

Jesus before the High Priest and Peter's denial: Trinity, 3 April 2022

Mark 14: 53 - 72

Our current series on Mark's Gospel has brought us to the first part of Jesus' mock trial before various authorities, and to the story of how Peter denied Jesus. Before we look at these two stories, I want to compare the accounts of Peter's denial in the four Gospels, since there are some variations.

John's account, almost certainly the last to be written, is rather more remotely reported than the other three, and contains less detail, leaving out Peter's hurried departure. All four mention the three challenges to Peter in the courtyard, but the obvious difference is that Mark reports two cock-crows, both as predicted by Jesus at the Last Supper and as occurring on the following morning; whereas the other Gospels mention only one cock-crow. Apparently the surviving original manuscripts of Mark vary, some with two cock-crows and the rest with one. One interesting fact I discovered is that there was a recognised time or stage in the early morning known as "second cock-crow". If I mention "coffee time", you get an idea of an approximate time of the morning; and "second cock-crow" is mentioned in some classical authors. So it's quite possible that what Jesus said to Peter in the Upper Room could be rendered as:- "Before second cock-crow in the morning you will deny me three times"; if that's right, it disposes of the slight difficulty. It would also imply that, if there were actually two roosters heard that morning, Peter did not notice the first one, despite having already denied Jesus once by then; but we can't build too much on that since it's based on a small textual variant.

So: Jesus is brought to the High Priest's house - and Peter follows into the courtyard. We know from John's account that the person described as "the other disciple" was there too, because he was known to the High Priest, and was therefore able to let Peter in. Tom Wright's commentaries make an interesting suggestion here: most people assume that "the other disciple" was John himself, and Wright goes along with this, though he points out that it is not certain. But he suggests that John was possibly a very young man at the time, and therefore not seen by the Jewish authorities as a serious threat - which would explain why he was there, and was also at the Cross later on, apparently in no danger of being arrested. It would also chime with John's authorship of the last book in the Bible, Revelation, thought to have been written some 60 or more years after Jesus' death and resurrection. In other words, a very young man when it all happened, a very old man when he was exiled to Patmos and was given the visions. In our passage today, the immediately-previous verse describes how all Jesus' friends deserted him and ran away - and that must have included John and Peter; so it looks as though the two of them must have changed their minds on the way and joined the group heading for the High Priest's house in the early morning. If John was a very young man, it would also give a touching colour to Jesus' bringing of his mother and John together as he was dying: "Woman, here is your son". But it's only a suggestion.

So here are the authorities trying to find some evidence that would convict Jesus. Since they were not allowed by the Romans to execute anybody, it would have to be evidence that would make the Roman Governor take notice. And they could not find any. Obviously the whole trial was rigged, in that the purpose of it was not to uphold the law but to dispose of Jesus on any pretext - but it is remarkable that, quite apart from finding no substantive charge, they couldn't even get two so-called "witnesses" to agree on what they were saying to the court. I think this speaks volumes about Jesus' sheer force of character. In the scene before us, Jesus is standing there, hands tied, surrounded by guards, doubtless dog-tired from a night without sleep, a night that

had moreover been unimaginably stressful emotionally - and I think that something about his presence made their scheming falter and wither. Even in his apparent “weakness”, in which he submitted himself to what he had called “your hour, and the power of darkness”, that invincible strength of character was there, and it turned the trial into a shambles. We see the same strength of character back in the garden where he asked the rabble whom they were looking for: they told him “Jesus of Nazareth”, and he replied, “I AM”. And they fell over. Imagine what it will be like for those who still resist him up to the time when he comes again in power and great glory...

Ultimately the only matter they could come up with was a charge under Jewish law, not Roman law: that of blasphemy. The fact that they used this against Jesus was a measure of their steadfast rejection of him, their refusal to accept the many demonstrations of his power and authority. The High Priest’s question, “Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed One?” seems to show that at some level they had understood at least a hint that the Messiah would be both God and Man, but they were adamant that Jesus was not that Messiah. So it was the best (or the worst?) that they could produce against him, and they only managed to make it stick with Pilate by threatening both to start a riot and to shop him with Caesar for allowing a rebel king to walk free. But come back to that quiet, tired figure standing in the middle of that travesty of a court scene. When Jesus returns in glory, comes to judge the earth, he will cut a very different figure from the one standing silently in Caiaphas’ house.

