the deeper significance of his death. And it is this deeper significance that matters to us most, isn't it?

The problem with this view is that it splits off the life of Jesus from his death. All that seems to matter is his death – his life seems like just a necessary but unimportant prequel. It doesn't matter that he lived for 33 years. Perhaps he could have died the very day after his birth and still bought us salvation. Couldn't he?

And when it comes to the matter of Jesus' death, Christians typically insist upon his innocence. Since many Christians believe in Jesus' overall sinlessness, we conclude that Jesus can't have committed any acts to warrant his execution. And so this is how the gospel is often presented – marginalising the life and teaching of Jesus, often resulting in a privatised, spiritualised gospel that is a far cry from the gospel Jesus proclaimed.

This is where the limitation of The Creed reveals itself. Now I am not the best person when it comes to grammar! I struggle with my pronouns and apostrophes, hyphens and em-dashes, but I have been told that correct punctuation can save a person's life! And commas in particular seem to have this power. For example, the three simple words 'Let's eat grandma' mean an entirely different and altogether more humane thing when you add a comma!

Yet in the Creed a comma is ALL that links the birth of Jesus with his death... 'born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate'. The whole of Jesus' life is summed up by a comma. Extraordinary don't you think?

What was it about Jesus' life that was so dangerous that even those who attempted to sum up the core doctrines decided to omit any reference to his 33 years of actual incarnated life?

Maybe it is because Jesus seemed to have upset almost everybody! What he said and what he did antagonised them. Who he claimed to be, how he challenged the system and the cultural norms, the threat he seemed to pose to the powers that be – things like this got him killed. And it seems like people from almost every segment of society wanted him gone. For example:

- + Herod tries to kill Jesus as a threat to his position and power in Matthew 2:13-16
- + The Pharisees plot to kill Jesus for healing on the Sabbath in Matthew 12:14
- + The chief priests and the teachers of the law look for a way to kill him, fearing him because the whole crowd are amazed at his teaching in Mark 11:18
- + The people in Nazareth try to throw Jesus off a cliff because he speaks about God's inclusive love for Gentiles in Luke 4:29
- + And after Jesus overturned the tables in the temple and called it a 'den of robbers', the chief priests, the teachers of the law and the leaders among the people try to kill him in Luke 19:46-47

In the account read from John earlier we hear the frustration and anger that erupted across the city after Jesus had basically staged what today we might call 'Occupy Jerusalem' - he rallied the crowds as he marched into the city on a colt to the cries of Hosanna; he disrupted public order by overturning the tables in the temple; he challenged the tax system by flipping the question 'What belongs to Caesar?' to 'What belongs to God?' And he draws attention to the exploitation of a widow who, although destitute, has to give her last coin to the temple authorities who Jesus has just previously accused of 'devouring widows' houses'

From what they saw and heard, the crowds may not have had all the facts to hand, but what they knew was that this man was trouble and they were desperate to get rid of him:

What's he done, asks Pilate? Isn't it obvious?! If he were not a criminal we would not have handed him over to you, they attest.

You try him yourselves he says, 'but we have no right to execute anyone - you do our dirty work, they plead.'

We just want him gone, do it for us.

And so Pilate tries to understand what is going on with Jesus asking 'Are you really a king?'

'My kingdom is not of this world. if it were my servants would fight to prevent my arrest' - but there is no-one fighting to save Jesus. Are they that powerless, that scared, that marginalised, that they dare not even protest? Or is there truly a non-violent commitment in this new movement?

I came into the world to testify to the truth, says Jesus. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me.

'What is truth?' A question we are all asking ourselves in this post-truth, fake news era.

And then we see what I think is Pilate's Brexit moment. Pilate tries to give the crowds a way to back out of their demand for blood without losing face by giving them what he thinks is a clear-cut choice. He offers to free Jesus or the notorious criminal Barabus. And in this moment I think he misjudges the crowd and they choose Barabus! He was so confident

they would choose Jesus, Pilate didn't think he needed to have a plan B and so is left with no other option but to wash his hands of the decision.

So what was so disturbingly dangerous about Jesus' life that we continue to contain him in a comma?

Jesus underwent his trial and a terrorist style execution because:

1. He preached the gospel of the kingdom – announcing the rule of God and calling us to live under God's authority in every area of life, downgrading ALL other authorities. It is at the name of Jesus that every knee should bow, he who has been exalted to the highest place, and who has been given the name above every name.
2. He preached the gospel of peace – announcing an alternative way of confronting injustice than the use of lethal violence and retaliation. A most radical invitation to share a table with our enemies in the valley of the shadow of death.
3. He preached good news to the poor – challenging systemic inequality, turning everything upside down, announcing jubilee and starting a revolution that had been prophesied in Isaiah 61 'to preach good news to the poor, bind up the broken-hearted, proclaim freedom for the captives, release from darkness for the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour'.

These continue to be dangerous things to preach and live today, offering countercultural responses to dominant expectations.

### **So in conclusion, what does this mean for us today?**

1. If you feel like you are facing trials today... Jesus can identify with you.

If you are due in court for some reason... Jesus can identify with you  
If you have been accused or convicted of a criminal offence,  
if you are imprisoned, rightly or wrongly,  
if you feel like you are facing a death sentence physically, emotionally or mentally...  
... Jesus can identify with you

If you are breaking unjust human laws... Jesus can identify with you  
If you are taking non-violent direct action in pursuit of justice... Jesus can identify with you  
If you are speaking truth to power... Jesus speaks with you  
If you are trying to organise for peace as effectively as those who organise for war... Jesus can identify with you and goes ahead of you.

2. And if the life of Christ is beginning to sound more intriguing and revolutionary than you previously thought, which it does to me increasingly, perhaps we might need to look more deeply at the Christ who has been captivated in a confessional comma.

*And so, may the Christ of the comma break through this grammatical gate and occupy our lives afresh this day and may we follow his profound and glorious example in being radical peacemakers, announcing his kingdom rule and may we join him in preaching good news*

*to the poor, binding up the broken-hearted, proclaiming freedom for the captives, release from darkness for the prisoners and the year of the Lord's favour.  
Amen*

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Some material in this talk is explored more fully in the Jesus Unplugged weekend of the Crucible Course - [www.cruciblecourse.org.uk](http://www.cruciblecourse.org.uk)