

# WHO WILL STAND WITH ME?

26th March 2017

Readings: Matthew 26:31-35; 57-58; 69-75

Have you a favourite classic movie? One with big screen drama, larger than life actors, compelling plot. The 1960 movie *Spartacus* ticks these boxes. Based on historical events, it retells the story of slaves rising up against their Roman masters. Set around 70BC Spartacus is a famous gladiator, on top of his game, best of the best. He escapes slavery leading others to freedom. As news spreads, thousands more slaves join his army as they rampage through Italy.



Near the end of the movie the Roman army finally defeat the slaves. The Roman commander, played by Laurence Olivier, suspects Spartacus is still alive amongst the prisoners. So he gives the prisoners a choice: turn over Spartacus or... death by crucifixion. Let's see how it plays out.

## *Play movie clip*

Here we've a remarkable scene of a man so loved, his followers would not only die for him, but die by the most horrendous of deaths - crucifixion. This loyalty's nothing short of amazing. Who could imagine?... And it's what came to mind as I was pondering another historical figure, surrounded by loyal followers and under the threat of crucifixion. Who might that be? Well, no surprises - Jesus. On the night he was betrayed Jesus had his disciples around him as he faced the mob ready to take him to his death. And his disciples had a similar opportunity. The mob didn't know who Jesus was and it was dark. Judas complicated matters, but my question is, "Why didn't the disciples take advantage of the dark and mob not knowing who Jesus was? Where was Jesus' Tony Curtis who leapt to his feet declaring, 'I'm Spartacus'. Why did not at least one of the disciples stand by their Master and say, 'No, I'm Jesus'?. Why did they scatter into the night, leaving Jesus to face arrest, trial and crucifixion - alone?" These are some of the questions I've wrestled with and that we're going to explore as the disciples run for the hills and as Peter denies his Lord.

So let's turn to Matthew 26:31 where we see the first hint of the scattering. It's after the Last Supper, as they're making their way to Gethsemane. Jesus makes a blunt assessment of their loyalty...

Then Jesus told them, “This very night you will all fall away on account of me, for it is written: “I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered.’ But after I have risen, I will go ahead of you into Galilee.” Matthew 26:31–32

Why did Jesus do this? Two reasons. To emphasise no matter how grim events were about to become this is all God’s plan. It’s not bad luck nor the devil’s scheme but his Heavenly Father’s will. Secondly, to give the disciples a measure of reassurance. Jesus knew the disciples would scatter and deny. For despite Peter twice assuring Jesus of his loyalty and the others chiming in, Jesus knew they’d soon disown him - but he would not. Though they would be disloyal, he would remain loyal.

Forewarned, events move onto the garden and then arrest. Full credit to Peter for drawing a sword but with just an ear to show for it, and facing a well-armed mob, the disciples scatter.

Then all the disciples deserted him and fled. Those who had arrested Jesus took him to Caiaphas, the high priest, where the teachers of the law and the elders had assembled. But Peter followed him at a distance, right up to the courtyard of the high priest. He entered and sat down with the guards to see the outcome. Matthew 26:56b–58

Again to Peter’s credit he’s the only disciple to follow Jesus - how be it from a safe distance. Again we see the heart of Peter - ready to draw the sword in the heat of the moment. Now, we see him determined to do what he could, even if was at a distance.

So as Jesus faces an unjust trial, Peter finds himself sitting in a courtyard - but not alone.

... a servant girl came to him. “You also were with Jesus of Galilee,” she said.

But he denied it before them all. “I don’t know what you’re talking about,” he said. Matthew 26:69-70

And again...

“This fellow was with Jesus of Nazareth.”

He denied it again, with an oath: “I don’t know the man!” Matthew 26:71b–72

And again

Surely you are one of them, for your accent gives you away.”

Then he began to call down curses on himself and he swore to them, “I don’t know the man!” Immediately a rooster crowed. Matthew 26:73–74

Three times Peter had an opportunity to stand up for his Master, three times he denied him. And when the rooster crowed Peter remembered Jesus’ words...

