

**Matthew 27:1-26: What kind of kingdom do you want to live in?**  
**Notes from a sermon preached at Christ Church Liverpool**

This week quite a lot of news coverage has been devoted to stories about the possibility of “modernizing” the monarchy. Politicians of all political parties have been wheeled in to TV and radio studios to tell us how important it is that the Royal family and the rules that govern it need to be in tune with modern Britain. In these times of recession you might imagine that this would mean picking 20% of the Royal workforce and telling them their services are no longer required and they have 4 hours to clear their desks. In practice it seems to mean giving equal rights to future kings sons and daughters to get the top job (though age discrimination will, apparently, still be OK) and allowing Roman Catholics to be king or queen, or at least be married to the king or queen.

All of this talk about modern monarchies set me thinking though about the way that in all sorts of spheres of life the quality of the king, the head man, or woman, is reflected in the qualities of the kingdom – or company, school, church or family.

The truth of that idea has been seen particularly starkly recently in the case of Sir Fred Goodwin and a number of other “arch villains” of the banking world. Unless we pay absolutely enormous sums of money, the argument used to run, we won’t get the most talented and able people to come and run our banks.

Unfortunately what our current crop of bankers demonstrate is that if you offer, as the reward for the job of banking, massive sums of money, what you get on the whole is people who are really interested in... earning massive sums of money. And then the entire bank becomes all about earning massive sums of money. Not for the investors. But for the staff.

In other words the culture and aspirations of the king permeate the entire kingdom. Kings demonstrate and, indeed, define, the values of their kingdoms. And that is the great lesson of this passage in Matthew’s gospel.

In these verses we see unfolding the greatest miscarriage of justice in human history. We see the tragic end of Judas, the beginning of the end of the Jewish system of religion and the abject failure of one of the greatest systems of justice the world has known.

But more than any of those things Matthew introduces us to a clash of kingdoms. As he recounts the dramatic last hours of the life of Jesus Matthew wants us, his readers, to know that the kind of king we choose will profoundly affect the kind of life we live.

And he wants to warn us that the kind of kingdoms that look successful and powerful are, in the end, sources of nothing more than deceit, destruction and death. Let’s look then at four “kings” and their kingdoms...

***Four kings and their kingdoms***

**1 Kingdom of Judas:  
Betrayal, pride and suicide**

Nobody knows why it was that Judas handed Jesus over to the Jewish authorities. Many have suggested that he was a secret zealot; hoping for Jesus to start an armed insurrection against the Roman army and conquer Jerusalem by force.

That would certainly make sense of the fact that he was totally gutted when Jesus was condemned to death, apparently without taking any stand for himself.

It doesn’t, however, explain why he accepted money to betray Jesus. The sympathetic might suggest that it was to make the deal look more realistic to the Jewish authorities; but we already know from John’s gospel that Judas was a thief so that seems somewhat generous as an interpretation.

Anyway, whatever his motivations, Judas had done something terribly wicked. He had knowingly handed over a man who had never shown anything but kindness and love to him to people Judas knew wanted Jesus dead at all costs.

Judas is guilty of great evil. And, when he sees that the game is up and that Jesus is not going to escape death he is overcome with sorrow.

Quite rightly he returned the money to the chief priests and even confesses his sin to them. Judas knows that the man he is betrayed is innocent and he is sorry.

Perhaps at this stage there is, humanly speaking, still hope for Judas. Who knows what might have

happened had he been given wise spiritual counsel and urged to truly repent of his sin before God and offer sacrifices in the very temple where he was standing.

But the religious leaders offer no comfort; not should Judas expect them to given that he knew all along what they were planning to do.

Biblical comfort to a lost sinner was not high on their agenda; their minds were fully fixed on getting rid of Jesus whatever the cost.

So Jesus throws the money into the temple treasury and walks away. It was a paltry sum of money, by the way. All Judas got paid for betraying the Christ, the Messiah, the greatest man who ever walked the earth was 30 pieces of silver – the price you would need to buy a regular slave.

But the true heart of Judas is seen in the seven words that follow: *“then he went away and hanged himself.”*

You see for all that the religious leaders failed to offer him the godly advice they should have, I am not convinced that Judas went for such counsel in the first place.

Judas went, didn't he, hoping to reverse the decision. Hoping that by changing his story he could have Jesus let off and everything would go back to how it was before.

