

Good Friday

John 18:2-3, Mark 11:15-17, John 18:28

Slide 1

As I mentioned last Sunday, the Innocence Project was formed in 1992 in order to bring justice to those who had been wrongfully convicted.

Since then, it's grown to 70 independent chapters in 50 states and 12 countries.

Their goal is to provide investigative support, legal representation and assistance to individuals with claims of innocence.

They've helped free over 300 individuals, 21 of whom were sentenced to die. It was this type of official misconduct that brings us to where we are this evening.

A few days ago, we celebrated Palm Sunday where we looked at the dark side of the celebration.

How it was after Jesus entered Jerusalem riding on a donkey while the crowds praised Him and waved palm branches, but not everyone was happy.

The religious authorities felt they had no option but to take matters into their own hands. It was at this point they decided Jesus must die; a decision led to where we are today, five days later.

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During these five days, Jesus was surrounded by crowds of sympathetic people who had come to hear Him preach. People whose lives He had impacted.

Perhaps they'd been healed, or maybe, because of His teachings on forgiveness, they'd seen a relationship restored. Some may even have been part of the multitude He fed by the shores of Galilee.

Regardless of how or why, those who gathered around Him during the day would pose a considerable problem for the authorities, so the religious leaders came for Him under the cover of night.

But even then, they were taking no chances. To arrest the Man who had spoken of love, forgiveness and grace, a crowd was sent.

Three of the Gospels simply identify them as a crowd of men armed with swords and clubs; however, John gets more specific.

John 18:2-3, "Now Judas, who betrayed him, knew the place, because Jesus had often met there with his disciples. So Judas came to the garden, guiding a detachment of soldiers and some officials from the chief priests and the Pharisees. They were carrying torches, lanterns and weapons."

I don't know if they expected Christ to fight or run, but either way they came prepared. What they didn't plan on was for Him to simply surrender.

Luke 22:52-53, "Then Jesus said to the chief priests, the officers of the temple guard, and the elders, who had come for him, "Am I leading a rebellion, that you have come with swords and clubs? Every day I was with you in the temple courts, and you did not lay a hand on me. But this is your hour—when darkness reigns."

In that one statement, Jesus let them know that He knew. You see even though the night arrest made for good strategy and good theatre it was the beginning of the flawed prosecution of Jesus.

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Jesus knew if they couldn't prove a case against Him, they'd fabricate one, which started with the flawed arrest. Historically we're told that there were two problems with the arrest.

The first being that it was performed at night. In Biblical times, there were all kinds of guidelines and regulations in place for the Jewish judicial process.

One specific guideline was that neither arrests nor trials were to be conducted at night.

You need to understand that two thousand years ago in Israel, justice was under the authority of the Sanhedrin.

They were the supreme religious authority at the time and functioned like a supreme court.

There would've been no discussion about the separation of religion and state back then. While Israel may have been under Roman rule, they still considered themselves a Theocracy.

In the United States we enjoy a democracy, and that word can be traced back to two Greek words: "*Demos*" meaning "People" and "*Kratia*" meaning "Power." 2000 years ago, Israel was a Theocracy. "*Kratia*" still means "Power" but "*Theos*" means "God."

So, in manners of religious and civil law you had a religious court, the Sanhedrin, which was comprised of Pharisees, Sadducees and members of the Priesthood.

The Grand Sanhedrin had 71 members and was only convened for matters of national security. Then you had a cabinet comprised of 23 members which was probably the group that conspired against Jesus.

They functioned like courts everywhere, under restraints, and one of those restraints was that justice was to be performed in the daylight hours.

There's symbolism wrapped up in that requirement. Justice was about being transparent, about light being shone into the darkness.

Justice was to be able to bear up to the scrutiny that would come on it in the light of day.

But on this Friday, they're seeking Jesus after dark. The arrest of Jesus happened somewhere between 1 and 2 o'clock in the morning and that was wrong.

The other problem with this arrest is that He was arrested on the information provided by Judas.

