

AN INIQUITOUS TRIAL

By Charles Mwewa

“Who has believed our message? And to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed? He grew up before Him like a tender shoot, and like a root out of dry ground. He had no stately form or majesty to attract us, no beauty that we should desire Him. He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, acquainted with grief. Like one from whom men hide their faces, He was despised, and we esteemed Him not. Surely, He took on our infirmities and carried our sorrows; yet we considered Him stricken by God, struck down and afflicted. But He was pierced for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon Him, and by His stripes we are healed,” (Isaiah 53:1-4)

Introduction

In the case of *R. v. Sussex Justices*, a 1924 case, Lord Hewart, the then Lord Chief Justice of England, laid down a dictum of, “Justice must not only be done but must also be seen to be done.” Rome, and England, were some of the earliest places where law and justice developed. A Byzantine Emperor, Justinian’s Code of Justinian (Latin: *Codex Justinianus*) had long permeated Europe in the seventh century before the Viking hero, William the Conqueror, had conquered England in 1066 and thereafter introduced the Common-Law. At His trial, it was neither by Roman law, nor by Mosaic canon, that our Lord was condemned and killed. It was by political intrigue and conspired malice. In this sermon, it is argued that the Roman and Jewish rulers conspired to deny our Lord justice. And to assist in the investigation of this theme, the following points will be used: Arrest through betrayal; Witnesses in denial; and Injustice in expedited trial. The points will be discussed in that order before a conclusion, application and related prayer is offered.

1. Arrest through Betrayal

The Byzantines, who were superior and the masters in laws, believed that betrayal was one of the worst sins. Traitors faced very unorthodox deaths. And there was no worse traitor than the one with whom you shared either a table or a bed. Our Lord, Jesus Christ, hand-picked His disciples who sat and ate at His table, and yet one of them betrayed Him: “When evening came, Jesus was reclining with the twelve disciples. And while they were eating, He said to them, ‘Truly I tell you, one of you will betray Me....’ Jesus answered, ‘The one who has dipped his hand into the bowl with Me will betray Me.’”¹ Judas Iscariot sat and shared a meal with Jesus. He also kept the group’s money. He betrayed His Lord. In His time, thus, our Lord received the worst betrayal ever. If He were married, the worst betrayal would come from a spouse. In this case, it came from the most trusted disciple. It is no wonder after Judas realized what he had done, committed suicide.² Traitors were understood to have been dupes of Satan himself. Thus, “Then entered Satan into Judas surnamed Iscariot, being of the number of the twelve.”³ This is consistent with what the ancient perceived betrayal to be; it was an act of evil, sanctioned by the devil himself.

¹ Matthew 26:21 and 23

² See Matthew 27:1–10

³ Luke 22:3-23

Our Lord knew that Satan was involved in His arrest. He never resisted: “Jesus, knowing all that was going to happen to him, went out and asked them, ‘Who is it you want?’ ‘Jesus of Nazareth,’ they replied. ‘I am he,’ Jesus said. (And Judas the traitor was standing there with them.) When Jesus said, ‘I am he,’ they drew back and fell to the ground.”⁴ Note that Jesus presented Himself to be arrested. He allowed it. In judicial parlance, the innocent do not get arrested, only the alleged guilty. Similarly, those who are to be arrested usually fight or flee. Our Lord surrendered Himself as though He was guilty; He was not. He even healed Malchus whom Peter had chopped his ear off.⁵ Satan brought two factions which hated each other together in order to arrest Jesus: “The detachment of soldiers with its commander and the Jewish officials arrested Jesus.”⁶ Betrayers usually connive with enemies and evildoers to inflict injustices on the innocent or the loved ones. That is why betrayal is such an awful sin.

2. Witnesses in Denial

Do you know what a lawyer’s worst nightmare is? It is when her material witness either refuses to testify or he does testify but changes sides. It does not matter the amount of preparation; the circus is tangled. In the art of presentation of evidence, the rules require an advocate at this time to treat her own witness as hostile and cross examine him. In the case of our Lord, the most powerful witness – who ate with the Lord, saw miracles firsthand and even experienced one himself, and who was shaping up to be the leader, cowered and denied his Lord: “Simon Peter and another disciple were following Jesus. Because this disciple was known to the high priest, he went with Jesus into the high priest’s courtyard, but Peter had to wait outside at the door. The other disciple, who was known to the high priest, came back, spoke to the servant girl on duty there and brought Peter in. ‘You aren’t one of this man’s disciples too, are you?’ she asked Peter. He replied, ‘I am not.’”⁷ Do you know that is surprising? Peter was not being asked by a lawyer or a soldier; it was an innocuous servant, and a girl. In those days, girl servants had the lowest social status. In other words, there was no threat to Peter. He simply denied His Lord. If Peter couldn’t testify for Jesus, who would? With no witnesses, His defence would have fallen on deaf judges. Of course, the outcome would have been conviction and sentencing. In this case, death.

