

Matthew 27:1-26: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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Preacher: Alastair Roberts

[0 : 0 0] Matthew chapter 27 verses 1 to 26. When morning came, all the chief priests and the elders of the people took counsel against Jesus to put him to death. And they bound him, and led him away, and delivered him over to Pilate the governor.

Then when Judas, his betrayer, saw that Jesus was condemned, he changed his mind and brought back the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and the elders, saying, I have sinned by betraying innocent blood.

They said, What is that to us? See to it yourself. And throwing down the pieces of silver into the temple, he departed, and he went and hanged himself. But the chief priests, taking the pieces of silver, said, It is not lawful to put them into the treasury, since it is blood money.

So they took counsel and brought with them the potter's field as a burial place for strangers. Therefore that field has been called the field of blood to this day. Then was fulfilled what had been spoken by the prophet Jeremiah, saying, And they took the thirty pieces of silver, the price of him on whom a price had been set by some of the sons of Israel, and they gave them for the potter's field, as the Lord directed me.

Now Jesus stood before the governor, and the governor asked him, Are you the king of the Jews? Jesus said, You have said so. But when he was accused by the chief priests and elders, he gave no answer.

[1 : 2 3] Then Pilate said to him, Do you not hear how many things they testify against you? But he gave him no answer, not even to a single charge, so that the governor was greatly amazed.

Now at the feast the governor was accustomed to release for the crowd any one prisoner whom they wanted. And they had then a notorious prisoner called Barabbas. So when they had gathered, Pilate said to them, Whom do you want me to release for you, Barabbas or Jesus, who is called Christ?

For he knew that it was out of envy that they had delivered him up. Besides, while he was sitting on the judgment seat, his wife sent word to him, Have nothing to do with that righteous man, for I have suffered much because of him today in a dream.

Now the chief priests and the elders persuaded the crowd to ask for Barabbas and destroy Jesus. The governor again said to them, Which of the two do you want me to release for you?

And they said, Barabbas. Pilate said to them, Then what shall I do with Jesus, who is called Christ? They all said, Let him be crucified. And he said, Why? What evil has he done?

[2 : 2 9] But they shouted all the more, Let him be crucified. So when Pilate saw that he was gaining nothing, but rather that a riot was beginning, he took water and washed his hands before the crowd, saying, I am innocent of this man's blood. See to it yourselves.

And all the people answered, His blood be on us and on our children. Then he released for them Barabbas, and having scourged Jesus, delivered him to be crucified.

In the first half of Matthew 27, we see the final cascade of events leading to the crucifixion of Christ. Judas feels bitter remorse for what he has done, but he doesn't seem to repent.

He abandons all hope and he kills himself. We should be alert to the fact that Judas' response is closely juxtaposed with Peter's denial, as it is in Jesus' initial prediction of both events.

There is a fearful near symmetry between the two, while some important differences that distinguish them. It's very important to notice that Judas casts down the blood money in the temple itself.

[3 : 32] The trail of blood goes into the heart of the very house of God. The temple has become a house of blood, and the fate of the temple is central in the concluding chapters of Matthew.

Jesus is the prophet like Jeremiah, who declares that the temple is doomed. A temple that has become a den for sheltering the wicked. A refuge for the bloodthirsty, for people who are brigands.

When it should be a house of prayer for all nations, and a site for relationship with God. Jesus is the temple that is about to be destroyed, but there is also going to be a judgment upon the actual temple.

And the matter of Jesus' blood is key throughout this passage. Judas mourns for betraying Jesus' innocent blood, placing the money he was bribed for the blood in the temple. The blood money is used to buy the potter's field, thereafter called the field of blood.

Pilate washes his hands of Jesus' blood. The people call for Jesus' blood to be on them and on their children. We should consider this in the light of Matthew 23, verses 34 to 36.

[4 : 34] Therefore I will send you prophets and wise men and scribes, some of which you will kill and crucify, and some you will flog in your synagogues and persecute from town to town, so that on you may come all the righteous blood shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah the son of Barakia, whom you murdered between the sanctuary and the altar.

Truly I say to you, all these things will come upon this generation. The innocent blood of Christ is contaminating everyone in this chapter. It's spreading, and it spreads to the very heart of Israel in its temple.

The story of Israel began with the purchase of a burial place for the people in a land of strangers, the cave of Machpelah and the field of Machpelah. And now the doom of Jerusalem is declared in the purchase of a burial place for strangers in the land of the people.

Matthew says that this is fulfilling Jeremiah, but he quotes Zechariah 11, verses 12 to 13. This is all very strange. In Zechariah 11, verses 12 to 13, we read, So what's going on? It seems to me that Matthew isn't stupid.