“Before the rooster crows, you will disown me three times.” And he went outside and wept bitterly. Matthew 26:75

Here we have it! Jesus in his darkest hour. The disciples have fled and Peter has denied his Lord. No one stood with Jesus. No one stood before the mob and said “I’m Jesus”. No one stood in the courtyard and said, “I’m with Jesus”. No one.

And how are we to make sense of this? How are we to understand what’s happened. And we must, for we know - in our heart of hearts - we too have not stood with Jesus. In our family, with our friends, at work or school we have not stood with Jesus. At a work function we’ve said something and someone says, “You’re not one of those Christians are you?” and we splutter into our drink. Or new friends want us to do something on a Sunday morning but we’re in the church music team but don’t want them to know so we just say we’re busy. In big ways and small we like Peter, can deny our Lord.

And as I was trying to make sense of this I thought maybe it’d be helpful to contrast Peter with Judas. Both were disciples, both turned their back on Jesus - but one was restored and one wasn’t. Where were they different? How can we be like Peter - restored and not Judas - shipwrecked. In the battle for loyalty to Jesus where did Peter get it right and Judas get it wrong? Well there were two battles that Peter won and Judas lost. What were the two battles? The first was the battle of our affections.

### 1. Battle of our Affections

To put it bluntly Peter had a heart for Jesus. Peter loved Jesus. By nature Peter wore his heart on his sleeve and that heart belonged to Jesus. Like Tony Curtis was to Kirk Douglas in Spartacus, more so was Peter to Jesus.

We see this a few pages back in Matthew 16. A few weeks earlier on the road to Jerusalem Jesus and the disciples were talking and Jesus asked (13), “Who do people say the Son of Man is?” From the outflow of his heart...

Simon Peter answered, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” Matthew 16:15–16

Peter gets it spot on and Jesus commends him. But in the next breath, as Jesus explains that he must suffer, die and be raised to life, Peter can’t help himself.

Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. "Never, Lord!" he said. "This shall never happen to you!" Matthew 16:22

By this and other incidents in the Gospels we see Peter's heart for Jesus - unlike Judas. Judas let his heart grow cold toward Jesus. Not fulfilling his expectations of who and what a Messiah should be, Judas had long let his heart grow cold towards his master.

And we need to be so, so careful we don't do the same. We start our walk with Jesus with enthusiasm and commitment. We give our lives to Jesus but in return we expect Jesus to pull some strings for us. Especially in the big things – that special someone we want to like us, health, career, family, finances. But after a while we hit a few peed bumps, major reversals. And we think, "This is not what I signed up for. This is not the Jesus I imagined." And like Judas we allow our heart to grow cold to Jesus.

Now troubles of some kind or another come to every Christian. Troubles that test our loyalty. Troubles that where we choose to be like Peter or Judas. To let our hearts soften or harden to our Lord. Jesus puts it clearly in his letter to the church in Ephesus. Found in the book of Revelation Jesus writes...

I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance...You have persevered and have endured hardships for my name, and have not grown weary. Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken your first love. Remember the height from which you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first.  
Revelation 2:3-5

All this is reinforced in Proverbs 4:23

Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life. Proverbs 4:23

If we want to be loyal to Christ, if we want to stand with Christ when others run away, we need to win the battle of our affections. We must have a heart for Christ. A heart broken, a heart softened, a heart restored by Jesus - like Peter would soon experience

## 2. Battle of the Mundane

This then is the first contrast between Peter and Judas - a heart for Jesus. Now we come to a second contrast. If we want to be loyal to Jesus, to stand with him - though all else deny - we must win the battle of the mundane. What do I mean by this? Well we love the drama of Peter, the hotheaded, man of action. But faith is not like that - day in and day out. Not at all. Much of our walk involves is being faithful in the mundane - in the day-to-day outworking of our faith. We keep our quiet times, not just because it cultivates our heart for Jesus, but because such devotion is a

call to being faithful in the day to day. We serve in the church, go on a roster, attend a working bee, cook a meal for the GI dinner, and lead a small group - because God calls us to be faithful in the mundane. And not just the sacred but also the secular - faithful at work or school, faithful to our spouse and friends, faithful in household chores and the mundane. And we underestimate the power this has to make a difference<sup>1</sup>.

