

Jesus on trial

19 February 2023

INTRODUCING TODAY'S THEME

Building fences that exclude people ... or having rules that exclude people ... examples!

e.g. you can only play netball if you're a girl

e.g. you can't be part of our group because you don't have a bike

e.g. you can't come to my party because you're too young

I wonder how it feels if you're excluded or left out.

... what could we do instead?

When Jesus came, he wanted to help people.

Sometimes they were sick but often they'd been forgotten or left out of the community. So Jesus helped them get up and take their place again, so they could fit in and be accepted and valued and loved.

Jesus asks us to be people who are like that too ... who reach out to those on the edges and take them by the hand and welcome them.

BIBLE READINGS

Matthew 17:1-9

After six days Jesus took with him Peter, James and John and led them up a high mountain by themselves. There he was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun and his clothes became dazzling white. Suddenly there appeared before them Moses and Elijah, talking with Jesus.

Peter said to Jesus, 'Lord, it is good for us to be here. If you wish, I will put up three shelters – one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah.' While he was still speaking, a bright cloud covered them, and a voice from the cloud said, 'This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!'

When the disciples heard this, they fell face down to the ground, terrified. But Jesus came and touched them. 'Get up,' he said. 'Don't be afraid.' When they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus. As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus instructed them, 'Don't tell anyone what you have seen, until the Son of Man has been raised from the dead.'

John 5:2-47

Now there is in Jerusalem a pool, which in Aramaic is called Bethesda and which is surrounded by five covered colonnades. Here a great number of disabled people used to lie – the blind, the lame, the paralysed. One who was there had been an invalid for thirty-eight years. When Jesus saw him lying there and learned that he had been in this condition for a long time, he asked him, 'Do you want to get well?'

‘Sir,’ the man replied, ‘I have no one to help me into the pool when the water is stirred. While I am trying to get in, someone else goes down ahead of me.’ Then Jesus said to him, ‘Get up! Pick up your mat and walk.’ At once the man was healed; he picked up his mat and walked.

The day on which this took place was a Sabbath and the Jewish leaders said to the man, ‘It is the Sabbath; the law forbids you to carry your mat.’ But he replied, ‘The man who made me well said to me, “Pick up your mat and walk.”’ They asked him, ‘Who is this fellow who told you to pick it up and walk?’ ...

So, because Jesus was doing these things on the Sabbath, the Jewish leaders began to persecute him. In his defence Jesus said to them, ‘My Father is always at his work and I too am working.’ For this reason they tried all the more to kill him; for not only was he breaking the Sabbath, but he was calling God his own Father, making himself equal with God.

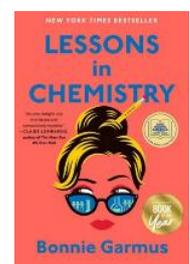
Jesus gave them this answer: ‘Very truly I tell you, the Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees his Father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does. For the Father loves the Son and shows him all he does. Just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, even so the Son gives life to whom he is pleased to give it. Moreover, the Father judges no one, but has entrusted all judgment to the Son, that all may honour the Son just as they honour the Father. Whoever does not honour the Son does not honour the Father, who sent him. Very truly I tell you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be judged but has crossed over from death to life. ...

If I testify about myself, my testimony is not acceptable. There is another who testifies in my favour – John the Baptist – and I know that his testimony about me is true. You have sent to John and he has testified to the truth. ... I have testimony weightier than that of John. For the works that the Father has given me to finish – the very works that I am doing – testify that the Father has sent me. ... You study the Scriptures diligently because you think that in them you have eternal life. These are the very Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life.

... I have come in my Father’s name, and you do not accept me ... But do not think I will accuse you before the Father. Your accuser is Moses, on whom your hopes are set. If you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote about me. But since you do not believe what he wrote, how are you going to believe what I say?’

MESSAGE

Authors write stories for various reasons ... perhaps to entertain us or to inspire our imagination ... or perhaps to invite us to solve a crime mystery or to offer insight into a historical period ...



The authors of the NT also write with various purposes in mind ... to remind us of the person and message of Jesus ... to encourage us to keep up our faith in the face of difficulties ... and to show us how to live a godly life.



The Gospel writer John follows this same pattern. He wants to encourage his community to remain faithful ... but rather than focus on ethical behaviours, John highlights one crucial question again and again ... namely, **who is Jesus?**

This question is clearly in view in today's passage as Jesus directly confronts his opponents for the first time, but certainly not for the last time.

One commentator I read this week called this chapter 'unattractive, unappealing and having little relevance to our contemporary concerns'! Maybe that's why this chapter of John doesn't feature in the Lectionary! But the author thought its content was important enough to include ... and to include several other similar chapters.

So we might have to work a little harder than normal this morning, but hopefully by the end we will gain some useful insights.

I suggest to you that one helpful way to understand this chapter in John is to see it as the first in a series of public **trials** of Jesus.

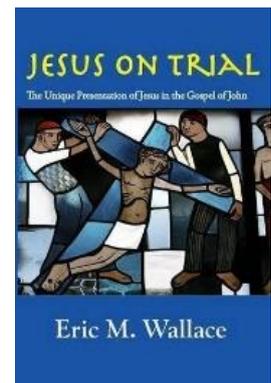
First, the **crime**.



The scene of the crime is in the city of Jerusalem at a pool where disabled people gathered in the hope of being healed. There was some **superstition** attached to the pool ... the first person to enter the water after the water was stirred up would likely be healed. Not much help though, if you're blind or crippled or paralysed and can't get

into the water.

