

UNDER OATH

2nd April 2017

Readings: Matthew 26:57-68

Over history there's been a number of famous critics who've gone out of their way to attack Christianity. Those who in the public forum stood up and said, "See, here's the evidence against Jesus," or "How can you possibly believe in God when such-and-such is true?" Richard Dawkins, renowned atheist, is a modern-day example. Another is Voltaire, the 18th century philosopher who once said though it took centuries to build Christianity up but "I'll show you how one Frenchman can destroy it within 50 years." Further back there were soldiers guarding the tomb who were paid to say disciples stole Jesus' body in the night. This morning we'll meet some more false witnesses and see how religious leaders used them to bring a guilty verdict against Jesus. However, thinking they'd won instead set in motion events that would see Jesus glorified beyond what they could possibly imagine.



Let's pray

It's been a busy few hours for Jesus. Finishing the last supper, he and disciples left the upper room and made their way out of the city to the mount of Olives. There in the garden Jesus agonised in prayer. Afterwards, no sooner had he roused his disciples, than an armed mob appeared and carried him off to a late night trial. Following at a distance Peter finds himself in the high priest's courtyard, where he tries, and fails, to be inconspicuous. Meanwhile we pick up events inside...
Matthew 26:59

The chief priests and the whole Sanhedrin were looking for false evidence against Jesus so that they could put him to death. But they did not find any, though many false witnesses came forward. Matthew 26:59–60

Now before Roman rule, the religious leaders wouldn't have had so much trouble. They'd easily have manipulated the trial and had Jesus stoned first thing in the morning. However capital punishment was the sole right of the occupying forces. Only the Roman governor could authorise execution and he wasn't going to do so just because the high priest asked. Caiphais needed evidence he didn't have. So he was prepared to turn to false witnesses. However there was a problem. None of them could agree until...

Finally two came forward and declared, “This fellow said, ‘I am able to destroy the temple of God and rebuild it in three days.’ ” Matthew 26:60b–61

Now, finally Caiaphas, the high priest had something he could work with; the claim that Jesus said he could destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days. Now, with dark irony these villains speak more truth than they realise. Let me explain. Jesus did make a similar claim but with a vital difference. After clearing out the temple of dishonest traders he was challenged by the religious leaders. In reply he said...

“Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days. John 2:19

Two things to note. First Jesus clearly states it's the religious leaders - not himself - who'll destroy the temple. So, the two witnesses certainly have it wrong. But secondly Jesus is referring to his body and not the temple itself. He was declaring that the religious leaders would kill him, but after three days he would rise from the dead. All this went over their head then just as it does so now – just as his words are being fulfilled. For they're about to do exactly what Jesus said they would; kill him, but third day he'd rise.

Now back to the trial. What is Jesus response this accusation? verse 63. “But Jesus remained silent.” And by doing so Jesus fulfils another prophecy from Isaiah 53

He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; he was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth. Isaiah 53:7

However Caiaphas is livid that Jesus won't answer and puts him under the most solemn of oaths.

The high priest said to him, “I charge you under oath by the living God: Tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God.” Matthew 26:63

Now Jesus' response contains some of the most significant words ever uttered. In my opinion this ranks as one of the most theological important verse in the Bible and is Matthew's whole focus in this section. Again and again through the passion narrative it's the words of Jesus that carry the greatest significance. Here's a prime example.

“Yes, it is as you say,” Jesus replied. “But I say to all of you: In the future you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven.” Matthew 26:64

Jesus clearly refers to himself as the Son Man who sits at God's right hand and will come on the clouds of heaven. And in doing so he's referencing a vision of Daniel the prophet. And this vision unlocks the very divinity of Jesus.

"In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. 14 He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all peoples, nations and men of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed. Daniel 7:13-14

The references to the "son of man" and "clouds of heaven" clearly link Jesus words to this passage. Now, what Jesus claims here is amazing. Daniel's vision reveals the Ancient of Days in the heavenly realms. This is clearly God on his throne. Now into God's presence is escorted one like the son of man, to whom all people of every language will worship. We have here for the first time in Scripture a divine being apart from God who is worthy of worship. Astounding. Without precedent. Now this would have been most disturbing for Daniel. Remember that throughout the book of Daniel he and his friends refuse to worship anyone but God. Daniel is thrown into a lion's den and his three friends into a fiery furnace because they refused to worship any other. Yet - here in this vision Daniel sees a second, divine being worthy of worship. No wonder we read in Daniel 7:15 & 28

I, Daniel, was troubled in spirit, and the visions that passed through my mind disturbed me... I, Daniel, was deeply troubled by my thoughts, and my face turned pale. Daniel 7:15 & 28

And all this was not lost on the high priest. Caiaphas knew that by Jesus claiming to be the son of man of Daniel's vision he was claiming divinity, the right to be worshiped. No wonder he...

... tore his clothes and said, "He has spoken blasphemy! Why do we need any more witnesses? Look, now you have heard the blasphemy. What do you think?"

