

“KANGAROO COURT (Mark 53)”
Mark 14:53-65

This is it! There's no way back now. Jesus has been led away from the Garden of Gethsemane. He has been betrayed by one of his closest friends. The rest of his companions (with the exception of Peter – and he follows at a distance, unwilling to appear too interested in what's going on) have run away. And he is taken under armed guard to the house of the chief priest. Mark doesn't name him, but we know from other sources (not least the other accounts of Jesus' life in the gospels) that his name was Caiaphas.

As we saw last time, although he is surrounded by armed men, Jesus is still very much in control. He seems to have a certain serenity and dignity in his bearing as he questions his attackers about their methods and motives for arresting him. The authorities, though, seem to be in a bit of panic. Their hastily convened meeting in Caiaphas's home is ample testimony to that. There's a great deal of scholarly debate about what exactly is going on here. Is this part of the trial of Jesus (as we traditionally think it to be)? Or is this some kind of pre-trial inquiry?

If it is a trial, then it is illegitimate on a number of counts. Firstly, a trial could not be held during the hours of darkness. This was for the same reason that you are not allowed to hold a wedding ceremony after sunset today – recognition. If it's dark there are issues of identification, and particularly if it is a capital trial (which this would have been), there is the danger that the wrong person could be sentenced to death. Secondly, the trial had to be held in the appropriate place, which was the court room – not in the High Priest's home. Thirdly, the witnesses had to agree. This was a fundamental tenet of Jewish law, which was in place to prevent miscarriages of justice.

Now, some people have said that because of the irregularities this is obviously not a proper trial. But if it is some kind of pre-trial investigation, there are still plenty of anomalies. Again, the night-time meeting is, to say the least, very unusual. It is also very important that the witnesses agree on their stories and Mark makes it clear twice in this short account that there was no agreement. And apart from the night-time meeting, if it was a preliminary to trial the next day (which is when it would have been) this was the time of the Passover Festival, so a trial would not normally have been held the next day. All these irregularities tend to point towards a great deal of desperation on the part of the authorities.

Jesus, though, keeps quiet to start with. In v60 the High Priest asks Jesus to explain himself, to offer some kind of defence in the face of the various trumped up charges that are being brought against him. Eventually he puts a direct question to him and asks him if he is indeed “*the Christ, the Son of the Blessed One*”. (“*The Blessed One*” is a way of avoiding saying the name of God, which was too holy for

the Jewish people to utter – and still is.) Only then does Jesus reply and finally we have from him a clear statement of who he believes he is. Again and again during Mark's story of his life we have seen Jesus refusing to say exactly who he is, declining titles that others have attributed to him. Now, in this reply which he gives to the members of the Sanhedrin, he uses three titles (two of them for the first time) which communicate something of who he is. Here – he's not shouting down the forces of evil in the demonically possessed, he's not showing his mastery over the forces of nature, he's not rebuking the leaders of the people, but he's at his most vulnerable, standing before the Jewish authorities, bereft of friends and support, probably bound or chained: – here Jesus proclaims his true status.

1. THE CHRIST

Firstly Jesus acknowledges that he is, indeed, the Christ, the Messiah. It's a word that we so often attach to the name of Jesus that we lose sight of the fact that this is not a name, but a title. Jesus the Christ, the Anointed One, the one chosen by God and appointed to bring the good news of God's new Kingdom into the world. There had been others who had claimed this title for themselves and Jesus has warned his followers that there will be many more (*13:6,21,22*) – but he is the genuine article.

This is the title of Jesus that is most often used in the New Testament. It is a title given him by men and women. On more than one occasion in the gospels there have been reports that people thought of him as the Messiah – most notably Peter's confession in *8:29*. It is a title that offers hope for humanity. The Messiah is one who comes to deliver, to liberate, to redeem. It was – and still is – a very potent title for the Jewish people. They longed for someone to come and restore things to the state that God originally intended. And for the people who gathered in the High Priest's home that night, the acknowledgement of this title would have seemed very awkward coming from the lips of one who was so obviously to their eyes in a position of total weakness and defeat.

For the Jewish people who had for so long looked out for a Messiah, three things would have been particularly in their minds as far as this kind of talk went. The Messiah was firstly a **Davidic King**, someone from the line of David who would rule with the same kind of glory and authority that he did. Many of the prophecies in their scriptures (our Old Testament) pointed towards this figure. But they also pointed towards a **Suffering Servant**, especially in the words of the prophet Isaiah. And in the amazing visions of Daniel, the Messiah was also seen as a **Heavenly Judge**. With hindsight, of course, we can see just how that has come true, but these men could not see that as Jesus stood before them apparently tamed and desolate.

Jesus, though, is about to demonstrate the truth of the claim that he is the Messiah as he suffers on the cross for the liberation of all humanity from the power of sin and death and hell. He has shown his kingly status as he has proclaimed and demonstrated that good news of the kingdom of God. And he will return, as we shall see in a moment, as a divine judge to put right all that has gone wrong with God's good creation. This title of the Christ, given and used by men and women, refers to a figure of hope and optimism.