Under the law of the day, someone who was a criminal associate couldn't provide the evidence needed for an arrest in a capital case due to conflict of interest. They'd be as guilty as the accused.

Yet the story here revolves around the betrayal of Jesus by Judas, one of His closest associates. When the crowd came to arrest him, Judas stepped forward, embraced Christ and kissed Him.

That was done to ensure that in the darkness of the night, lit only with flickering torches, no mistake would be made, that the right man was arrested.

Remember, the one thing that those who conspired to end Jesus' ministry agreed on was "*Jesus must die.*"

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But it wasn't only the arrest that was flawed, the trials were flawed, too. Notice that I said trials, not trial.

What happened after the arrest of Jesus would've been considered a travesty by today's legal standards.

From Jesus' arrest, to His interrogation, to His conviction, to His sentence things were done differently than we would do them today.

Now, we can't expect that a trial held in an occupied country 2000 years ago should be held to today's standards.

In fact, in the past few years, we've watched as historical figures have been judged by today's standards, and seldom did they fare well.

Yet, we would expect that Jesus' trial would've been held to the standards of that day and time.

In 1948, British Judge Frank Powell wrote a book called, "*The Trial of Jesus Christ.*"

It looks at Jesus' trial in light of the historical standards of that day, the way a capital case was supposed to be tried under Jewish law.

What he discovered was that there was nothing fair about Jesus' trial. Very little was done properly.

Around the same time, American Lawyer David Breed wrote, "*The Trial of Christ*" and found a number of errors that, under Jewish and Roman Law, would've been considered serious breaches.

Today they'd be considered reversible errors and would be the basis for a new trial. Mr. Breed identified, not just one or two, but 17 different issues that violated the trial laws of that time.

Starting with Jesus' first appearance in front of Annas, we see that nobody was interested in justice, they were interested in ridding themselves of a problem.

John 18:12b-13, *“They bound him and brought him first to Annas, who was the father-in-law of Caiaphas, the high priest that year.”*

We need to understand that Annas had no legal standing in the Jewish community. He had been the High Priest but now he was retired.

He was just the father-in-law of the man who was the current High Priest, Caiaphas.

So why was Jesus taken to Annas first? I’d suspect it goes back to an event that happened earlier in the week, when Jesus cleansed the temple courts.

You might recall Jesus’ reaction when He came into the temple courts and saw the money changers and vendors taking advantage of the pilgrims who had come for the Passover celebration.

Mark 11:15-17, *“On reaching Jerusalem, Jesus entered the temple courts and began driving out those who were buying and selling there. He overturned the tables of the money changers and the benches of those selling doves, and would not allow anyone to carry merchandise through the temple courts. And as he taught them, he said, ‘Is it not written: ‘My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations’? But you have made it ‘a den of robbers.’”*

Well, here’s an interesting tidbit from history. The man in charge of what happened in the temple courts, the man who profited from the extortion, was none other than Annas.

The temple courtyards were even referred to by the Jews of the day as *“The Bazaars of Annas.”*

So, Annas demanded the names of Jesus’ followers and what He had been teaching them. When Jesus didn’t give the answers that Annas was looking for, He was beaten.

In turn Jesus responded by saying in John 18:23, *“If I said something wrong,” Jesus replied, “testify as to what is wrong. But if I spoke the truth, why did you strike me?”*

It was at that point that Annas had Jesus bound like a criminal and sent to his son-in-law, Caiaphas.

Remember Caiaphas? He’d already stated publicly his intention was to have Jesus killed. He had a small problem of being unbiased.

In reference to Jesus, Caiaphas told his colleagues in John 11:50, *“You do not realize that it is better for you that one man die for the people than that the whole nation perish.”*

Two days later we read this account in Matthew 26:3-4, *“Then the chief priests and the elders of the people assembled in the palace of the high priest, whose name was Caiaphas, and they schemed to arrest Jesus secretly and kill him.”*

I believe Caiaphas knew the truth about Jesus, because we read in Matthew 26:59-61, *“The chief priests and the whole Sanhedrin were looking for false evidence against Jesus so that they could put him to death. But they did not find any, though many false witnesses came forward. Finally two came forward and declared, “This fellow said, ‘I am able to destroy the temple of God and rebuild it in three days.’”*

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Understand that under Jewish law a capital trial could only happen during the daytime, and they’re still under the cover of night.