He knows his Old Testament scriptures, and he presumes that his readers do too. Matthew wants us to hear the Zechariah citation within the resonance chamber of Jeremiah chapter 18 to 19, and chapter 32, verses 6 to 15.

[6 : 18] So in Zechariah chapter 11, God withdraws his favour from the people. The prophet performs the part of an unfaithful shepherd, shepherding the people doomed for slaughter, and then breaking his staffs that signify the covenant, asking for his wages, and then he's given 30 shekels of silver, which he throws down in the house of the Lord, to the potter.

The reference to the potter there may seem strange and odd, but Judas seems to play much the same role. He's paid 30 shekels of silver for destroying the Lamb of God. However, Matthew's reference to Jeremiah challenges us to hear this text against the background of another series of passages concerning the fate of Israel as the pottery of the Lord.

There is a message of judgment, but with a silver lining of blessing. In Jeremiah chapter 18, God compares his people to a piece of pottery that he works with. And in chapter 19, he says to Jeremiah, Thus says the Lord, Go buy a potter's earthenware flask, and take some of the elders of the people, and some of the elders of the priests, and go out to the valley of the Son of Hinnom, at the entry of the potsherd gate, and proclaim there the words that I tell you.

You shall say, Hear the word of the Lord, O kings of Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem. Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, Behold, I am bringing such disaster upon this place, that the ears of everyone who hears it will tingle.

Because the people have forsaken me, and have profaned this place by making offerings in it to other gods, whom neither they nor their fathers nor the kings of Judah have known, and because they have filled this place with the blood of innocents, and have built the high place of Baal, to burn their sons in the fire as a burnt offering to Baal, which I did not command or decree, nor did it come into my mind.

[8 : 04] Therefore, Behold, days are coming, declares the Lord, when this place shall no more be called Topheth, or the valley of the Son of Hinnom, but the valley of slaughter. And in this place I will make void the plans of Judah and Jerusalem, and will cause their people to fall by the sword before their enemies, and by the hand of those who seek their life.

I will give their dead bodies for food to the birds of the air, and to the beasts of the earth. And I will make this city a horror, a thing to be hissed at. Everyone who passes by it will be horrified, and will hiss because of all its wounds.

And I will make them eat the flesh of their sons and their daughters, and everyone shall eat the flesh of his neighbour in the siege, and in the distress, with which their enemies and those who seek their life afflict them.

Then you shall break the flask in the sight of the men who go with you, and shall say to them, Thus says the Lord of hosts, So I will break this people and this city, as one breaks a potter's vessel, so that it can never be mended.

Then if we go forward a number of chapters to Jeremiah 32, in verse 6 and following, we read, Jeremiah said, The word of the Lord came to me, Behold, Hanamel, the son of Shalom, your uncle, will come to you and say, Buy my field that is at Anathoth, for the right of redemption by purchase is yours.

[9 : 20] Then Hanamel, my cousin, came to me in the court of the guard, in accordance with the word of the Lord, and said to me, Buy my field that is at Anathoth, in the land of Benjamin, for the right of possession and redemption is yours.

Buy it for yourself. Then I knew that this was the word of the Lord, and I bought the field at Anathoth from Hanamel, my cousin, and weighed out the money for him, seventeen shekels of silver.

I signed the deed, sealed it, got witnesses, and weighed the money on scales. Then I took the sealed deed of purchase, containing the terms and conditions and the open copy, and I gave the deed of purchase to Baruch, the son of Neriah, son of Masiah, in the presence of Hanamel, my cousin, in the presence of the witnesses who signed the deed of purchase, and in the presence of all the Judeans who were sitting in the court of the guard.

I charged Baruch in their presence, saying, Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, Take these deeds, both this sealed deed of purchase, and this open deed, and put them in an earthenware vessel, that they may last for a long time.

For thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, Houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land. So there's a message of judgment, but also a hint of blessing.

[10 : 29] Matthew then wants us to read the story of Israel, the story of Judas, the story of Jesus, against this very carefully orchestrated allusion to Old Testament scripture, both Zechariah and different parts of Jeremiah.

You could also see this passage as connecting Judas and Ahithophel. Ahithophel is a close friend and counsellor of David, but during the rebellion and the coup of Absalom, he joins Absalom and serves him as counsellor.

And this was seen as a great betrayal by David and is spoken of in the Psalms and elsewhere, and is connected with Judas, as Psalm 41 verse 9 is applied to both Ahithophel and Judas, in John chapter 13 verse 18.

In 2 Samuel chapter 17 verse 23, Ahithophel's advice is rejected for Hushai's, and Ahithophel, seeing that the plot has gotten away from him, responds by taking his own life.

When Ahithophel saw that his counsel was not followed, he saddled his donkey and went off home to his own city. He set his house in order and hanged himself, and he died and was buried in the tomb of his father.

