

**Text:**

Matthew 27.32-54

**Big Picture:**

Although Jesus has been predicting this moment throughout the entire Gospel of Matthew, there is something shocking about his death on the cross. For some, the story has ended all wrong, but for those who believe, we join our voices with the centurion and those with him to affirm: Surely, Jesus was the Son of God.

**Preparing for the Lesson:**

We pick up the story of Jesus' movement toward the cross immediately following his "trial," if the proceedings could be called such. Jesus has prepared his disciples for this moment, but the road to this point has been convoluted. Prior to the passage for this week's section in Matthew, Jesus has been anointed, symbolizing in his mind the preparation of his impending death. Jesus and his disciples gather for the Last Supper, the disciples learn that Judas is to betray him, and the bread and the cup are re-symbolized, if you will, to represent Jesus' body and his blood. Peter is told he will deny Jesus, a fact that he, well, denies.

The scene then moves to the Garden of Gethsemane. Probably an olive orchard where the olives were also pressed, there is some possibility that this was a previously visited location for Jesus and his followers. Peter, James, and John—the inner circle of Jesus' disciples—are taken a ways further from the rest of the disciples and then Jesus tells them to watch and pray over the course of three interactions. This episode serves as a comparison of Jesus, who is committed to following the will of God even while being extremely troubled, and his disciples, who lack what it takes to even sit and pray with Jesus.

Jesus' stay in the garden is ended by the arrival of Judas and a large crowd armed to take Jesus captive as if he were common criminal. In fact, the word Jesus uses to describe himself (translated in the NIV: "Am I *leading a rebellion...*") is the term Josephus most often used to describe Jews who were rebelling against the Roman Empire. In this, we see the crux of the matter. To those who followed Judas, Jesus was nothing more than a traitor, trying to pull people away from following Yahweh.

A group of Jewish leaders is quickly gathered, but it is obvious from Matthew's recounting of the story that this is not a trial to determine guilt, but an opportunity to determine how to best present Jesus as a guilty party to the Romans. Much has been written about the legality and manner of the meeting of these Jewish leaders. People will point out that they did not follow their own laws in determining guilt and observe the proper procedures in order for a meeting of the Sanhedrin to be official. (I think we could compare this to our open-meeting laws here.) While on one level all of this is true, on another it also misses a bigger point. The Jewish people had no legal right to condemn someone to death—only the Romans could do that. To that end, this may never have been considered a proper trial, even in the minds of the Jewish leaders. It was instead a "think tank" to determine the best way to present Jesus to the Roman authorities in order for them to sign off on Jesus' guilt.

What we discover is that getting the Romans to do so was no easy task. Pilate wanted nothing to do with the guilt of condemning Jesus to death. Pilate, by the way, was probably not just a puppet that followed the whims of the Jewish crowds; at least, according to the Jewish historian Josephus he was not. He was actually

deposed following the brutal manner in which he squelched a rebellion of Jews, which apparently was consistent with the way he typically treated the Jewish people. After trying to free Jesus, Pilate does finally give in to the crowd and has Jesus handed over to be killed, but only after washing his hands of the matter. We should recognize this act as one more proof in favor of Jesus actually being the Messiah.

After the soldiers, who ironically mock him as the very king he is, beat Jesus, he is taken to Golgotha, which is where our text picks up.

Matthew's treatment of the actual crucifixion of Jesus seems very straightforward and matter-of-fact. He allows what we know as his reader to give meaning to the story, focusing instead on the reaction of those around Jesus. There is great irony in their reactions: they, like the soldiers, mock Jesus as the "king." For us, we understand the irony. Jesus really is the king and these people are missing it!

Three things I want to point out here. First, as we have already mentioned, the disparaging remarks are reality, albeit unknown to those who are saying them.

Second, Jesus' cry on the cross (from Psalm 22), is significant to our understanding of Jesus' actions. From a theological perspective, this moment points to a separation of Jesus and God. Most will say this is the taking on of our sins, which could not be in the presence of God, so Jesus is "rejected," albeit temporarily. It may be easy for us to press this too far, but Jesus' cry "in a loud voice" certainly indicates a moment of grief here. If you read Psalm 22, you discover the psalm certainly fits the moment well.

Last, the tearing of the curtain and tombs breaking open indicate an eschatological moment. Jesus' death was no ordinary death, but one that ended the age of cultic sacrifice and ushered in a new age of access to the throne of God. We do not know specifically what is meant by Matthew's reference to those who came out of the tombs, but we understand this to be indicating the reality of resurrection now being a part of the Christian life.

Our text today closes with the centurion and "those with him who were guarding Jesus" confessing that Jesus was the Son of God. Here is the final affirmation from one for whom we should least expect such a statement. The entire Gospel of Matthew has pointed the fact that Jesus is the Son of God and perhaps it is these individual's statement that best confirms it for Matthew's readers. Is there any left who has not affirmed this fact, except of course, the Jewish leaders?

My question is: what does it take for us to confess Jesus as the Son of God? Have we seen something in the life ... and death and resurrection of Jesus ... that would cause us to boldly make such a confession?

### **Possible Lesson Outline:**

Begin your discussion by asking your group the following: Many watched the live TV remake of "The Sound of Music." What was your reaction to this show? [I am going out on a limb here, but am pretty sure someone in your group saw it and someone who did, hated it.] What was right about it? What was wrong with it?

You could also start (or continue) by asking the questions: Tell me about a movie that ended "wrong." What about the ending was "wrong?"

Read today's text. Although this may be something you always do, if not, be sure to read this text.

Ask discussion questions.

Close with a time of prayer.

## **Discussion Questions:**

1. When you read Matthew's account of the crucifixion of Jesus, what stands out to you about the way Matthew tells this story? If you had been writing about this event, what do you think you would have done differently? What do you think you would have added that Matthew does not?
2. There are many different moments of irony within the crucifixion story, especially when it comes to the Romans making fun of Jesus as "King of the Jews." What do we know that they do not, at least initially? How does this knowledge help Matthew tell his story?
3. Put yourself in the minds of the bystanders, hurling insults at Jesus. What do you think they are thinking? Why is it so easy for them to say such things about Jesus? Why is it easy for us to do the same thing to people in unenviable circumstances?
4. Jesus cries out in a loud voice, quoting the words of Psalm 22. Read this psalm. Why does it make sense Jesus would have had this psalm on his mind at this moment? Besides the first verse, what other connections do you find between Jesus' crucifixion story and the psalm?
5. Several things happen (found listed in Matthew 27.51-53) that are really quite alarming. What significance do you see in the events that occurred at the moment of Jesus' death?
6. How does the confession of the centurion and those with him fit with other confessions of Jesus we have seen in the Gospel of Matthew? Why is this one perhaps the most significant? In what ways is it the most unexpected of endings to this story (at least within our text for today)?
7. The death of Jesus is a surprise ending for many who longed for a Messiah to come and rescue Israel. However, for those who continue to follow Jesus, it becomes a story that reshapes their lives, reorienting them toward what it means to be a savior. What have we seen in the life and death of Jesus that would cause us to say: Surely this was the Son of God?

## **What's Next:**

Next week is our final section of the Gospel of Matthew and will cover 27.62-28.20. One Group will be looking at 28.18-20.