

Good Friday Reflections from the Perspective of Luke (22:66-23:56)

1. The Trial before Pilate: Luke 23:1-4.

23 Then the whole assembly rose and led him off to Pilate. ²And they began to accuse him, saying, “We have found this man *subverting our nation*. He *opposes* payment of taxes to Caesar and *claims to be Messiah, a king*.” ³So Pilate asked Jesus, “Are you *the king of the Jews*?” “You have said so,” Jesus replied. ⁴Then Pilate announced to the chief priests and the crowd, “I find no basis for a charge against this man.”

Early on Good Friday morning, the Sanhedrin – the Supreme Court of chief priests and elders in Jerusalem – led Jesus to the Roman Governor, Pilate, to seek a guilty verdict. Prior to that, they had been interrogating Jesus concerning his identity as the Messiah or, equivalently, the Christ.¹ Their strategy seems to have been to goad Jesus into incriminating himself. Luke has been telling his readers from the very beginning of his gospel that Jesus is indeed the Messiah,² but here Jesus is evasive and noncommittal so as not to give the Sanhedrin ammunition in response to their trick questions.³ The title “Messiah,” like “Son of God,” has religious *and* political connotations. So, if they can get an admission from Jesus, then would have grounds to take him to the *political* authorities – the Romans. Regardless of what Jesus actually said, the Sanhedrin determine they had sufficient grounds⁴ to take him to Pontius Pilate, where they accuse Jesus of sedition – conduct or speech that would incite a rebellion against Rome. He is accused explicitly of “perverting the nation,”⁵ “forbidding the people to pay taxes to the Emperor,” and as being “a king” – the Messiah.⁶

The question of taxes would certainly concern the Romans, as would proclaiming himself to be a King.⁷ However, the way Luke tells the story, we readers know that the charges that Chief Priests make are lies. Jesus affirmed that Jews *should* pay taxes to Caesar, as well as give to God what belongs to God⁸ And in terms of being the Messiah, this “king” comes in peace and to bring peace, and he is not a political or military threat.⁹ Jesus was the promised *saviour*, not a political schemer or a militant rebel.

¹ Luke 22:66-71.

² Luke 2:11, 26; 4:41; 9:20, but Jesus had ordered the disciples not tell anyone.

³ Although they have put their question(s) to him, they would *not* have accepted his answer even if he would have responded forthrightly. Jesus has already encountered members of this group in the Temple and he knows that they refused to answer any of *his* questions (Luke 20:5–8, 26, 40).

⁴ In Mark 14:62, Jesus gives an *explicit* affirmation that he is the Messiah. In Matt 26:63-65 and Luke 22:67-71, Jesus’ response seems to give grounds for it to be interpreted as such.

⁵ Luke interpreted God’s work through John the Baptist and Jesus as a fulfilment of the divine purposes for Israel (1:68–69, 2:25,32). Jesus’ accusers were right in seeing Jesus’ work as having implications for the nation of Israel, but its redemption was seen as perversion. In fact, it was the religious leaders who were “perverting the nation” for their own power games.

⁶ Luke 23:2.

⁷ Only the Roman Emperor could appoint someone as a “king.” He would be a Roman puppet.

⁸ Luke 20:25.

⁹ Although, without doubt, being part of God’s kingdom has consequences for politics and personal loyalty.

It does not take Pilate long to conclude Jesus is *innocent* of these very serious charges. Luke's version of the Good Friday events stresses Christ's *innocence*. Pilate said it *three* times¹⁰ and Herod agreed.¹¹ Why might this be important for Luke? Death by crucifixion was the harshest and worst form of death sanctioned by the Romans. You had to have done something terrible to deserve that punishment. It can't have been easy to defend Christianity to the civic authorities across the Roman Empire when its founder had been executed by crucifixion. Consequently, Luke's emphasis that Pilate declared Jesus innocent may have been important for the life and witness the church late in the first century, in order to clarify that Jesus was found innocent under *Roman* law and, therefore, those who followed him are not a threat to a stable society. Unfortunately, this transferred the blame to the *Jewish* religious authorities and, over the centuries, this has fuelled anti-Semitism. How bitterly ironic that the gospel that emphasises Christ's inclusive love should be used as a weapon against persons of his own race.

