

Meet Me Near the Cross

Presented by Jack Heppner in the Gospel Fellowship Church,
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Introduction

As we come toward the end of the Gospel of Mark, we are struck by the fact that Jesus' death on the cross has overshadowed the whole story. Already in chapter three verse six, the Pharisees and Herodians are consulting together about how to kill Jesus. So it is fair to say that the Gospel of Mark is a passion story with an extended introduction. And even in the introduction, already in 1:14, John the Baptist is arrested, letting us know that the stakes are high. Arrest and danger will be part of this story. It will be a story to the death!

Almost immediately upon entering his public ministry, Jesus ran into trouble with the leaders of institutionalized religion. And it almost seems as though Jesus speaks and acts deliberately in such a fashion that these leaders will be provoked. And he doesn't back down when his unorthodox manners are challenged by those in authority. He can see through the institutional games these leaders play. He always can. Even today.

By Chapter eight he breaks the news to his disciples that his journey would end on a cross. Although this is much to the dislike of his followers, Jesus presses on – deliberately, it seems – toward the cross awaiting him in Jerusalem. By chapter 12, when the authorities have questioned Jesus by what authority he is carrying out his ministry, he tells the assembled leaders the parable of the vineyard. After the owner of the vineyard had sent numerous servants whom the tenants either beat up or killed, he finally sent a beloved son whom they also killed. Then the owner shows up and throws the tenants out of the vineyard. *“And they tried to arrest him, but feared the multitude, for they perceived that he had told the parable against them...”* (12:12).

So by the time we get to chapter 14 in the Gospel of Mark, the stage has been set. There will be a show down. The religious leaders are circling like vultures waiting for an opportune moment to strike. In that context Mary of Bethany anoints Jesus feet with expensive ointment, and Jesus declares that she “has anointed his body beforehand for burying” – as if to say that death lies at the door. And immediately afterward the betrayals begin and Jesus moves evermore surely toward his death on the cross.

What Role Do You Play in this Story?

Have you ever pictured yourself being in the story we are now describing? Where would you have positioned yourself? With which of the persons bustling around in the story that leads to the hill do you identify most? Or is there a part of you that identifies with each of the players of this cosmic drama?

It is easy to sit in judgement on those who participated in this swarming event 2000 years ago. And while it is not possible for us to go back there in time, the story of the swarming around the cross always presses forward in history until it knocks on our doors today.

Maybe the best question to ask is not, “Were you there when they crucified my Lord,” but rather “How do I respond to the story that still comes swarming through my neighborhood and stops at my door?” In many ways we are similar to those who witnessed and participated in the passion story many years ago. And just like then, we too respond in various ways to the story that never grows old – which still always remains alive among us. So “Meet me near the cross,” and let us ask ourselves the question where we fit in.

The First Trinity of Responders: Judas, the Jews and Pilate.

Judas

As we already said, immediately after Mary anointed Jesus feet the betrayals begin. We read in 14:10, *Then Judas Iscariot, who was one of the twelve, went to the chief priests in order to betray him. And when they heard it they were glad and promised him money. And he sought an opportunity to betray him.*

Judas betrayed Jesus for money. Have you ever betrayed Jesus for money? Our society is almost totally absorbed with money. Money rules and many allow themselves to be ruled. Do you?

I think we must allow some slack, perhaps, for those like my father who lived through the Great Depression and then spent the rest of their lives talking about money. How to make it. How to save it. How to let it make you feel safe. But by now we live in one of the wealthiest countries of the world and we assume that having money and lots of goods is our birthright. Even though a third of the world goes to bed hungry at night. That’s not my problem, we say, and turn our hearts back to our thirty pieces of silver.

I am encouraged with what I see in our younger generation. Yes, many still dream of the big bucks they might make down the road, but I have met so many younger people who want to follow Jesus wherever it takes them. They know that money is only a means to an end and never an end in itself.

I also meet a lot of middle-aged and older folk enamored with money and possessions. A nicer house, a newer car, a more expensive vacation. A lot of people who keep betraying Jesus for the money that’s in it. Fortunately I also meet some who have risen above such madness. Some who make life choices, not on the basis of money, but on the basis of how faithful those choices are to the call of Christ.