And when he discovers that he cannot do that. When he discovers that his good works cannot undo his evil works he is overcome not with repentance, not with beating his breast and crying out for mercy to the living God, but with self-pity and pride. So he goes and kills himself.

Judas' suicide is the ultimate expression of his lack of true repentance. And the fact that he hangs himself is included by Matthew to make it quite clear that the death he dies is a cursed one.

It's really important that we are clear about that. Because we won't see how totally destructive the kingdom led by proud manipulators like Judas is unless we see that his killing himself is, in the end, not a final expression of repentance but a final act of defiance and pride.

Judas will not accept that his works cannot undo what he has done. He will not seek grace and mercy. So he kills himself.

## **Excursus: A word about suicide**

Now at this point I want to take a few minutes just to step aside from the passage because, fairly obviously, it raises the question of suicide more generally and I think it's worth saying a few words about that, because many people here will know others who have killed themselves or attempted to take their own lives. And I am quite certain that some people here have tried to commit suicide or at least very seriously considered trying.

I think we can broadly sum up the Bible's perspective on suicide in three statements:

- Feeling suicidal is not a sin.
- Committing suicide is a terrible sin
- But it is not an unforgiveable sin

Obviously we don't have time to go into detail on any of those now; please do come and ask me afterwards privately if you'd like to chat more about these issues. But I think it's worth noting two things.

One is that the prevailing atmosphere in evangelical churches like ours is that you ought to be happy all the time. Can I say to you loudly and clearly this morning that that is utter nonsense. It is fine to be a Christian and feel miserable some of the time. To wish that you had never been born. To feel that you cannot go on any more and you want it all to end. It's OK to feel like that. Well it's not OK; if you feel like that you must seek help. But it's OK as a Christian to feel like that. It's a normal part of life in a fallen world for many people. It has been a part of my life. And it was the experience too of many of the great heroes of the Bible story; for Elijah, Job and Jonah. If you struggle with suicidal feelings do not feel like that is a terrible spiritual failure. It isn't. But not telling anyone probably would be.

But the second thing I want to say is that in our cultural attitude to suicide we have swung on a massive pendulum from one extreme to another. Until relatively recently suicides could not be buried in consecrated ground such as a churchyard and were often buried upside down as a kind of after death punishment. It was considered that a suicide could not possibly be saved. Today such attitudes seem, quite rightly, somewhat barbaric. But in realising that suicide is not an unforgiveable sin and that the mental pressures, of circumstances, brain chemistry or whatever are truly awful our culture is in danger of letting go of the truth that suicide is a terrible sin.

We have a family friend who killed himself leaving a wife and young child. Now I cannot imagine what a dark and terrible place he must have been in. But when he died all anybody said to me was how sympathetic towards and sorry for him they felt. And I shared that feeling. But I could not believe that nobody else seemed to share the anger I felt towards him. Yes it must have been a terrible place to be. But what a selfish thing to do. He might have believed the world would be better without him. But nobody else believed that. His wife and son certainly didn't.

Make no mistake taking your own life, though not necessarily incompatible with genuine Christian faith, is an awful and wicked thing to do. So talk about the emotions that are not sinful before you are tempted to do something that is.

## **2 Kingdom of the Jews: Hypocrisy, manipulation and death.**

Judas, of course, is not the main player in this scene. And although his cocktail of political machination, pride and, ultimately, self-destruction, is very common in our society it isn't, on the whole, the way that leaders live.

Much more common are people like the Jewish leaders of Israel. They are the ones who have set up this whole situation. Offended by Jesus popularity with the crowds and seeing their privileges potentially threatened should the crowd riot against Rome they determine that, whoever he is, they will be rid of Jesus.

Did you notice the terrible irony of v4? Judas confesses his sin in the temple. He had come to the very place that was meant to be the one location on earth where sin could be forgiven. He had come to the people who were God's representatives on earth to offer sacrifices for sinners. And what do the priests say? Don't come to us for help Judas, that's your lookout. They were the people who were meant to help. But Israel's wicked leaders have totally abdicated their spiritual responsibility in pursuit of political gain.

It seems they manipulate the charges brought to maximise their political impact before Pilate; even though, of course, they hated Pilate and the empire he stood for.

They incite the crowd to cry for the release of Barabbas the murderer not Jesus the Messiah.

Most strikingly of all in this passage it is the money, as so often, that exposes what they are really like.