[11 : 37] However, the similarities with Judas should not be hard to see. In both cases, there is remorse as a plot against the Davidic king gets out of hand.

And there is a further parallel that could be considered. In two chapters, in chapter 17 and 18 of 2 Samuel, you have two people hanging on trees. You have Ahithophel, who hangs himself, and then you have Absalom, the son of David, who is also hung on a tree.

The rebellious son hung on a tree. In Matthew chapter 27, you have two people hung on trees. You have Judas, and you have Jesus. And those two characters are juxtaposed in other ways.

Jesus is the son of David. He's suffering the fate of the rebellious son, but he is the faithful son. And so the juxtaposition between Jesus and Judas, and then the juxtaposition between Judas and Peter, should all be considered.

Judas is placed here, whereas in Luke's account, Luke brings him forward to Acts chapter 1, does not mention his death within the context of his account of the Passion.

[12 : 44] The ways that such stories are told really matters. Jesus is tried by the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate. Once again, Jesus is notably silent in fulfilment of Isaiah chapter 53 verse 7.

The lamb led to the slaughter, who before his shearers is silent. Pilate's wife has dreams concerning Christ, and warns her husband. Once again, the language of the king of the Jews is coming to the surface.

Once again, warning dreams. This is something that we saw at the beginning of the Gospel, in the story of the Magi. The choice between Barabbas, whose name means son of the father, and Jesus, could be seen as the choice between two sons.

Peter Lighthouse has suggested that we should think of the two goats on the Day of Atonement. Jesus is the sin offering that is going to be offered to God, but Barabbas is the scapegoat who bears the sins of Israel.

Barabbas, however, is released back to Israel, placing their sins back upon their heads. In choosing Barabbas, the people also choose the revolutionary over the true Messiah, a choice of a particular course of action that would seal their fate later on in AD 70.

[13 : 51] Pilate's actions are constrained by the fury and the bloodthirstiness of the crowd, who are baying for Jesus' blood. And we should observe the similarity between the statement of Pilate in verse 24, and the statement of the chief priests and the elders in verse 4.

So in verse 24, A number of commentators have observed that in the background of this particular passage is the rite of Deuteronomy chapter 21 verses 1 to 9 unwittingly being performed.

That rite is atonement for unsolved murders. If in the land that the Lord your God is giving you to possess, someone is found slain, lying in the open country, and it is not known who killed him, then your elders and your judges shall come out, and they shall measure the distance to the surrounding cities.

And the elders of the city that is nearest to the slain man shall take a heifer that has never been worked, and that has not pulled in a yoke. And the elders of that city shall bring the heifer down to a valley with running water, which is neither ploughed nor sown, and shall break the heifer's neck there in the valley.

Then the priests, the sons of Levi, shall come forward, for the Lord your God has chosen them to minister to him, and to bless in the name of the Lord. And by their word every dispute and every assault shall be settled.

[15 : 15] And the elders of that city nearest to the slain man shall wash their hands over the heifer whose neck was broken in the valley. And they shall testify, This is a passage lying behind the actions of Pilate, who's unwittingly performing this ritual in a certain way.

However, the irony in this case is that the heifer is the Jews themselves. He washes his hands. I am innocent of this man's blood. And then the people respond, His blood be on us and on our children.

Once again, this fulfills Jesus' judgment in Matthew chapter 23, that the blood of all these people will come upon that generation. It's important to emphasise here, again, some later Christian readings, that this judgment is fulfilled in AD 70.

This doesn't refer to a curse that continues over the Jewish people. However, Israel is supposed to bear the sin of the old creation upon it as the appointed scapegoat and sin-bearer for the nations.

And what we see fulfilled in Christ is just that. So Israel suffers the fate of the blood of all the righteous slain. But Jesus is also bearing the sins of the world, all the sins of the old creation coming upon him.

[16 : 48] And Jesus is then led away to be crucified. Behind this text, then, is a rich tapestry of Old Testament allusions that help us to see exactly what has taken place in the cross of Christ.

And the movement of the blood from one party to another, the ways in which different parties are implicated in different ways, the rituals beneath the surface, all of this helps us to see how God is orchestrating his purpose for redemption for his people through the sacrifice of his son.

And that in this event of crucifixion, it's not just an unjust murder. It's a means by which atonement is being provided, a means by which God is fulfilling his purpose for Israel, and a means by which judgment is working itself out, both for those who are rejecting and for those who will accept this sacrifice.

This is the outworking of destinies. A question to consider. The role of the crowd within this particular narrative is incredibly important.

The crowd press Pilate to crucify Christ. Now, they're spurred on by the chief priests and the elders, but there's something about the crowd itself that deserves attention. How might we think about the relationship between Satan's agency within the story and the role of the fevered crowd?

[18:05] How many