Before we move on with the story, a word about the one charge mentioned in our passage: that of destroying the temple and re-building it in three days. This saying of Jesus is reported in John chapter 2, when they challenged him over driving out the money-changers and racketeers from the outer court. John tells us that the hearers took the obvious meaning: Jesus was referring to Herod’s temple. Except he wasn’t: John explains that he was referring to the “temple” of his body, and to the resurrection, and that the disciples remembered after the resurrection what Jesus had said. But nobody else understood - and I want to ask a rather blunt question: can you blame them? After all, the confrontation Jesus had provoked by his actions was centred on the actual temple in which this scene took place: was it fair to expect them to understand what he meant by such oblique language? Was he being deliberately confusing? If so, why?

There is a spiritual principle at work here which is difficult to grasp. Remember that Jesus’ challenge, “Destroy this temple...” and so on, was addressed to people who were his determined opponents: the Jewish leaders and teachers. The Old Testament has quite a lot to say about people’s hearts being hardened so that they cannot understand God’s message to them. In these passages the Bible describes people who harden their hearts and won’t listen - but there are also references to God himself hardening people’s hearts so that they are unable to receive and believe the word that is spoken. What are we to make of this? Is God being unfair?

The textbook case on this difficult topic is the story of Moses, Pharaoh and the Plagues of Egypt. In Exodus 7, before Moses has been to Pharaoh the first time, God tells him that the Israelites will indeed be brought out of Egypt, but that it will be in spite of Pharaoh, not with his permission. “I will harden Pharaoh’s heart, and he will not listen to you”.

This whole topic of the Sovereignty of God is one which we shall probably never understand: and it’s fatal to let human logic loose on it, because that leads to very unbiblical results. But I was fascinated, while examining

the story of the Plagues, to find out exactly who hardened Pharaoh's heart each time. Remember that there were ten Plagues, after nine of which Pharaoh refused to let the Israelites go; then the tenth plague was the most devastating of all, the slaughter of the firstborn, and Pharaoh had no alternative. To summarise, the first five plagues were those of Blood, Frogs, Gnats, Flies, and a plague on Egypt's livestock. After each of these we are told that Pharaoh hardened his heart and refused to let the Israelites go. Then God told Moses to call down a plague of boils, and this time God said that he would harden Pharaoh's heart. The result was the next plague, that of Hail - but after that one Pharaoh said to Moses, "This time I have sinned - go and pray to your God...": in other words, Pharaoh "softened " his heart, and God removed the boils. But Pharaoh himself hardened his heart again. For the remaining plagues God hardened Pharaoh's heart each time, and finally the firstborn were slain, on the night of the first Passover. So God in fact allowed Pharaoh space to repent after the sixth plague. But when he reverted to type and changed his mind again, it's as if God had had enough - and from then on God hardened Pharaoh's heart. But notice that God did give him ample opportunity to repent.

There is a verse in Genesis 6 which in the old King James version says "My spirit shall not always strive with man"; but the context there is not the same as here; some versions render it as "My spirit shall not always remain in man..". So I don't think we can use that as a source text for God apparently giving up on Pharaoh. But nevertheless there is a warning here, from which we must take two important principles:- firstly, if we refuse to listen to God, and continue to do so steadfastly and consistently, there is no guarantee that God, though amazingly patient, will always repeat the opportunity to repent and to come back to him. Secondly, our attitude when listening to God's word is vitally important. We need to be prepared to listen submissively to God's word to us, not to set ourselves up in judgement on it - because if we start from a standpoint of seeing if we like what God is saying, deciding if it fits what we like and think already, then we run a risk of completely misunderstanding what he is saying to us. This is the background story of those who listened to Jesus' teaching but utterly failed to get the point. Jesus himself says to his hearers at one point: "Why can you not understand my words? Because you cannot receive my WORD."

There is a further hazard facing us today: that of over-familiarity. I have been listening to God's word being taught ever since I was a child, and I know what it's like: that feeling when your eyes start to glaze over, when it seems like it's boring, when the preacher isn't all that enthralling, when I'm tired or not in the mood, heard it all before . . . We all need to ask ourselves quietly: when was the last time you listened to a sermon with your mind wide open for God to work in your life? Please note that I am not issuing one of those ringing challenges here, with a fiery gaze scanning you all, as if daring you to rise to my own standard of Christian success: we are all in this together, believe me.