Is your role in the story that of Judas? Exchanging loyalty to the Kingdom of God as seen in Jesus Christ for what looks like financial security? Can you see yourself making choices for reasons that rise above the money involved? Is it possible that when we make life choices based mostly on the money factor, that we are modern day Judases?

Would you be willing, like the rich young ruler wasn’t, to sell all that you have, give it to the poor, and go follow Christ - if that is what God called you to? If your answer is “no”, Jesus won’t argue with you, but will watch you turn away with great sadness. He will feel

betrayed. I am afraid, that as much as we would like it to be otherwise, there is a little bit of Judas in all of us. So before we hang Judas, perhaps we should examine our own hearts.

The Jews

By 15:1 we read, “*And as soon as it was morning the chief priests, with the elders and scribes, and the whole council held a consultation; and they bound Jesus and led him away and delivered him to Pilate.*”

Why did the Jews betray Jesus? Why had Jesus been an irritant in their sandals from the get go? Was it not because he exposed their shallowness? For the Jews, especially those in leadership, to have embraced Jesus would have meant to admit that the self-righteous comfort zones they had carved out around themselves were artificial. They would have had to admit that the masks they were wearing hid a self-centered and self-serving approach to life. They would have had to admit that they had never let the real God come within five feet of their hearts. It would have become evident that they weren't prepared to admit to failure, to be vulnerable, to be real, to ask for mercy. They would have had to drop their heavy robes behind which they tried to hide their shallowness.

Have you ever betrayed Jesus by wallowing in your shallowness? I suppose there are some good reasons why many of us prefer shallowness to depth. It's easier that way. I remember how when I was plowing the fields as a teenager, that after my father left I would set the plow a little shallower so the AR John Deere could handle it in third gear. I wanted to finish the field as quickly as possible. Of course when dad noticed my great progress he saw through my game and came to reset the plow a notch deeper and to deliver a warning about not moving that setting. I preferred the shallower setting. Isn't that the case so often in life too!

Shallowness or depth has very little to do with education, or your position in life. I have met many well-educated but shallow people. I have also met some plain folk who plow deeply. To be shallow is to be guarded and protective. It is to try to keep others from noticing your weaknesses. It is to be creative mask-makers. It is to pretend that you live in a fairy tale where all turns out right – because, after all, you are always right.

The Jews had to betray Jesus because if they didn't get rid of him their shallowness, already obvious to so many, would become the talk of the town. And their positions of power, built on air-balloons, would simply vanish once the balloons got pricked. To move from shallow living to deep living simply means to move toward honesty, openness, vulnerability and unashamed love. Is your life shallow? Or does it have depth?

It seems to me that unless we are somewhere on the road from shallow living to deeper living, we stand shoulder to shoulder with the Jews who betrayed Jesus to Pilate to hide their shallowness.

Pilate

After questioning Jesus, Pilate said to the crowd, *“Do you want me to release for you the King of the Jews? For he perceived that it was out of envy that the chief priests had delivered him up. But the chief priests stirred up the crowd to have him release for them Barabbas instead...And Pilate said to them, Why, what evil has he done? But they shouted all the more, Crucify him. So Pilate wishing to satisfy the crowd, released for them Barabbas; and having scourged Jesus, he delivered him to be crucified (15:9-15).*

Why did Pilate betray Jesus? To satisfy the crowd, says Mark. Pilate was annoyed that he should be bothered at all. He didn't want to have to decide one way or the other. He wanted to play it safe. If he refused to have Jesus crucified he would have a riot on his hands and get into trouble with his superiors. If he had him crucified he knew he would be sending an innocent man to his death. He simply wanted to maintain an equilibrium.

There comes to each of us at times the same temptation that faced Pilate. We are in a place of comfort. There seems to be an equilibrium in our lives, and we like where we are at. We just don't want to be bothered with anything that might disrupt our tranquility. And then suddenly we are faced with having to choose sides – to speak the truth, even if that means some people will be upset with us.

“Why couldn't you just say what we wanted you to say?” we are sometimes told – that is, those of us who speak publicly. Whenever I speak to satisfy the crowd, like Pilate did, I betray Jesus. How many Christian leaders betray Jesus today when they get up to speak? When they stroke feathers and fluff up pillows for their hearers to rest on – are they not betraying Jesus, just like Pilate did?

