

A Criminal, A Centurion & some Women

(Preached by Cheryl Williams at Footscray Baptist Church on Good Friday, April 15th, 12022 – Luke 22 & 23)

Here we are at Good Friday, a day of mixed emotions. A day of seeming failure, full of grief and sadness.

At that first Good Friday, a criminal, a centurion and some women are at the cross, each with their own story and their own understanding of all they have just watched unfold.

They have watched the farcical legal proceedings. Trumped up charges brought by the religious authorities who seem to want the Romans to do their dirty work for them. Charges like perverting the nation – what kind of perversion – including others, showing compassion, forgiving, healing, feeding! The main charge though – was he is the Messiah. Jesus chooses to remain silent, you wouldn't believe my answer anyway he says, and simply tells them you say I am Messiah, Son of God, King of Jews. He is moved between Pilate and Herod, both of whom it appears want nothing to do with this. Traditional enemies Pilate and Herod seem to agree that the charges are ridiculous and Jesus is innocent and if he needs to be punished then just a flogging would suffice.

Initially when asked by the council if he is the Messiah or the Son of God, Jesus never really answers the question. First he says you wouldn't believe my answer and then that you are saying that not me. This is enough to spur them on, to proceed with their Kangaroo Court, in their mind his non answers is all the testimony they need.

Before Pilate, they also complain that Jesus is forbidding them from paying taxes, perhaps they were appealing to the Romans (who profited from the taxes) to take on this case. Pilate asks if Jesus understands himself to be king of the Jews, Jesus simply says you say so. Pilate finds the charges have no basis but the crowd are insistent. When Pilate finds out he is a Galilean he takes the opportunity to wash his hands of the saga by sending it to Herod.

Herod wanted to meet Jesus, he wanted a sign or miracle (who can forget the line in Jesus Christ Superstar – if you are the Christ, walk across my swimming pool), he asks lots of questions, he mocks and mistreats Jesus but finds no case against him so sends him back to Pilate.

Pilate then informs the crowd that neither he or Herod find any of the charges (the poor charges) proven and announces that Jesus doesn't deserve death and to keep the crowd happy he will have him flogged and then released.

The crowd are incensed and ask that Barrabas, a really bad guy, be released instead, something that could be requested. They still call for Jesus to be crucified. Pilate for the third time says he has done nothing that requires death as a punishment. For whatever reason Pilate then gives in to the crowd, releases Barrabas and hands Jesus over to be sentenced.

They have witnessed the sentencing. Jesus is to be crucified and led away for that to happen. Forced to carry his own cross, it is then taken and carried by Simon of Cyrene. The guards could force anybody to carry the cross, hence Simon doing this. Many follow, including women wailing. Jesus then is crucified beside two criminals, not before seeking God's forgiveness for all involved in the process. The indignity continues – lots

cast for his clothes, mocked by soldiers before he commits his Spirit to God and breathes his last.

One criminal sharing the same fate as Jesus can only find words of derision still. The other criminal sees things differently. He chastises him and reminds him that they had done the crime and were now paying the time, Jesus on the other hand was innocent. He truly understands the injustice of this and fears God, he simply asks that Jesus remember him when he comes into his kingdom. This man has come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, the King of the Jews, why? Perhaps it is the way in which Jesus has dealt with this debacle. Jesus tells him he surely will remember him. A man who has sought and accepted the grace of God.

A centurion, a Roman, standing guard has also been watching, doing his job. Maybe he had a front row seat to the whole drama. He had seen it all, the trial, perhaps it was he who compelled Simon to carry the cross, the mocking, the conversation of the two thieves, perhaps he knew of Barrabas and what a thug he was. He had seen the women following and wailing. He had watched Jesus as he was dying. At the end of the proceedings, another Roman, a pagan announces his judgement – surely, he was innocent. As he praises God, he is appalled at the injustice of it all. Does he leave his post? Whatever he does next he is now a believer.

Some women stood at a distance, watching and looking on, too scared to get too close, but unable to tear themselves away. They have probably followed Jesus for some time, maybe they provided hospitality for him along the way. They have seen the betrayal, the denial, watched the disciples flee, they have been horrified at the mocking and indignity of it all, but they cannot abandon Jesus, they need to keep watch in some way.

There are so many characters in this drama, there is a sense in which the injustice of it all is repeated again and again all over the world. The criminal, the centurion and the women have the courage to name the injustice and to turn to God, they are able to say – surely, he was the son of God. They will not abandon Jesus and in turn God will not abandon them.

May we too have the courage to say to Jesus ‘remember me’ when you come into your kingdom. Amen.