

If you've been around the last couple of weeks, you'll know that we are currently in a Lent sermon series—Lent being the season of the Christian calendar when we take six weeks to focus on Christ's journey to the cross, His endurance in suffering.

And we do this because it really does shape our hearts and minds to be better prepared for Easter. And when I say 'prepared,' I mean that by the time we get to Easter, we're aching for it. The joy of it hopefully sinks in a bit deeper *because* we've been sitting in the suffering and trials of Jesus.

So this year we're looking at Matthew's gospel, chapters 26-27. Because from the moment that Jesus steps foot into the Garden of Gethsemane, everything changes. The mood changes. The focus changes. Because He's having to prepare, now, for the trials that are about to come.

As we've seen in the last two weeks, all of His disciples either betray or abandon Him. He's left completely alone—both in prayer and in His arrest.

But it's what needed to happen. Because only Jesus could handle what was about to happen next.

Read Matthew 26:57-68.

I had a rather humbling moment not too long ago. We were all in the car together—Danny, myself, and the boys—and as we pulled up to park along a side street, Malakai asked us what the red thing was that was sticking out of the grass.

And I said to him, "Oh, that's a fire hydrant. When fire fighters need water, they get it from there."

And all of a sudden, a much-delayed light bulb went off and I turned to Danny and said, "I've never thought about the connection between the word 'hydrant' and water before."

Hydro of course originates from an ancient Greek word (hydor) meaning water. And it was only in explaining the big red thing to Malakai that this occurred to me. I'd been saying 'fire hydrant' my entire life, but I had never paused to consider what the word actually meant.

Now, I offer that very humbling story (which you are forbidden to tease me about later) because something that we see happening in our text this morning is that the true meaning of words has been lost, and it's almost as if Jesus and the Sanhedrin are speaking different languages.

The very men who were supposed to be guiding the people into a posture of humility before *God*. The very men who *God* instituted and directed—through the Law of Moses—to encourage the people in a life of repentance and transformation. They are, ironically, the ones who have put the Son *of God* on trial—and of all places—in the courtyard of the high priest.

And their deviation away from what their role was intended to be becomes very clear soon after this passage in chapter 27—which we aren't going to look at in this series, but it's important to acknowledge because it's anecdotal of the problem with the current temple leadership.

Because once the chief priests have made their plans on how to have Jesus executed, Judas is suddenly seized with remorse, comes *to the temple*, and offers back the thirty pieces of silver that the temple leadership had paid him to betray Jesus.

He recognizes it as sin. "*I have sinned,*" he says, "*for I have betrayed innocent blood.*" Where else was Judas, as a Jew, to go with his sin but to the Temple?

But think about the irony of this for a moment. Money was taken—probably from the *Temple* treasury—to betray the God whose temple it is for.

And the *very people* who are supposed to be in charge of *receiving* peoples' confessions and guiding them into a right way of being before this God, they are the ones who say to Judas, "This is now your problem, not ours."

And so it makes perfect sense, then, that the mob who has just arrested Jesus immediately takes him to no one else but the Temple leaders.

And because they don't want to get in trouble with Rome—the empire had rules around death sentences—they have to do this properly. They need to appropriately condemn Jesus under their own law to get him an audience with the Roman governor. So they have to find some way to catch Jesus in His words or find evidence that says that He has committed blasphemy.

Finally, the text says, two witnesses (maybe a couple of the elders) come forward and declare, "*This fellow said, I am able to destroy the temple of God and rebuild it in three days.*"

Now, in John 2, Jesus does in fact say this: "*Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days.*"

But, as we are told, Jesus wasn't talking about the physical Temple building, which was clearly no longer serving the purpose for which it was intended.

Jesus was speaking of a temple that would be the new people of God, who would no longer need a physical building to hold the Spirit of God because *they themselves* would house the Spirit.

All throughout the gospels, people are being healed *outside of the Temple*. People are finding forgiveness of sins *outside of the Temple*. People are finding the love and presence of God *outside of the Temple*. All throughout His ministry, Jesus pointed to this new incoming era, demonstrating that something new would soon upstage the physical Temple.