Now Judas lost the battle of the mundane. Not only did he let his heart grow cold to Christ but he lost the battle in the small choices, of the mundane. It got so bad that Judas, keeper of the common purse, was dipping into that purse for his own ends. It got so bad that for 30 pieces of silver he betrayed Jesus with a kiss. He wasn't being faithful in the small things, which lead to him not being faithful to the only thing that matters in the end - to Jesus.

But did Peter fare any better? He had a heart for Jesus and was, as much as the Gospels reveal, faithful in the small matters, yet he still denied Jesus.

Yet, for Peter all was not lost. And in this we can take heart. Though we may disown Jesus he will not disown us. For Peter remembered the words as they were walking to Gethsemane... "I will go ahead of you into Galilee."

And so Peter goes...He travels to Galilee and goes fishing. John recounts the story of how Peter and some of the disciples fished all night and caught nothing<sup>2</sup>. Early that morning see a figure on the shore. "Friends, haven't you any fish" the stranger calls. "No", their reply. "Throw your net on the right side of your boat". And when they do the catch is too much to haul in.

For Peter the penny drops. "It is the Lord!" he cries out and jumps in the water. Soon they're around a fire, and Jesus asks Peter three questions. And of course we remember what happened the last time Peter was around a fire and asked three questions

"Peter, Do you truly love me?" "Yes, Lord, you know I love you". Again, "Do you love me"? Three times Peter replies "Lord, you know I love you." And remember what Jesus goes onto say - "Feed my sheep". Jesus restores Peter. Restores Peter to himself but also to leadership. "Peter you will feed my sheep. Yes, you will lead

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<sup>1</sup> "Every time you make a choice you are turning the central part of you, the part of you that chooses, into something a little different than it was before. And taking your life as a whole, with all your innumerable choices, all your life long you are slowly turning this central thing into a heavenly creature or a hellish creature: either into a creature that is in harmony with God, and with other creatures, and with itself, or else into one that is in a state of war and hatred with God, and with its fellow creatures, and with itself. To be the one kind of creature is heaven: that is, it is joy and peace and knowledge and power. To be the other means madness, horror, idiocy, rage, impotence, and eternal loneliness. Each of us at each moment is progressing to the one state of the other." C S Lewis, Mere Christianity

<sup>2</sup> John 21:1-19

again but... it will cost you your life.” In Jesus’ reply he refers to when Peter is old he will stretch out his hands - and it’s a reference to him being crucified. It’s like Jesus saying, “If you had stood up for me in the garden, or in the courtyard it would have probably have cost you your life. But I will give you another chance and you will stand with me again and again until eventually it will cost you your life”. And it did. For many years later Peter was crucified in Rome for his Lord.

And we come full circle. At the start I asked why did not one disciple stood with Jesus as Spartacus’ followers stood with him? Well though each disciple fled, each disciple was restored and all bar one later gave their life for Jesus. James in Jerusalem and Peter in Rome, Thomas in India - each stood with Jesus. That exception was John, imprisoned on the island of Patmos, where he wrote the book of Revelation.

Listen, though we deny Jesus he will not deny us. We may have turned our back on him in the past but today he invites you back. Be encouraged. Be challenged. First win the battle of your affections. Is your heart soft toward Jesus, or has apathy or busyness or disappointment formed callus’ that harden and block your affections for Christ? Hear Jesus’ words, “Return to your first love” Repent, invite Jesus to soften, even break your heart for him. And remember each day we have choices before us, mostly small, sometimes big. They all shape our faith. Make them count for Christ. And when we do, and when it comes to the crunch, whether before a mob or in the quiet of a courtyard, God will help us stand with Jesus and instead of crying out “I’m Spartacus” we’ll declare, “I stand with Jesus. He’s my Lord - do your worst”.

Let’s pray.