On another level, the drama between Jesus and Pilate is a test of character and convictions. Throughout the trial, Jesus maintains composure before his accusers, while Pilate tries one ploy and then another to extricate himself from this tricky situation. Pilate announces Jesus is innocent, but it cannot make his verdict stick. He sends Jesus to Herod, but Herod will not resolve the crisis for him. Who, then, is *really* guilty of "perverting the people"? It is *all* those who pervert the truth for political expediency and to retain power; some things don't change! Will people blindly follow their misguided leaders? Will Pilate allow himself to be manoeuvred into condemning an innocent man? When you think about it, this trial has a way of exposing the forces, commitments, and loyalties that we hold most dear. And this also makes it personal for us, because where were the disciples in all of this?¹² It is not a question of whether we will follow Jesus when the going is easy. Rather, the trial of Jesus forces the uncomfortable question: can Jesus count on me when the going gets tough? How willing are we to follow Jesus the Messiah when the following becomes costly?

2. The Crucifixion of Jesus: Luke 23:32-43.

³² Two other men, both criminals, were also led out with him to be executed. ³³ When they came to the place called the Skull, they crucified him there, along with the criminals—one on his right, the other on his left. ³⁴ Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." And they divided up his clothes by casting lots.¹³

³⁵ The people stood watching, and the rulers even sneered at him. They said, "He saved others; let him save himself if he is God's Messiah, the Chosen One."¹⁴ ³⁶ The soldiers also came up and mocked him. They offered him wine vinegar ³⁷ and said, "If you are the king of the Jews, save yourself."³⁸ There was a written notice above him, which read: THIS IS THE KING OF THE JEWS.

¹⁰ Luke 23:4,14,22.

¹¹ Luke 23:11-12;15. This was Herod Antipas, tetrarch of the northern regions of Galilee and Perea.

¹² Indeed, the *lack* of following for Jesus (certainly none with any *influence*) may have contributed to Pilate concluding Jesus was innocent.

¹³ See also Ps 22:18 (1,7).

¹⁴ See also Isa 42:1.

³⁹ One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him: “Aren’t you the Messiah? Save yourself and us!” ⁴⁰ But the other criminal rebuked him. “Don’t you fear God,” he said, “since you are under the same sentence? ⁴¹ We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong.” ⁴² Then he said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” ⁴³ Jesus answered him, “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise.”

Crucifixion was a shameful form of execution and therefore one challenge facing the gospel writers was to make clear to their reader’s the distinctive significance of Jesus’ crucifixion. Luke does this in three ways. First, he presents the *demeanor* of Jesus on the cross as calm and composed. Jesus says, “Father, forgive them, for they don’t know what they are doing.”¹⁵ There is no cursing of his tormentors and killers, as was typical in Jewish martyr stories.¹⁶ Second, there is the *mocking* by the soldiers,¹⁷ some leaders of the Jewish people,¹⁸ and by one of the criminals who died with him.¹⁹ Third, Luke again points to the *identity* of Jesus as “The Messiah (of God), The Chosen One, and the King of the Jews,”²⁰ titles he places on the lips of those who mock him. This is no ordinary execution of a criminal! He was a victim not a villain.

Luke makes that even clearer with his unique portrayal of the conversation Jesus has with one of the two criminals who is being crucified with him. While one criminal joins in the mocking, the other maintains Jesus has done nothing wrong; *even* he recognises by Christ’s demeanor that Jesus is *innocent*.²¹ And here we have the gospel in a miniature: Jesus is once again among the outcasts conveying forgiveness and hope to the sinner who owns up to his guilt. As Jesus said earlier, “The Son of Man came to seek and save the lost.”²²

In Christ’s death there is the promise of life with Jesus for those trust in him. This is staggering news not just for the criminal on the cross, but also for us *today*.²³ We should all recognise that we stand in need of God’s mercy and ask that he might remember us. This story invites the same response to the gospel as a whole: turn to the Lord for mercy, receive his grace, and then confidently spread the good news of God’s kingdom among others by doing for them what Jesus did during his ministry.

3. The Events Surrounding Jesus’ Death: Luke 23:44-49

⁴⁴ It was now about noon, and darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon, ⁴⁵ for the sun stopped shining. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two. ⁴⁶ Jesus called out with a loud voice, “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.” When he had said this, he breathed his last. ⁴⁷ The

¹⁵ See how this attitude is mirrored in the stoning of Stephen; Acts 7:54-60. (Even if v34 is contested, the general point is valid. There is no crying out with a sense of abandonment by God in Luke’s account.)