So it's not just coincidence, then, that *this* is the evidence used against Him, as He stands before the very people whose whole life was the Temple. It's understandable that they would be a tad upset.

I mean, imagine that you had an idea for a small business. You put all your money into it. You and your family sacrifice everything to make this thing happen. And it blossoms into this multimillion-dollar enterprise that becomes a real blessing to other people.

Imagine somebody walks in and says, "Hmm, I'm going to build something different."

You probably wouldn't respond very favorably to that. Because it would seem that this individual was claiming some kind of authority over *your* business.

By saying what He did, Jesus indicated that He did in fact have some kind of authority over the Temple, which Caiaphas—as high priest—would have taken immediate offense to. The Temple was His whole life. His vocation, his identity, his empire. It was the holiest place to be, that housed the holiest of holiest of places that almost no one could be *except him*.

Only the high priest had 'supreme authority' in all matters relating to the Temple.

So what we have here in Matthew's gospel—and what we've been seeing all along—is a collision of authority, a collision of temple authority, a collision of empires.

And you would think that, because of this, we'd end up with a kind of sparring match, both sides defending themselves using quotes from the Law of Moses.

But Jesus does a very unexpected thing. Verse 63: "*Jesus remained silent.*"

Right in the middle of this passage, there is a divine pause. The Son of God Himself is silent—He who was there when God spoke the world into being, who is *the Word* made flesh, the spoken-living-breathing Word of God.

And you have to wonder if all of creation in that moment went silent with Him, as the Son of God—through whom the world was made—fulfills the words of Isaiah 53:

*"He was oppressed and afflicted,
yet he did not open his mouth;
he was led like a lamb to the slaughter,
and as a sheep before its shearers is silent,
so he did not open his mouth.*

I mean, no wonder Jesus is silent. All the run-ins He had with the Jewish leaders along the way, the frustrations He expressed towards them for their ignorance and evil practices, His one angry outburst that happened *in the Temple*—it all comes to a climax in this moment.

Because the people who had been called to be a priesthood—*priests* who mediate God's presence to the people and mediate the people's hearts to God—they are now seeking to kill the very Being that they are meant to adore. They are the ones shearing Him for sacrifice.

A couple weeks ago we spoke about a God who suffers, and how the very concept of that was ludicrous to the ancient world.

What about a God who goes silent when His people reject Him? Who decides *not* to speak when He is labelled as an imposter and a deceiver?

I remember a time, a number of years ago before we had kids and actually had time for this, where Danny and I went to go see a show at Bard on the Beach in Vancouver. And before the show, we grabbed some dinner at a Mexican restaurant just on 4th Avenue, close to Vanier Park.

And the décor in this restaurant was like nothing we'd ever seen before. Because seventy-five percent of it was images of Jesus—paintings, icons, some reverent, some not-so-much. We assumed that the owners were Catholic but perhaps wanted to keep the atmosphere casual and welcoming.

So we finish our dinners and Danny goes to the counter to pay, and I overhear these two men sitting at a high-top table behind us—talking about, believe it or not, Jesus. One of the men was clearly the talker in the relationship, and I couldn't help but hear him comment on how the cult of Jesus was the most brilliant deception there ever was.

"It's so smart," he said. "To tell people that you're the fulfillment of their sacrificial system, and then to fake a death and be heralded as a god. Of course your teachings will live on forever."

And I remember being so dumbstruck, because there's no part of my being that can even imagine Jesus as a fake or capable of deception. It just doesn't make sense.

I mean, there are thousands of leaders throughout history who have used various 'fake' measures or words to get what they want. They overdramatize a situation. They manipulate. They fake the control they have but really don't have. They fake promises that they don't plan to keep. They fake what they say they believe or value. They 'play the role' to get what they want.

But they don't fake suffering. They don't intentionally say things that will lead to their demise. But that's what Jesus did. His leadership was defined by lowliness, suffering, and being rejected.

And so it's not surprising, then, that in the text it's Jesus Himself who provides the 'blasphemy' that is needed to charge Him as guilty. The high priest demands that Jesus state outright if He is in fact—in His mind—the Messiah.

'Messiah' means 'anointed one.' But just like the fire hydrant, the high priest has heard the word 'Messiah' his whole life but not truly understood it. Because of course in his mind, *he* as high priest was the one who had been anointed.