Judas, v5, throws the money into the temple treasury; putting it, of course, back where it came from.

But although they had no scruples about taking money from the temple to bribe a traitor to hand over an innocent man for a corrupt trial their religious rules won't possibly let them put such dirty money back into religious service.

Like the Christian who would throw an apoplectic fit if his church suggested applying for lottery money but who justifies his investments in arms, tobacco, bookmaking and casino companies because they give him the best return they show that they know what they have done is wicked but that they will not repent.

So they use the unclean money to buy an unclean place, a cemetery, for the burial of unclean people, non-Jews. The whole thing, to put it bluntly, stinks.

That's what the quotation in v9 and 10 is about. Matthew quotes a passage from Jeremiah and Zechariah about money being paid and a field being bought. In both those places, as here, what happened was a total rejection of good leaders by the people of Israel and the apparent triumph of wicked leaders.

Those passages are fulfilled here, Matthew says, because nowhere in history is the rejection of the good for the bad more clearly seen than in the rejection of Jesus Christ by the selfish and manipulative leaders of Israel.

Those men have been followed, of course, in their tens of thousands by religious leaders through history. Church leaders who will not speak for Jesus in case it jeopardises the Bishop's palace and the seat in the House of Lords. Televangelists who promise miracles and take your money even when they don't happen. Mullah's who send young men on suicide bombings they would never undertake themselves.

The kingdom of the Jews is one of wicked hypocrisy. But, in this section, the real villain is not even the wicked leaders of Israel, as terrible as they are. The real villain is Pilate...

## **2 Kingdom of Pilate: Pragmatism, power and self-preservation.**

Pilate was appointed by Rome as the representative of the Imperial power in Judea. He was the man with real power in this occupied country and the Jews could not carry out any death sentence without his consent.

So, as much as they hated Rome and Romans, the Jewish leaders had to get Pilate on side in order to have Jesus executed. So, v2, they hand him over to the governor.

Clearly he has been briefed as to the nature of the charges because his first question to Jesus is, v11, "are you the king of the Jews?"

Jesus reply, unfortunately, is not very well put in the NIV. What he actually says is "you have said so." He neither affirms or denies the charge. Instead he stands calmly by while the Jews list accusation after accusation against him. I imagine that most prisoners, facing the prospect of death on the word of the governor, would plead and beg him and vigorously refute any element of the charges against them they thought were untrue in the hope of warding off such an awful fate.

It wouldn't surprise me if one look at Jesus showed this experienced judge that he was no rebellion-leading zealot. But in any case Jesus silence seems to have a profound effect on this hard-bitten Roman leader. He is, v16, amazed by Jesus. And even at this stage he looks around for an opportunity to release him, using the opportunity of the traditional Passover amnesty.

No sooner have the words left his mouth than the pressure on him is intensified by a message from his wife that in some sort of supernatural vision she has been warned that Jesus is totally innocent and that Pilate must have nothing to do with the gross miscarriage of justice the Jews are planning.

Even when the crowd, stirred up by the Jewish leaders, answer that they want Barabbas released to them rather than Jesus he keeps on trying; asking what crime he has committed that he should be punished so.

Finally he adopts a Jewish custom, washing his hands in front of the crowd so that nobody can be in any doubt that he finds Jesus to be entirely innocent and will not take any responsibility for his death.

You might think, at first sight, that Matthew intends to present Pilate in a positive light; the one who

really sees Jesus innocence and will not anything to with this corrupt and wicked process.

But if you think about it that isn't be what Matthew is saying at all. Pilate might want to wash his hands of responsibility; but Matthew still thinks he has blood on them.

He has Jesus flogged. He hands him over for crucifixion. He ignores his wife's dream and his own conviction and sends an innocent man to a terrible fate.

And the real indictment is the reason he does it. Why does Pilate do this? Because he sees that an uproar is starting. This is the man in charge of the troops. The man who runs the country. Pilate is the one with all the power of Rome at his disposal. So why doesn't he use it? Because it isn't convenient. After all imagine what Caesar would say if Pilate used the riot police to save someone who was claiming to be a king?

Pilate is probably the only individual in Jerusalem with the power to save Jesus if he wanted to. And he will not use that power because it doesn't suit his bigger agenda. Pilate is a pragmatist.

