

1. Flawless? (Matthew 27:11-26)

Our Lord has been betrayed by Judas (who in despair at what he had done has taken his own life). He has been subjected to illegal questioning and false testimony by the religious hierarchy. He has been denied by Peter and now, because of their desperate anxiety to see Him put to death, the authorities are handing Him over to Pilate. And then Pilate and the others pass their judgement on Jesus, little knowing that He is their Judge and not vice versa and He is the King.

The more we look at Him the more clearly we see that He is indeed flawless. We are used to seeing a figure built up as iconic and then debunked but with our Lord, the closer the scrutiny, the clearer it becomes that He is flawless. Let's look at the testimony of Pilate.

We notice (v 11) He does not deny His kingship to a puzzled, bemused Pilate and He shows a dignified, regal silence to the Chief Priests and Elders and indeed to Pilate himself. We are told that He gave not a single answer. Normally a man in danger of condemnation will try all he can and fight like a tiger to avoid condemnation. He on the contrary doesn't open His mouth. We might think that Pilate has all the power (or so it seemed). And yet it is clear that he was astonished at Jesus and out of his depth. Within a few years all the power that he had would be gone because, like all other earthly power, it is temporary. Did Pilate and the others but know it they were being used to play their part in fulfilling the prophesy (Isaiah 53:7 from that remarkable chapter Isaiah 53) we can read in our own time. Just listen to those words written about Him hundreds of years before, "He was oppressed and He was afflicted, yet He did not open His mouth. Like a lamb that is led to the slaughter and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so He did not open His mouth." Poor Pilate with all that "power" is powerless to do what he really wants which is to release Jesus but instead he is there to fulfil a deeper purpose than he could know as we shall see. He realises the charges against our Lord are bogus and brought out of envy. He sat on the judgement seat, yet he was the one incurring the judgement of One infinitely greater than him who was before him. He is desperate to release Jesus (rather than Barabbas – more of him later) because the more he seems of Jesus the more it becomes clear that he is indeed flawless and without fault, as he says, "Why what evil has he done?". When Pilate asked that question the answer of the crowd is to avoid it altogether and simply demand His crucifixion. Again, they are showing that He is indeed flawless in every respect. By verse 24 we can see that Pilate, that most powerful of men, was totally powerless to do what he wanted and so he makes a pathetic attempt to absolve himself of putting this just man to death.

Pilate's wife saw all too clearly that Jesus was flawless. Her name was Claudia Procula. She was the daughter of an emperor and bravely she invades or disturbs her husband's judgement seat with a message, whose urgency is shown by the interruption. Here was a powerful and influential lady but powerless to prevent the Lord speaking to her and giving her persistent and troubling dreams, "Have nothing to do with that just man."

Did they but know it the Chief Priests and Elders and the crowd all testified to Jesus as the flawless One. The former could not bear the truth about Jesus and so poisoned the minds of the crowd to the irrational baying for His blood, and then the crowd themselves utter those dreadful words that they would bitterly regret. It has been truly said that, "man given half a chance will murder his Maker" and so instead Pilate releases in Jesus' place one who is

anything but flawless, even as Jesus the flawless One was offered up to be crucified. There was no other good enough to pay the price of sin.

2. Foolish? (Matthew 27: 27-44)

Just as the one who is in charge was not the apparent powers that be but the flawless King. So the one who was seen by so many as foolish was in fact the one wise one amongst many fools. Notice the folly of the soldiers, they mocked, they assaulted, they insulted Him, they undressed Him and dressed Him, they submitted Him to appalling degrading treatment. Did they but know it, fulfilling the words of Isaiah 53 that He should be despised and rejected. They mocked Him by calling Him King, unwittingly they were 100% right. He was and is the King. He was too weak to carry His own cross and His very clothing was up for grabs, just as had been prophesied and He was strung up on a cross between two bandits. Yet unwittingly again they acknowledge that He is King. Even then He is in control, refusing a drink normally given to dull the pain because He knew that His suffering had to be experienced in all its intensity. And then we come to what seems like the ultimate folly, staying on the cross. Three times He is challenged to come off the cross. What agonising temptations that must have been, often known as “the last three temptations of Christ”. The Son of God, the King, could have come down from the cross at any time He liked but He would not because in a much deeper sense He could not because, as we see shortly, that is why He came. The “foolishness” of the cross would turn out to be the greatest wisdom of all time and the true folly would belong to those who refused to see what was really happening. That is true then and sadly true now.

3. Forsaken? (Matthew 27: 45-53)

Now the dreadful day reaches its climax. The awful darkness revealed the terrible nature of the evil being carried out culminating in that moment when Jesus cried out those awful words that He has been forsaken by His Heavenly Father. The worst moment in the whole history of the world and yet amazingly also the most wonderful. Psalm 22:1 prophesies these very words of the Suffering King and in a way we can barely begin to see He was indeed forsaken but so that we could be forgiven. Even as His cry is totally misheard or misunderstood, at that very moment of choice He breathes His last and with a loud voice gives up His life at the moment of His choosing and look what happens next. The curtain is torn in two from top to bottom. The inner Holy of Holies, 18 metres high to which only the High Priest could go in once a year, symbolising the awful purity of God’s presence barred to man except for sacrifice and then only on limited terms but now torn open, once for all, by Christ, God the Son on the cross. Only He could unlock the gate of Heaven and let us in.

Notice too that it was torn in two from top to bottom confirming that this was done by the Divine hand, not a human one. And then the earthquake and the opening of tombs. We have no liberty to airbrush this out or regard it as a flight of fancy. It shows that Christ on the cross had conquered death for those who love Him and would never be separated from Him. Yes, he was indeed forsaken in a way that had never happened before and need never happen again. He was forsaken that we might be forgiven.

4. Forgotten? (Matthew 27:54-65)

Normally anyone who is crucified was very quickly forgotten. The remains of only one such person have ever been found. Yet from the beginning the contrary was true. The very man with others who was in charge of His crucifixion knew this man to be entirely different, “the

Son of God". A number of ladies who had looked after Jesus in His life were there for Him, in and after His death. Nor was He forgotten by a secret disciple, a man of wealth and influence and access to the corridors of power. And all of a sudden Joseph is the Lord's man, the right person, in the right place, at the right time, with the right access and the right resources. Whatever his earlier failings, he didn't lack courage now to go to see Pilate, who was no doubt in a pretty foul mood, battered and bewildered and getting stick from his wife. And Pilate agreed. Even after death the King is in charge and Joseph's own resources are placed at Christ's disposal and at least two of the Marys are still in attendance (v61). He was not forgotten by the establishment either and once again they had played into His hands. A heavy guard was placed to secure the tomb (and lies were later told) which only served to prove the truth that, far from being forgotten, the King would be risen and alive today for you and me. A few weeks later 3000 of that crowd, far from forgetting, were pleading for forgiveness and amazingly they were able to receive forgiveness and put their trust in the very One that they had helped to crucify.

Which brings us back to two characters to notice at the finish. The first is Barabbas and he stands for all of us as the first for whom Christ died in his place. The second is Simon of Cyrene who is called to carry the cross of Christ and he too stands for each of us who are called to take up the cross for Him and follow in His footsteps. "Love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all."