Also, criminal cases weren’t permitted to be held during religious celebrations, and the Passover celebrations had started the day before.

A legal trial also had to be held in the meeting place of the Sanhedrin, but they were meeting in the home of Caiaphas.

At least two witnesses had to be examined separately, yet here the witnesses were examined together after being coached to twist the words of Christ.

And, under Jewish law, only a not guilty verdict could be delivered the same day as the trial.

When the verdict was guilty, at least one night had to pass before sentencing, so the tribunal would have time to reflect and perhaps consider mercy. Jesus' trial was finished in hours.

These were the Sanhedrin's own rules and, in their rush to be rid of Jesus, they were prepared to make a mockery of a legal system that was admired in their day.

The charge that Caiaphas and his cronies finally settled on was that of blasphemy. Jesus claimed to be God.

The problem for them was that 300 years earlier they would've had the authority to have Jesus executed, but not under Roman law.

So, we pick up the story in John 18:28, *"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."*

The problem was that blasphemy was a religious charge, and Pilate could've cared less.

So, we read in Luke 23:2, *"And they began to accuse him, saying, 'We have found this man subverting our nation. He opposes payment of taxes to Caesar and claims to be Messiah, a king.'"*

So, the charge changed from blasphemy to treason. When Pilate said he didn't see any evidence of that they upped the ante.

Luke 23:5, *"But they insisted, "He stirs up the people all over Judea by his teaching. He started in Galilee and has come all the way here."*

But it was here that Pilate saw an out. He didn't want to execute the carpenter, but he didn't want to alienate the religious leaders either.

Luke 23:6-7, *"On hearing this, Pilate asked if the man was a Galilean. When he learned that Jesus was under Herod's jurisdiction, he sent him to Herod, who was also in Jerusalem at that time."* The old pass the buck trick.

This was the same Herod who had John the Baptist killed, it was his father who had tried to kill Jesus when He was a newborn.

We're told that Herod had heard about Jesus and wanted to meet Him and see Him perform a miracle.

Comedians often tell how annoying it is when they meet someone and are asked to say something funny, and magicians say that they are often asked to perform a trick for people.

Very seldom does the minister get to eat in a group without being the person who's asked to say grace. So, in Andrew Lloyd Webber's *"Jesus Christ Super Star"* Herod sings:

*"So You are the Christ
You're the great Jesus Christ
Prove to me that You're divine
Change my water into wine
That's all You need do
And I'll know it's all true
C'mon King of the Jews"*

We're told that Jesus doesn't even grace Herod with an answer, and so Herod puts a purple robe on Him and sends Him back to Pilate saying that he just found Jesus annoying.

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Conclusion

So, what's Pilate to do? The religious leaders, and the mob they incited demand that Jesus be executed, but he can find no evidence to support a case against Jesus, and neither can Herod.

Pilate's wife showed up in the middle of everything and told him about a dream she had about Jesus and how he should release Him.

Pilate tries. He tells the crowd that as a gesture of goodwill and, because it's the Passover, he'll release one prisoner.

He stands Jesus up next to a known murderer named Barabbas and offers the crowd their choice of who should go free.

He figured it was a no brainer, but the mob, egged on by the authorities yelled, "*Free Barabbas, crucify Jesus.*"

Things were getting out of control. So, Pilate had Jesus flogged with a steel tipped whip, but even that didn't satisfy the bloodlust of the crowd.

Finally in frustration Pilate turns to the crowd and in Matthew 27:24, "*When Pilate saw that he was getting nowhere, but that instead an uproar was starting, he took water and washed his hands in front of the crowd. "I am innocent of this man's blood," he said. "It is your responsibility!"*"

So today, the responsibility and choice are still ours. What will we do with this innocent Man?