

Session 5: The Triumphant Jesus Transcript

Well massive congratulations, you have made it all the way through to session five of our Lent Course. And what a journey we have been on in the company of the Apostles. With them we have rejoiced in the Ascension and been sent out in the Spirit to share the good news. With them we have explored the meaning of suffering and the call to service.

And we end on a high note. Our theme for session five is the Triumphant Jesus and the apostles we will be focusing on this week are Paul and Silas. In particular we are going to be with them in one of their many brushes with the law in Acts chapter 16 verses 25 to 34.

Now imagine this. Imagine you are in a foreign country and in an alien city. Imagine you have done something that has got up the noses of some wealthy and influential people. Imagine as a result you have been stripped naked in front of the crowds and publicly beaten with rods. Imagine you've then been thrown into a secure prison, chains on hands and feet, the grisly old jailer told to keep a special eye on you. Imagine you're going to be sentenced the next day with the full expectation that it will be the death penalty. You're cold, abandoned and soon to die.

In a context like that, what words would you use to describe your mood? Downcast? Depressed? Anxious? Despairing? Bleak? Doom-laden? It's hard to find words strong enough to describe the mood. Gerard Manley Hopkins in one of his poems describes himself as 'Pitched past pitch of grief' which begins to do it justice.

What I have just described is exactly what happens to Paul and Silas in Chapter 16. They cast a demon out of a slave girl which means she loses her gift for fortune telling, costing her owners their living. The apostles are stripped, beaten and imprisoned. So what is their mood? It's in verse 25. '*About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them.*'

What crazy madness is this? What bonkers insanity? These guys are in desperate pain and soon for the chop, but they are rejoicing in God and singing their heads off. No self-pity, no anxious theological speculation on how God can allow this, no protestations of innocence or attempts to escape. Their hearts are full of joy! They are celebrating their faith and not just celebrating it. They are sharing it with their fellow prisoners! How on earth can this be so?

And compare Paul and Silas to the jailer. The jailer has the keys. The jailer has the power. The jailer is the one getting paid for his work. By any sane standards, the jailer should be the happy one. But he isn't! He's anxious, he's uncertain, he's all over the place. So precarious is his existence that when the prisoners escape, he tries to take his own life.

The prisoners are joyful. The jailer is despairing. How on earth can that be? It all comes down to one question which the jailer asks in verse 30. *'Sirs, what must I do to be saved?'* The jailer does not know the answer to that question, so his life is filled with anxiety and dread. Paul and Silas know the answer, so whatever the external circumstances of their lives, they are joyful.

So let's think about that question. 'What must I do to be saved?' And let's do so remembering the context in which this story is played out. Paul and Silas are in prison because they are under the judgement of a group of earthly magistrates. Whether they like or not, those judges have power over Paul and Silas's lives, power indeed to take those lives away should they see fit.

But Paul and Silas know that there is another judge, a greater judge. For all are under the judgement of the God we meet in Jesus. All things are his. Everything, everyone is under judgement from him. That's why we stand up each week in the creed and chant, 'He will come again to judge the living and the dead.' That's why the image of Jesus as judge is so often repeated in the Bible. Indeed Jesus describes himself as judge in John 5 where he states that the Father has entrusted all judgement to him. Earthly judges may have power, but the justice of Jesus transcends that authority utterly.

And that's where the jailer is in a mess. He does not know what to do in order to be ready for God's judgement. 'What must I do to be saved?' he asks. His uncertainty has made his life an anxious one.

Paul and Silas know. They are completely certain that in judgement Jesus will find them righteous. So whilst they may be chained up in prison, really they are free, free in the Lord, free for eternity. And that hope of eternal freedom is what gives them joy, even in profound pain and incarceration.

I wonder how much you think of Jesus as your judge? It's an uncomfortable image. Or at least it is until you think it through. When I was at Primary school I was told in every assembly that we would be judged by God according to our behaviour. If we were good boys and girls we would go to heaven. If we were bad boys and girls we would go to hell. We were even told that Jesus kept a black book in which he wrote down all our lies as the basis for his judgement.

That kind of thinking, totally wrong thought it might be, can lodge very deeply in our minds. I have met many faithful Christians who think we are judged according to our behaviour: the good go to heaven, the bad go to hell. I even once heard someone compare judgement to a set of scales – as long as our good deeds just about outweigh our bad deeds, we'll be okay.

The problem with that way of thinking is that you can never know if you are saved or not. How do you know you've been good enough to get over the line? You can't. There can

never be certainty which means our lives, like the jailers, are filled with anxiety and fear. What's more, since we are all sinners who struggle every day to choose the right path and whose instincts are selfish ones, the likelihood is we are all for the chop. Paul later wrote in Ephesians that none of us can save ourselves. *'For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—not the result of works, so that no one may boast.'* We don't have it in us to save ourselves by our behaviour. If we were all responsible for working out our salvation by obeying a set of rules or laws, we are all in trouble.