When is the last time you were willing to forego the comforts of being disengaged in order to speak the truth? Or to get involved? How often do we think that by simply washing our hands of any responsibilities that nothing more is required of us in a world of injustice, abject poverty and massive catastrophes? How often do we remain quiet in our happy clutches of like-minded people, when we should challenge what is being said because it is not the whole truth? And what is being said is hurting someone else? Every time we speak or act in order to please the crowd, however large or small, when it is clear that truth is not on their side, we betray Christ along with Pilate.

For centuries Christians have blamed the Jews for betraying and crucifying Christ. That sentiment underlies 2000 years of anti-semitism. But who really betrayed him. Yes it was the Jews. Yes it was a disciple of Jesus. Yes it was a Roman political pansy. And yes, it is me. Sometimes it's for money. Sometimes it's for shallowness. And sometimes it's for satisfying the crowds. Is anyone here not guilty?

A Second Trinity of Responders: The Soldiers, Simon of Cyrene, and the First Criminal

The Soldiers

“And the soldiers led him away inside the palace...and they clothed him in a purple cloak, and plaiting a crown of thorns they put it on him. And they began to salute him...and they struck his head with a reed, and spat upon him, and they knelt in homage before him...and they led him out to be crucified” (15:16-20).

The soldiers played around with Christ. They had no strong feeling for or against this man. They were simply doing their duty. And they were having some fun along the way. Joking about their victim and bullying him just for fun.

Are you ever tempted to play around with Christ? You don't have strong feelings one way or the other. Does it sometimes seem to you that taking Christ seriously would spoil your party? Are you in it for the kicks you get out of it? Are you sometimes a bully? I experienced a lot of bullying when I was in school and I know how it hurts. I still carry some scars from childhood bullying. But I have lived long enough to know that there are bullies in every community, including church communities. And Jesus says that whatever we do to the least of these his brothers, we have done it to him.

Have you become used to playing around with Jesus – not taking him seriously?

Simon of Cyrene

“And they compelled a passer-by, Simon of Cyrene, who was coming in from the country, the father of Alexander and Rufus, to carry his cross (15:21).

Here is a guy who got dragged into the action unwillingly. He was coming into town to do his weekly shopping and got caught up in the action and before he knew it he was carrying a load he hadn't bargained for.

Have you ever felt like you got dragged into this Jesus thing against your wishes? Maybe your parents forced you to go to church even though you didn't want to. A camp counselor pressured you to say the sinner's prayer even though you didn't really mean it? Or maybe in later life it is family or peer pressure that keeps you coming back to church. But if you could really do what you feel like, you would be somewhere else?

It is a hard thing to be forced to bear a cross. If we choose to pick up our crosses at the invitation of Jesus, he promises that our yokes will be easy and our burdens light. But when the cross is not our own, it is always heavy.

I am not sure what my word to you is if you feel compelled by others to carry on with the Jesus thing but don't really have it in your heart to do so. I am tempted to suggest that you come clean. To say the truth, even if that means laying down the cross you have been forced to bear. Even if that creates some disruption in your family or circle of friends.

God will be more honored by your honesty, even if that means withdrawing from the show for a while, than by you continuing to bear this burden which others have placed upon you. Perhaps, once you have become honest with yourself and others, you will get to a place where you choose to pick up your own cross and find it not to be a burden.

The First Criminal

Bringing in some detail here from Luke's account here, we read, "*One of the criminals who were hanged railed at him, saying, 'Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us'*" (Luke 23:39).

Here is a man so totally taken in with his own desperate situation that all he can think of is himself. "Hey, man – get us out of here!" It is obvious that he knew who Jesus was, but had not bothered to follow him earlier. Now he was in trouble and just looked to Jesus to get him out of a jam – or more literally, off his cross!

How often has it happened in your life, that you don't take Jesus seriously until you are in trouble. And then, when you do call on him, your cry has that whining tone about it. Look at poor me. Am I not in bad shape? Just get me out of here! I am not really interested in who you are or what you represent. I am only interested in you, Jesus, if it will get me out of this mess.

Are we sometimes not guilty of seeing Jesus as our last resort? If all else fails, I will try Jesus. You know what? This is not good advice because chances are by that time you will be so cynical and bitter that you wouldn't even recognize God's favor if it came your way. You'd probably end up claiming the credit for yourself. Have you ever been in a tight spot in which you prayed desperately, and then later, when you have been delivered, you brag about how your own wits got you out of it? I have a hunch that that is the kind of guy we are looking at here?