Jesus sees an older person lying there and after checking that he does actually want to be healed – and therefore lose his ability to beg for money or food – Jesus says 'Stand up, pick up your mat and walk' – and instantly the man is healed. We may hear echoes of a similar story in the Synoptic Gospels where Jesus likewise calls a cripple



to get up, pick up his mat and walk. And just as in that story where the Jewish leaders complain, so here they start persecuting Jesus.

*The crime committed is that Jesus dared to heal on the **Sabbath**, the Jewish day of rest as included in the Ten Commandments of the Mosaic Law. And the healed man broke this law by carrying his mat. For Jesus' opponents, obeying the 'no work' requirements of the Sabbath took precedence over showing **compassion and healing** someone.*

When confronted with his '**crime**', Jesus calls God his Father and suggests he is just doing what his Father – God – is doing – working – and **bringing life** – even on the Sabbath. For making such a statement, Jesus commits a second crime in the mind of his opponents – claiming to be **equal with God** in authority.

Now the **defence**.

Jesus' initial defence is that he is like an **apprentice** learning a trade from watching the master at work. He sees what God the Father is doing and does likewise. And because the Father loves the Son, Jesus, God shows Jesus all that he is doing.



Jesus expands a little on what this looks like.

God heals people ... so Jesus also heals people – like the crippled man – reflecting the kindness and compassion of God.

God raises the dead and gives them life ... so Jesus too gives new life to people like the woman at the well and later will raise Lazarus from death.

More ominously, God judges people ... so too Jesus will one day judge people and grant eternal life to those who believe.

We may hear these words of Jesus and think 'How arrogant! How exclusive! How can Jesus speak in such terms?' Yet in this Gospel, he does so in speech after speech, claiming an authority equal to God, and always speaking about the '**life**' that he has come to offer to people.

Jesus thus embodies several prerogatives of God – healing, raising the dead, judging, granting eternal life ... all based on seeing what God is doing and then doing likewise. Jesus' defence is that he is simply doing the will and work of God.

The next part of Jesus' defence takes the form of calling for **witnesses**.

The first witness Jesus calls on is **John the Baptist**, who we may remember has already identified Jesus as both Messiah and the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.



Jesus then calls in other witnesses. If you don't believe my words, says Jesus, look at the powerful **signs** that I'm doing – like healing the crippled man, or healing a person of a life-threatening illness in the previous chapter. These signs indicate that God is working through Jesus and is therefore giving his approval to what Jesus is doing ... for those with eyes to see.

Then there is the witness of **Scripture**, the Word of God. Both Jesus and his opponents held that Scripture reveals God's ways. Where they disagreed strongly, however, was in the **interpretation** of Scripture – which passages take priority and how to read them.

Among all the many chapters and verses about the Law, Jesus claims that Moses also speaks about him, about Jesus. The passage that Jesus has in mind is not quoted but may well be this one from Deuteronomy ...

The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your fellow Israelites. You must listen to him. ... I [God] will put my words in his mouth. He will tell them everything I command him. I myself will call to account anyone who does not listen to my words that the prophet speaks in my name. (Deut 18:15-19)

So Jesus calls on Scripture, inspired by God, as an additional witness. With that, Jesus rests his case. No **verdict** is delivered just yet, but the **jury** – we the readers – can discern two clearly established lines of argument.

So what are we to make of this chapter in John's Gospel?

One observation from this chapter is about the important *value of work*, whether paid or volunteer. We sometimes think that being **spiritual** is the opposite of working. Yet here Jesus says that **God** is always working and likewise he is always working. Work helps people. Work gives us dignity and a sense of purpose, whether it is paid or volunteer.

I pray that God's Spirit would open our eyes and ears and hearts to see where Jesus is at work and would give us the courage and faith to join in that we might be Jesus' hands and feet to those we meet.

In his work, Jesus acts a bit *like an apprentice* by seeing what God the Father is doing and then doing likewise. In the other Gospels, the disciples are effectively **Jesus'** apprentices so they learn by watching and listening to Jesus and eventually take his message into the world. Here in John the disciples are largely absent. So Jesus makes his appeal directly to us, the reader. We are invited, then, to watch Jesus and to learn from him.

The next observation is that for Jesus, *compassion and bringing new life are more important than following religious rules*. It's a similar message that we get from the other Gospels too, especially in parables like the Good Samaritan in Luke.

So this morning, for instance, I have some information from ACT for Peace – the organization that runs the Christmas Bowl – about how we can donate to support **relief efforts in Turkiye and Syria**. We will take a



retiring offering this morning but people can also donate in other ways through bank EFT, credit card or cheque. Showing compassion to the people made homeless by the recent earthquakes is more important than holding back because these are Muslim countries that often persecute Christians. The reason we offer compassion is because of the example of Jesus.

But the biggest question that John brings us in this chapter is *'Who is Jesus?'* and a related question, *who therefore is God?* We don't get a final answer at this stage of the Gospel but the question is always being asked.

Is Jesus truly the Son of God who does the sorts of things that God does and is to be believed and followed? Or is Jesus an untrustworthy or deluded person who deliberately breaks God's rules and then claims equal authority with God? These are the questions that Jesus – and John – put before us.

So make no mistake, this Gospel is not a neutral story about a historical figure named Jesus ... it is a story that is always trying to persuade us of the truth claims of Jesus.