2. SON OF GOD

Jesus also acknowledges that he is the "*Son of the Blessed One*", the Son of God. For the members of the Sanhedrin who are listening to Jesus, this is the ultimate blasphemy. But this is not a title that Jesus has taken for himself, nor one that has been conferred on him by men. This is the title that has been given him by God himself and, paradoxically, is recognised by the forces of evil. As Jesus' ministry begins, the voice of God is heard at his baptism (1:11). And again God speaks it as Jesus is glorified before his three friends at the Transfiguration. Curiously, no human being ever calls him the Son of God, but the demons – the supernatural beings with whom Jesus joins battle for the souls and bodies of people in Mark's story – they recognise him for who he is: their deadliest enemy.

And that is because of the intimacy he has with God. The title of Son of God says something about the closeness that there is between Jesus and the Father. The mystery of this relationship has intrigued men and women down through the centuries, but whatever else it is, Jesus is so closely, so intimately linked to God that it is as if they are one. And so Jesus becomes a figure of obedience, one who is prepared to do the will of his Father whatever the cost. Didn't we see that in Jesus' prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane (14:36)?

And because of that obedience, he is also a figure of salvation. As Son of God, as one who is entirely devoted and obedient to the Father, Jesus can win for us the salvation that we all need. He and he alone is able to save us from the dreadful consequences of our wrong choices and selfish decisions. He alone, as Son of God, can ensure that we can stand before God on judgement day and be assured that our eternal future with God is guaranteed.

No wonder the High Priest is so angry! No wonder he rips his robes in a dramatic gesture of anger, frustration and sadness. Others may have claimed to be the Messiah and offered to give hope to an oppressed people. Others may have taken the mantle of a King like David or a suffering and misunderstood servant, but no-one would have had the gall, the sheer effrontery to suggest that they

might be the Son of God and offer to mediate between humanity and their Creator. After all, that was the job of the priests. But that's just who our Jesus is. Our obedient Saviour who ensures our access into God's presence and assures us of our eternal destiny with him.

3. SON OF MAN

But there's a third title that Jesus takes for himself here. The Messiah is a title conferred by men. The Son of God is a title conferred by God himself. Now Jesus uses once again his own favourite title – "*Son of Man*". Of all the titles given to Jesus in the New Testament, Christ is the most frequently used. Son of Man is the third most often used and in almost every case (I think bar two), it is used by Jesus himself. We've certainly come across it before in the story of Mark's on more than one occasion.

Now, some may see this as a title that complements the Son of God designation, a way of emphasising that Jesus is fully divine and fully human. In other words, Jesus is stressing that he identifies with us in our frail and vulnerable humanity. But the overwhelming opinion of scholars and commentators down through the ages is that this a special title taken from the Son of Man figure in the Old Testament. This is language with which his audience in the High Priest's house would have been far more familiar than we are. The Son of Man is an especially strong motif in the prophecy of Daniel, which we mentioned earlier (particularly *Daniel 7*), and he appears many times in Jewish literature outside the Bible.

This title would refer to a heavenly being, a transcendent figure who will eventually come to earth in triumph and act as judge of all humanity. That's why Jesus uses this image of the Son of Man "*sitting at the right hand of the mighty one and coming on the clouds of heaven.*" The idea of sitting on God's right hand is from *Psalms 110:1* and it further strengthens the claim that Jesus is the Son of God as well. But he comes on the clouds as the ultimate Messiah figure, the one who will eventually set the world to rights and pronounce judgement on the forces of evil and all who follow them.

John takes up the image in his description of the Risen Lord Jesus in *Revelation 1:12-18*. Jesus in the title he gives himself is conveying the idea that he is a figure of judgement and triumph, the one whose final coming will herald the cataclysmic ending of all that we now know as flawed and distorted, and the renewing of all creation just as God wants it to be. This is the ultimate Messianic Saviour.

So here, in this hastily convened kangaroo court, Jesus stands apparently defeated. He seems to be at the mercy of his human opposition, those who have dogged his steps and criticised his ministry from the very

beginning. It seems that they have triumphed and the forces of evil have had their way. But at the moment of his greatest vulnerability and weakness, Jesus declares his true identity and points to his ultimate mission. He takes upon himself titles given him by men, by God and by himself to declare that his is a mission of hope, salvation and judgement.

Those who watch him – no doubt incredulous at the arrogance of their victim – have no idea how what he declares can ever come to pass. But we look back, back through the lenses of crucifixion, resurrection and ascension, back through the pages of the New Testament, back through our own personal experience, to see a figure who stands at the crossroads of history. This is the man who stands above all powers and dominions, who loves us above all other things, who is at the heart of our faith. This is Jesus – the Christ, the Son of God and the Son of Man. Worship him.