Hopefully it is not the type of person you are – totally absorbed in himself.

A Third Trinity of Responders – A Young Man, the Second Criminal, and the Women.

A Young Man

In 14:51 we read, *And a young man followed him, with nothing but a linen cloth about his body; and they seized him, but he left the linen cloth and ran away naked.*

Personally, I think this young man was the author of this Gospel, as I have indicated in my introduction to the book. It is Mark himself. Here is the picture of someone who is intensely interested in Jesus but a little afraid to come out into the open with it when the pressure is on. A silent seeker, but somewhat unsure about how public he wants to be about Jesus. But he was so serious about his search that he didn't even take time to get dressed properly when he found out something was happening to Jesus.

Perhaps that is where you are at right now. You really are very interested to experience all that Jesus offers. So interested that you even find yourself in embarrassing circumstances at times when something slips out you hadn't intended others to know about.

My word to you this morning is "that there is life for a look at the Savior!" God will honor that sincere search, no matter how private or how awkward it sometimes seems. When a house is on fire, you grab what you can to cover yourself as you head toward safety. When you seek God with deep and sincere passion, you don't really give a rip about what you look like. You throw on whatever your hand touches first and head out the door looking for life.

I believe God honored Mark's passion to know Jesus, as is evidenced by the fact that he got to write part of our Scriptures. And he will honor your search as well.

The Second Criminal

Again we borrow a little from Luke's Gospel here, Luke 23:42-43. *And he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." And he said to him, "Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise."*

Here is a man who has nothing to bring Jesus but a broken life. He has taken his chances and his chances have turned against him. He can not bring an offering of money. He can not promise to pay back all the people he has ripped off. He can not promise to behave from here on. He does not even have time on his hands. His hours are numbered. All he has is a broken cry for mercy.

Perhaps this picture fits your experience. You may not be hanging on a cross, but you feel like you are at your wits end. You feel wounded and broken with nothing to offer God. If that is your situation your cry for mercy and grace is heard by our Savior.

The Women

There were also women looking on from afar, among whom were Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James...and also many other women who came up with him to Jerusalem (15:40-41).

And when the sabbath was past, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the Mother of James, and Salome, brought spices so that they might go and anoint him...(16:1)

Here were women of faith whose love for Jesus knew no bounds. Where were the men? Hiding like wimps, while the women at least came close enough to see Jesus hanging on the cross. The disciples who had committed to following Jesus to the death, were in hiding, afraid for their lives. And on Sunday morning, in their eagerness to give Jesus his last burial rites, they had failed to think about how they would get past the stone that closed the grave. Wouldn't you think that maybe at least a few of the men would have offered to accompany the women to do the heavy work of rolling back the stone? Obviously the men and women had talked to each other because the women knew where to go to find the disciples and Peter (16:7).

But was there a hint of help from these “brave” men? No. Can’t you just imagine the disciples talking to each other after the women left. **“Hey, by the way, Peter, how are they going to get into the grave? Just like women to be so impractical! We’ll see who gets the last laugh.”**

Women in love with Jesus, that’s all – to the point of being irrational. Is that a picture of where you are at today? Then Jesus has a job for you to do, “Go and tell...” It is interesting to note that the first evangelists bearing the good news of the resurrection were women, while men were hiding in their basements. How is it possible then that through the centuries many churches have concluded that women are not gifted or capable of being bearers of the good news? They must always be silent!

It is okay to love Jesus to the point of attempting some irrational things. As a matter of fact your irrational act may turn out to be the salvation of many. So go for it. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and soul and mind. It is the right and godly thing to do.

So where do you fit into the picture.

Are you like Judas – betraying Jesus for money?

Are you like the Jews – betraying Jesus to hide their shallowness?

Are you like Pilate – betraying Jesus to satisfy the crowds?

Are you like the soldiers – playing around with Jesus?

Are you like Simon of Cyrene – carrying a cross other placed on him?

Are you like the first criminal – thinking only how to get himself out of a jam?

Are you like the young man – so eager to know Jesus, yet afraid to get too close?

Are you like the second criminal – with nothing to bring but a broken life?

Or are you like the women – in love with Jesus that goes beyond rational bounds?

Wherever you fit into the picture, there is but one message for you...

Go to Galilee...there you will see him! (16:7).

If you seek him, he will find you!

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