But now we have the awful story of Peter's denials. This is THE story in all the Gospels which finds me out every time. It teaches us in the most graphic way not to be self-confident in our following of Jesus. We have to give Peter credit for one thing: at least he was there - although exactly what he intended to do or achieve isn't clear. But apart from anything else this story teaches us about the way temptation operates.

To start with, Peter is sitting with the guards and warming himself at their fire - a situation that amounts to sailing perilously near the wind. Did Peter feel that he could cope man to man with the guards? Or was it just that here was a fire and he was cold, like the others? But it's so significant that the first two challenges came not from a guard but from a little servant girl - and she knocked Peter right off balance. Perhaps he might

have taken a swing at a guard who made threatening remarks, but against a servant girl he was defenceless. Eventually a number of them explained, in what seems like quite a reasonable tone of voice, that what the girl had by now said twice was quite likely in view of his Galilean accent - and he was done for.

Our passage says that Peter “began to call down curses upon himself, and he swore to them”: this means that he must have said something like “May God strike me dead if I know this man”, or “I tell you I don’t know him, and may God’s judgment fall upon me if I am not telling the truth”.

Mark and Matthew then tell us that Peter remembered Jesus’ words; Luke’s account is even worse - “The Lord turned and looked straight at Peter”. Can you imagine it? No wonder he fell apart, went outside and collapsed in tears.

You can see the pattern, the progress of temptation, all too clearly here; it doesn’t need spelling out. Firstly, he was going to die with Jesus, even if all the others deserted him - remember? And I don’t think Peter meant to brag: remember that all of them said the same thing. I think he just didn’t realise how vulnerable he was. And it took just 24 hours for it all to unravel. The first clumsy denial would have made it so much more difficult to tell the truth the second time round, and as it was things got steadily worse. Do you remember the little cameo earlier in Mark, when the guards tried to arrest an unnamed young man, who left his clothing in their hands and ran away naked? I read somewhere in a commentary that he would probably have been wearing some kind of loincloth under the garment the soldiers took, and being reduced to this would have been considered nakedness, rather than a literal use of the word. But Peter is naked at this point, in a far deeper sense.

Let’s stop to make the point here: there is a way back for Peter. In God’s mercy and righteousness there is a way back. We know that from John 21, the stories in the Acts of the Apostles, and Peter’s two letters. Don’t forget that Peter is thought to be the principal source of much of Mark’s material - so he would have known that the story was being included. But for Peter in our Mark passage, in his hideous embarrassment and disappointment with himself, the shame was all the greater because of his earlier promise of faithfulness and support. Now that’s all gone. There is a very real sense in which, if you come to God, you must come naked: no pretensions, no guarding of your own position or past performance. This applies whether we are coming to Jesus for the very first time, admitting our guilt and asking him to forgive us and be Lord of our lives, or whether as his followers we come before him regularly in prayer and worship. Hebrews 4 tells us that “Nothing in all creation is hidden from God’s sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account”. And from this position of utter nothingness there is a way of deliverance, acceptance and fellowship - but that honest nothingness is where it has to start.

Finally, a confession: I am going to poach part of the Resurrection story from Mark 16 - because I want to make a connection with today’s passage. In Mark’s account, when the women go into the empty tomb they find a young man dressed in a white robe sitting there. The link I am drawing is probably rather fanciful - but I love to compare this with the embarrassed young man running away. We don’t know who either of these boys were - but look at it like this: on the Resurrection morning it’s all over now, or rather God’s future has just started now. And here we have a young man with a clean new robe on. The earlier young man had to find somewhere private to hide his embarrassment: now Jesus has finished the work - and the young man is kitted out in fine new clothes, and is sitting comfortably! Jesus can do this for you - and even if you know Jesus

already we still need to come back to him again and again. But we do need to let go honestly of all the pretensions, let Jesus take them away.

This story makes me shiver, because it's so terribly true to life. Let's pray "Lead us not into temptation" with renewed urgency, and let's praise our Lord Jesus for dealing with absolutely all our failings and sins, for sending his Spirit to enable us to "walk in newness of life". So new, in fact, that Peter (of all people) was able to preach on Pentecost Day, with conviction, that "You denied the Holy and Just One..". If that's not entire, complete forgiveness and restoration I don't know what is.