But there is good news. Amazing news. And the good news is this. We are not saved by our own merits. We are saved according to the merits of Jesus Christ. He is judge, but he is also Saviour.

You may remember back to week two when we explored Jesus as the sacrificial lamb of God. God is just and must see justice done. There must be a consequence to sin. But Jesus steps in and takes that punishment on himself. He is the sinless one who dies on behalf of the sins of the community. His death means we sinners walk free.

Imagine if in a court, the judge passed sentence on a criminal. But then instead of sending the prisoner to jail, he goes to the jail himself and pays the price of the crime. That's what Jesus does. So we are saved not according to our behaviour. We are saved because we trust in what Jesus has done for us. We are not saved because we deserve salvation. We are saved out of love, saved because God cannot bear to see us destroyed and so pays the price himself.

Does that mean we can therefore behave however we like, indulge ourselves, neglect the poor and be totally horrible people? No of course not! If we believe in Jesus, then our behaviour is changed because of our profound gratitude in him. Our good deeds are motivated not by a fear of hell, but by a joyful response to the amazing things that Jesus has done for us. You may know that old hymn, 'My God I love thee not because I hope for heav'n thereby.' It concludes by giving this reason for our love: 'But as thyself hast lovéd me, O ever-loving Lord.' We love because we are loved.

What must we do to be saved? Trust in Jesus. Be baptised into his cross and Resurrection. And live your life in response to his amazing and unbelievable love. It is that Gospel faith which meant that, even in their prison cell, Paul and Silas could rejoice.

As this course has proceeded, we have tried to do two things. To know about Jesus and to know Jesus. In terms of our knowing about Jesus, so far we have thought about him as a triumphant judge but one who sets us free through his merits rather than our own. So what about knowing Jesus? What does it mean to know this triumphant judge for ourselves?

Well the amazing thing is quite simply that we can. I once attended a day in a county court and everyone went to huge lengths to ensure that the judge was kept separate from the accused. The judge had his own entrance to the building, his own parlour, his own door into the court and sat behind a big screen. Judge and prisoner were kept apart. The scandal of the Gospel is that the triumphant judge is also our friend. The one who will judge all creation is our brother. The one who sits at the right hand of the Father is interceding for us. In other words he is praying for you to the Father even at this moment so that your place in the Kingdom is secured.

And what does it mean for us that we are friends with the judge? It's simple. It means joy. If you are uncertain about what the future holds, like the jailer was, that anxiety creeps back and fills your present with fear and dread. But as those judged on the basis of what Jesus has done on the cross, we know our future. We have a certain hope and a firm anchor for the soul. And because the destination is joyful, the journey there can be joyful too. Even when the outward circumstances of our lives are challenging, there can be a profound joy in our hearts.

Because for the Christian joy, is not an emotion. Emotions are frail and fickle things which change from day to day according to what's going on in our lives. For the Christian, joy is the reality of heaven. In the words of CS Lewis, joy is the serious business of heaven. Our joy is not a self-generated cheerfulness. It is our participation in the life of heaven. It is how we live our future now.

I have a friend called Bishop Joseph. He is Bishop of a war-torn diocese in Lwolo in South Sudan. His people are war-ravaged, most are still in refugee camps in Uganda and he serves the poorest people on the planet. His life is hard and exhausting in so many ways. He knows what it is to suffer for the Gospel. But when he gets together with his people to worship, the joy is totally infectious. When he writes to his people, every word that comes from his pen drips with the hope of the Gospel. He knows he is free in the Lord. He knows with all his heart that the judge is his saviour, and his saviour is his friend. So he can rejoice.

We can be such an anxious church in the west, so worried about our finances and our divisions and our buildings. But the issues we face have nothing to do with finance. They are about faith. Our problems are spiritual ones. If we can place Jesus back at the heart of our Church and at the centre of our lives, if we can trust him with everything and give him the cream of all our hearts, we can get all those apparent problems in proportion as we discover an infectious joy in the Lord, one that will bring people running to the name of Jesus.

Well that may be the end of the Lent Course. But my prayer is that it is the beginning of a new chapter of your Christian life.

I hope that over these five short sessions, you have found fresh wonder in what Jesus has done for you. He has left his palace behind to come and dwell with you and then

has invited you back to his palace so that you can live with him. He has died your death and made atonement for your sins. He reigns now as ascended Lord and triumphant judge but sets you free because he judges according to his own merits and not yours. And yet this miracle-working, all-powerful God is close to you. He serves you as a servant, he loves you as a friend, he knows you better than you know yourself and you can know him whom to know is perfect freedom.

So give him your life. Give him everything. Hand it all to him, the good, the bad, the ugly. 'Love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all.' Give it all to Jesus. Because when you do that, all heaven rejoices with a joy that will echo for all eternity.