Beware of pragmatists. Our society is full of them. They run our political parties, our hospitals, our schools and our businesses. Some of them run our churches.

The trouble with pragmatists, like Pilate, is that they are interested only in what works, not what is right. If you, though innocent, will be more use to them dead than alive they will get rid of you.

If you can take the blame for a mistake on the ward they will hang you out to dry whether it was really your fault or not.

If sacking you avoids the attention of the regional manager to their lack of budget control then you will be out on your ear regardless of your real contribution to the bottom line.

Just this week our Prime Minister has said he will do "whatever it takes" to get our economy going again. To which I want to ask "whatever it takes? Even something immoral?" And I suspect, though I cannot prove, that the true answer to that question is "yes". And I don't think the opposition parties are any different.

Beware of pragmatists. And beware of becoming a pragmatist too. After all you are surrounded by

them. And it's easy to become like things that surround us. Easy to blame the other person in the group for the failure of your project. Easy to score the interview to favour the internal candidate. Easy to not worry about paying cash, no receipt. Easy not to mention Jesus in a conversation. Easy in so many ways not to worry as much about what is right and true as about what works for you.

For Pilate everything was about self-preservation. If we're honest that seems like quite a good idea doesn't it? After all what could be more sensible than self-preservation?

But as attractive as it might seem this is not the kind of kingdom I think any of us really want to live in. Because in that kind of a kingdom each of us is nothing more than a pawn. A tiny piece in the jigsaw to be moved about and manipulated to suit the purposes of others. An economic unit. A cost-centre. Another fee-paying student.

You don't want that kind of boss do you? That kind of landlord? That kind of husband? That kind of king? Because the king we want is King Jesus...

#### **4 Kingdom of Christ: substitution**

It seems likely that Barabbas, who we know from the gospel accounts was a robber, murderer and rebel, was actually called Jesus Barabbas.

Some of the oldest manuscripts call him this and it seems likely that the name was removed by later copyists who could not bear the idea that Jesus' name might be associated with such a man.

If that is what they did they missed the point entirely. Because Matthew is deliberately showing us that Jesus Christ is not like Jesus Barabbas. He is the opposite in every way. He is righteous and innocent. Barabbas is wicked and violent. He is the Son of the Father. Barabbas name means, literally, a son of a father.

It's not that Jesus can be associated with Barabbas in his character. It's that he can be substituted for him in his death. There is no doubt that Jesus dies instead of Barabbas. The guilty are set free and the innocent dies. It's quite likely that the very cross Jesus dies on was the one intended for Barabbas and that the two robbers Jesus is crucified with are none other than Barabbas' henchmen. Jesus is Barabbas' substitute. He dies in his place.

Four kings. And four kinds of kingdom defined by them. In this passage their worlds collide and we

see plainly written in the pages of history the values of each one.

The question for you and me this morning then is this: which kingdom do you want to live in? What kind of king do you want to have?

It seems to me that one of the big PR problems for the Christian faith is that most people, including quite a lot of Christians, have an entirely wrong conception of what kind of god God is. And Matthew wants us to know this morning that to see the kind of god God is we need to look at God's king. At king Jesus. The one in whom we can see perfectly reflected the values of God's kingdom.

God is not a manipulative deity seeking to twist the universe for his own power games. He is not a prison guard or headmaster in the sky waving a big stick and looking for an excuse to beat you for doing wrong. He is not a pragmatist who will abandon you when it suits his personal agenda.

He is, instead, a God of love and grace who gives himself, the righteous for the wicked. Who dies that we may live. Who is willing to be nailed to the cross that belongs to us.

If you are here this morning and you are not a Christian. Or if you have thought you are a Christian but, on reflection, see that you have never allowed Jesus to be your king. Well this morning is a wonderful opportunity to enter a much better kingdom. To become part of a future where you are not a number in a computer or a chess piece on a board, but one whose life has been saved by another who give his life for you. Why not enter that kingdom even today?

And if you are a Christian here this morning let me ask you whether the kingdom of your life really reflects the values of your king?

Do you really want to live a life like everybody else – a life that might look good when you are full of pride and power but which can only end in death and destruction? If that's not the kind of life you want, and, if you are a Christian of course it isn't, then can I ask you, with me, once again this morning to repent of the fact that our values are so often aligned to the kingdoms of the world and not to the kingdom of God? And can I encourage you to choose again, afresh, to choose king Jesus?

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