"He is worthy of death," they answered. *(and all hell broke loose)*

Then they spit in his face and struck him with their fists. Others slapped him and said, "Prophecy to us, Christ. Who hit you?" Matthew 26:65-68

As dawn breaks we come to the end of the longest of nights yet there's still more to come. Jesus is bound and led away to the Roman Governor, Pilate. This then is the next step in the passion of Christ, one step closer to the cross, one step closer to our rescue, our redemption and our adoption as God's children.

This then is the trial in the house of the high priest. Now there're a number of implications surrounding this trial, especially around the words of Jesus. So, what can we learn? What's here for us to take home?

Well, three warnings and three encouragements. The negative first and then the positive.

I. Three warnings

1. There will always be false witnesses

Verse 60. There's never been an age where false witnesses have not been present. They've always been people ready to say, "This is why you can't take Jesus seriously". Whether it be the guards at the empty tomb, Voltaire in the 17th Century or Richard Dawkins today, there's always some new idea or supposed evidence that becomes a best seller at the bookstand, or gains traction on the internet. As Christians, we need to realise that this will always be the case, and to not allow our faith be shaken.

A good example is Voltaire who claimed within 50 years he'd destroy Christianity. Twenty years after his death the Geneva Bible society brought his house in Geneva and used it to print and distribute Bibles. False witnesses didn't derail God's plan on that first Easter and they won't derail our faith today, as we look to Jesus the author and perfecter of our faith.

2. There will often be collusion between the church and false teaching

Verse 62. In the same way that the religious leaders colluded with the two false witnesses we mustn't be surprised when some sections of the church promote false teaching. Let me give you an example that's close to home. In 1967 the Presbyterian church put Lloyd Geering, then Principal at Knox was put on trial for heresy; for teaching trainee ministers that Jesus didn't raise from the dead but was somehow resuscitated. Why? Because in Geering's mind miracles, including the resurrection, were such a barrier to modern man that Christian theology needed adjusting in light of advances in science. He proposed that resurrection and other miracles were to be considered part of a myth – a grand and glorious myth that would inspire and bring the best out of modern men and women.

My response - Bulllocks! I'm not sure if this is a theological term - but it's a good summary of his thinking. By the grace of God and though prominent at the time this has gained less and less traction within our denomination.

The point is we should not be surprised when sections of the church promote false teaching. Instead we are reassured that by God's grace his church will not be overcome or derailed by false witnesses.

3. We can't follow Jesus at a distance

Now I covered this in detail last week, so just briefly; where was Peter during the trial? Following at a distance. How did it end? In tears. After denying Jesus three times, he left the courtyard weeping bitterly. Following Jesus at a distance was the most bitter and disturbing event in Peter's life. Don't think it will be any different for us if we think we can follow at a distance. Many people do? There thinking's something like this, "What's the minimum I need to do to keep God happy, to receive his blessings and get into heaven?" So they've a Bible at home, they may send their children to church or even come now and again themselves. But listen - following Jesus at distance will end in tears - or worse.

So, three warnings - the negative implications. What about the three encouragements - three positive implications from Jesus' own words. From his reference to Daniel's "Son of Man" vision.

II. Three Encouragements

1. Jesus is at God's right hand

The first thing we learn about Daniel's "Son of Man" vision is where Jesus is today. He's not on trial. He's not on the cross, nor in the tomb. He wasn't resuscitated, lived and buried in Spain. No, he's at God's right hand.

Listen to these wonderful words from Hebrews 12:2

Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Hebrews 12:2

These words are a summary of the Passion. Jesus endured the cross, scorning its shame and is where? At the right hand of the Father - from where he will return, coming on the clouds of heaven to judge the living and the dead

2. Jesus is worthy of worship

The second thing we learn from Daniel's "Son of Man" vision is Jesus is worthy of our worship. Remember when Daniel first saw this vision he was mightily disturbed, shaken to his core. Why? He saw in heaven a second person being adored. He saw not only the Ancient of Days but also the Son of Man being worshiped by all heaven and by people from every tongue. Jesus is worthy of our worship!

As an aside this influences the way I witness to Jehovah Witnesses and Mormons... and even Muslims. What do they have in common? They refuse to worship Jesus and feel it's abhorrent when Christians do. So when a JW calls at the door, and if I've time, I do at least two things. I ask them their conversion testimony and then share mine. The second thing is I weave into the conversation how much I enjoy worshiping Jesus. It drives them batty! For their technique is to point out a whole bunch of scriptures we can agree on but subtly twist and distort the person

and nature of Christ. By focusing on worshipping Jesus it honours our Lord and exposes their folly.

3. Jesus is judge

Finally Daniel's Son of Man vision clearly shows that Jesus will rule over, and judge, all peoples and all nations. This is his role at the right hand of God. And so with great irony Caiphais, believing he to be judge passes sentence, "He is worthy of death". Yet... yet, the Son of Man, this Jesus who they now mock, and spit on, punch and slap is the ultimate and supreme judge. For he is...

... given authority, glory and sovereign power; all peoples, nations and men of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed. Daniel 7:14

He is the one we worship, as he sits at God's right hand to judge the living in the dead. Now, false witnesses will come and go, and some sections of the church will collide with them. But for all who follow Jesus with all their heart - not at distance, we have the joy of living lives that honour him who gave his all for us. Amen