The Lord warned: “Many will say to Me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?’ Then I will tell them plainly, ‘I never knew you; depart from Me, you workers of lawlessness!’”⁸ You see the power of a witness. When we stand before God, we will have only Jesus to testify in our defence. If we did not accept Him and do what He wants, we would be left with no witness. Thanks be to God, for those whom the Father has given to Christ will not be condemned: “All that the Father gives Me will come to Me, and the one who comes to Me I will certainly not cast out.”⁹ In other words,

⁴ John 18: 4-6

⁵ See Matthew 26:51; Mark 14:47; Luke 22:5

⁶ John 18:12

⁷ *Ibid.*, verses 15- 17

⁸ Matthew 7:22-23

⁹ John 6:37

Christ will be their witness. Now, you understand why the Lord's trial was iniquitous. His trusted man betrayed Him, and His most present disciple denied testifying for Him.

3. Injustice in Expedited Trial

The fundamental reason why trials are held is to find the truth. In this trial, truth became *anathema*: "If I said something wrong,' Jesus replied, 'testify as to what is wrong. But if I spoke the truth, why did you strike me?'"¹⁰ The Jewish leaders failed to find even a single lie in Jesus using their own Mosaic Law. The High Priest tried the entire night but in vain. Seeing that the Mosaic Law gave them no breakthrough, they sent Him to a Roman Governor: "Then the Jewish leaders took Jesus from Caiaphas to the palace of the Roman governor. By now it was early morning, and to avoid ceremonial uncleanness they did not enter the palace, because they wanted to be able to eat the Passover. So, Pilate came out to them and asked, 'What charges are you bringing against this man? 'If he were not a criminal,' they replied, 'we would not have handed him over to you.' Pilate said, 'Take him yourselves and judge him by your own law.' 'But we have no right to execute anyone,' they objected."¹¹

The above, is inimical even in banana republics. First, they find Him innocent using the Judaism's law. What do they do, you would think they would release Him, oh, no. They send Him to a totally wrong jurisdiction. Rome did not meddle into the local and customary Jewish jurisprudence. Second, they had no charges against Him to warrant change of jurisdiction. "Criminality" is not a charge; it is a condition that only obtains after one has been properly and legally convicted. But the Jewish leaders had already condemned Jesus even before the trial began. In fact, they had already passed sentence ("we have no right to execute anyone," they said. Implying that Jesus deserved execution). They had already decided on the sentence even before the trial was over. And last, they changed suddenly from a Jewish law accusation to Roman insurrection accusation, just to force the Roman gubernatorial to claim jurisdiction.

Then came the worst of the worst. "'What is truth?' retorted Pilate. With this he went out again to the Jews gathered there and said, 'I find no basis for a charge against him.'"¹² Law has failed. There is no basis in law to either charge Jesus or convict Him. In normal situations, this ends everything. The accused must be released. But no, the Jews, who, hitherto, had no love relationship with their colonial emperor, now, suddenly, became political and threatened Pilate. You see, in Roman political system, Caesar was law. If one went against Caesar, they danced with death. Pilate was an appointee of Caesar, and the Jews knew exactly how to blow the whistle: "From then on, Pilate tried to set Jesus free, but the Jewish leaders kept shouting, 'If you let this man go, you are no friend of Caesar. Anyone who claims to be a king opposes Caesar.'"¹³ What do they do, they blackmail Pilate. He would do nothing, though He tried to be fair and suggested

¹⁰ John 18:23

¹¹ *Ibid.*, verses 28-31

¹² *Ibid.*, verse 38

¹³ John 19:12

a choice for the Jews between Barabbas (an insurrectionist) and Jesus (a holy man). You guessed right, they chose an insurrectionist and demanded to kill Jesus.

Thus, the Jewish leaders used every trick in the book of evil and injustice to rush Jesus through an iniquitous trial and condemn Him to death. Isaiah says that all this was predicted to happen for the salvation of many: "Who has believed our message? And to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed?" Indeed, if this report had not been substantiated by historical reality, who would have thought that those entrusted with law and justice would have been the same to conspire with evil and condemn a just person.

Conclusion & Application

You see, justice must not only be done, but it must also be seen to be done. In our Lord's trial, justice was nowhere nearby. It had gone. His own confidante betrayed Him, his most reliable witness denied Him, and those entrusted with the management of the law, abused it against Him. We must be careful that we don't connive with evil to betray those who love us and are entrusted to us. We should be careful that we don't let down our loved ones and brethren just when our testimony is required to support them. And we should not use the instruments of mercy and truth to deal evilly with people around us. Law must be an instrument of justice, and a mechanism for finding truth, and not for hurting truth. Each time we betray our loved ones, we become dupes of Satan.

Related Prayer

Lord, mercy and truth, grant, we pray, in abundance;
In times of weakness, guard our faith with substance;
When faced with betrayal, recuse us from Satan's hell;
And if we should forget justice, let also our joy fail.

In Jesus' name, our Lord,
Amen!