¹⁶ See 2 Macc 7.

¹⁷ Luke 23:11,36.

¹⁸ Luke 22:63-65; 23:35.

¹⁹ Luke 23:39.

²⁰ See Luke 23:35-39.

²¹ Luke 23:40-41.

²² Luke 19:10.

²³ Luke 23:43.

centurion, seeing what had happened, praised God and said, “Surely this was a righteous man.”⁴⁸ When all the people who had gathered to witness this sight saw what took place, they beat their breasts²⁴ and went away.⁴⁹ But all those who knew him, including the women who had followed him from Galilee, stood at a distance, watching these things.

“It really happened. Whatever rumours you have heard, it is true that Jesus *was* crucified; the Messiah *was* killed,” says Luke. He also reports that “darkness was over the whole land.”²⁵ This has led many to believe that there was a solar eclipse, but from astronomy we know this is impossible at Passover, as there is always a full moon! Regardless of proposed alternative explanations, what might this “darkness” have meant to Luke? In the Old Testament the darkening sun was a sign of judgement associated with the Day of the Lord.²⁶ In other words, this signifies divine judgement on the nation for rejecting God’s Chosen One. Non-Jewish readers would have understood such darkness as a cosmic sign that often accompanied the death of a great man or king. Either way, “darkness” was a *sign* to pay attention.

Luke records the last words of Jesus as, “Father into your hands I commit my spirit,” a quotation from Psalm 31:5. Luke’s Jesus does not die with a cry of abandonment,²⁷ but having full confidence in the one whom he addressed as “*Abba*” or “Father.” Then Jesus breathed his last.

In Mark’s gospel, the affirmation, “Truly this man was the son of God”²⁸ by the centurion is a climax in that Jesus’ identity has been revealed publicly on the lips of a non-Jew. Luke presents it differently; the centurion’s response is, “Certainly, this man was innocent.”²⁹ This confession in Luke is therefore not a statement concerning Christ’s identity, but the last in a series of pronouncements of Jesus’ *innocence*.

Each of the Gospels present the death Jesus in a different way; we need to read each gospel individually and appreciate their distinctiveness. In Luke we stand with the crowd of the people watching as Jesus was crucified and by those who taunted him to “save himself” if he truly was a “saviour.” Jesus’ death confirms who he has been throughout his ministry; the one who pronounces forgiveness to society’s outcasts. He assures the penitent criminal of the blessing of paradise, and dies with a prayer to the one who he trusts as “Father” *even* in death. Jesus has faithfully undertaken the work of redemption in “lifting up the lowly . . .,” as Mary said in the Magnificat,³⁰ in “preaching the good news to the poor . . .,” as Jesus announced in his home town of Nazareth,³¹ and this cost him his life.³²

²⁴ A sign of *repentance*; see Luke 18:13; 23:27, i.e., the way Jesus died seems to have caused a profound change of heart.

²⁵ Luke 23:44, as does Mark 15:33.

²⁶ See, for example, Isa 13:9–10; 50:2–3, Amos 8:9; Joel 2:10, 31; Zeph 1:15.

²⁷ See Mark 15:34b; Matt 27:46b; Ps 22:1.

²⁸ Mark 15:39b; Matt 27:54.

²⁹ Luke 23:47b (NRSV) The NIV translates this as “just” or Jesus was “a righteous man.”

³⁰ Luke 1:52–53.

³¹ Luke 4:18.

³² Ironically, his death also signals the inevitability of completion of the other side of the redemption of the humble, namely: judgement on the proud and bringing down powerful from their thrones (Luke 1:51–53).

We know the story does not end there, as seeming defeat will be gloriously transformed in 3 days time. But let us, for today, pause in the darkness. How terrible it is that God sent the Son and we rejected him and crucified him on a hill outside of Jerusalem, even though he was innocent. If we have rejected the Saviour, what hope is there? Only by witnessing the darkness of his death and the despair of the loss of hope can we fully appreciate joy of resurrection. As Luke said at the beginning of his Gospel, Jesus came to give light to “those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death.”³³ Consequently, those who see the light in the darkness can join those at the cross who confessed Jesus. Amen.

³³ Luke 1:79.