So now Jesus speaks. And He says something that should have brought life but instead only brings death: *"You have said so. [And] from now on you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven."*

Don't glaze over that. This is huge, because He's quoting there from a passage in Daniel, where Daniel prophetically writes about a vision He had of the Ancient of Days. And he says this:

¹³ "In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. ¹⁴ He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all nations and peoples of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed."

Now, I don't doubt that many would-be Messiahs used passages in Scripture to justify their actions and claims to who they were.

But I doubt that anyone had dared to quote this passage in Daniel. And Jesus very likely references it again after His resurrection when He says to the disciples, *"All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me."* He *is* the fulfillment of this passage.

But here, in this moment, it is a dangerous thing to say. Because it implies that Jesus is claiming to be worthy of entering the very presence of God. It implies that Jesus is claiming to be worthy of having Kingship and dominion over all powers.

It implies that Jesus is worthy of *being worshipped*.

There's the rub. The high priest needs no further evidence. He tears His clothes, he shouts that Jesus has spoken blasphemy, that no more witnesses are needed, and he invites the rest of the crowd to respond.

And the unanimous response is, *"He is worthy of death."* Rather than worship, Jesus receives spit in His face, punches, slaps. And—since He quoted from the prophets—the men mock Him and ask Him to 'prophecy' about who hit Him.

Unlike the last two weeks, there is no final word from Jesus in this passage. He has said all that was needed. And it's very easy, by the end of this passage, to lay blame on the Jewish leaders for the death of Jesus.

But we have to realize that their rebellion was the climax of what had been building for centuries from the moment that humans rejected God in the beginning. From the moment that humans stepped *out of* the garden of Eden, inspired by the devil, it was rejection after rejection after rejection.

But from the moment that Jesus steps foot *into* the garden of Gethsemane, inspired by the Holy Spirit, that rejection begins to leave way for resurrection.

It's why we sing at Christmas: "He comes to make his blessings flow/ *Far as the curse is found.*"

In other words, Jesus' suffering accounts for *all of it*. And it confirms that Jesus *is in fact* building something new, something that *is* in fact about repentance and transformation.

So what do we do, then, with this reality that we now worship the cornerstone that the builders rejected? That it is *we*, now—according to 1 Peter 2—who are the 'spiritual house' that God is building up to be a 'holy priesthood'.

Do we realize the suffering that Christ endured to enable this? That this calling comes from a God who was silent in the face of rejection? Who offered Himself *as* the sacrificial offering?

And that this calling to serve as His new priesthood *assumes* that we mirror His lowliness and humility in order to lay claim to who He is?

Because when Jesus spoke about His Kingdom coming near, He was speaking of a different sort of empire than the empires that the world was accustomed to knowing. One that's very foundation and power is not in manipulation or deceit or fake reliability but in hope.

This past week I read an article interviewing an Iranian author, Arash Azizi, who's done a lot of work on asking Iranians what they want for their war-torn country.

He said this: "Naturally, many Iranians have hope that something better could emerge out of this. What else can they do but hope?... But I think I can speak for many when I say that they're far too aware of the possibilities of a state collapse, of civil war, of the regime surviving, and worse. Even the most optimistic scenario of a democratic transition doesn't look very easy."

In other words, even when there is the opportunity for hope, people are afraid to hope for it. They don't actually know what the word means for them. They've been living in a tyrannous country for so long, it's hard to imagine what hope looks like.

When Jesus told the people that he would rebuild the Temple in three days, that was an indication—already then—that a ‘regime change’ was about to happen. Something more essential than any political or economic change.

One where Jesus would be King, and where His new priesthood would be able to boldly declare—as He did—that all authority in heaven and on earth had in fact been given to Him. That His dominion will not pass away.

And that He would be with us always till the very end.

We are part of a regime change that has changed everything. Each of us is part of the new Temple in which the Spirit of God dwells, who equips us to stand before every other fear-based regime with the Kingdom vision of Jesus.

Jesus, the only King who never faked or deceived, but who silently suffered.

For His sake, we do what Kingdom priests do. What only Christ is worthy of.

Let’s worship.