

Jesus – The Dividing One

Roxy and I are making our way through a TV show called 'Suits'. Some of you might have watched it. It's brilliant! Basically it's about a bunch of different characters in a major law firm in New York City who deal with high profile cases and do their best to make sure their clients are declared "innocent".

Some of my favourite scenes happen in the court room. Here you have a trial. With two major players. The prosecution and the defence. The prosecution wants to do all they can to have the defendant declared guilty; whereas the defence wants to do all they can to have the defendant declared innocent.

And this all hatches on one entity: the jury. It's actually the jury that has all the power. They decide if the defendant should be let off or locked away. They come up with the verdict: innocent or guilty.

Now I've never been on a jury. I've never had that responsibility. But it does make me shudder a bit. The responsibility of passing verdict on a person. The responsibility of declaring innocent or guilty that basically determines a person's life.

If a jury cannot reach that decision it is said that there is a split jury or hung jury. If the jurors cannot together agree on a verdict, a split jury results, leading to a mistrial. The case is not decided, and it may be tried again at a later date before a new jury. Or the plaintiff or government may decide not to pursue the case any further and there will be no subsequent trial.

Either way, for any trial the power and responsibility lies in the hands of the jury. They are united or they are divided.

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We've been looking at the life of Jesus and who He says He is in the gospel of John and so far we've had a constant theme that opinions are divided between the people, the jury, around him.

Let's consider the evidence so far.

When we started in the gospel Jesus was recruiting people from all around him and many were following him. He did this pretty neat miracle early on – turning water into wine, a real crowd-pleaser! – And people like this kind of Jesus. He's fun to be around and adds to the party!

Then He turned all serious and got mad at some people in the Temple who had turned it into a business. They weren't leaving any space for those who didn't know God to come to know Him so Jesus drove them out. People don't really like this kind of Jesus. He's a bit too serious, a bit too direct, and let's face it, a bit too angry.

But then He goes and has two amazing encounters with two different people – first this guy called Nicodemus, who comes to him at night and asks him if he is God; and second a Samaritan Woman, who He comes to at lunch time, asks her for a drink of water, and declares to her that He is God.

And the result of this? Many people come to believe in Him and follow Him.

Jesus is on a roll. And again, we like this kind of Jesus. He's personable; he knows our story; he cares for us; He loves us.

Then Jesus heals this man who has been lying beside a pool each day for the last 38 years! Not one or two, 38! And Jesus doesn't even have to touch him, He simply tells him "Take up your mat and walk." And the man does indeed. Now *this* is a **really cool** Jesus! He knows that people suffer and wants to do something about it, and He can heal someone just by His words. How could anyone not like this Jesus?

Well, God's people, the Israelites, did not like him after that. Why? Because he had healed this man on the Sabbath. See, healing was considered work, and no one was meant to work on the Sabbath. That was a day of rest! Jesus had broken a cardinal rule in their eyes and from that time on He was a wanted man.

This Jesus didn't follow the rules in their rulebook of being a good Jewish person, so they didn't like him. They wanted justice.

That feeling grew even more when He made himself equal with God by calling Him His Father.

Jews didn't believe in God to be their personal father - that was blasphemy!

You kind of get the impression that perhaps Jesus didn't read the book "How to Win Friends and Influence People" somehow.

Following on from this, Jesus went to something called the Passover feast in Jerusalem. Again he did a real crowd-pleasing miracle by taking two small fish and five loaves of barley and feeding Five thousand men, plus women and children. That was a good one! Lots believed in him then.

But then the very next day He makes this totally outrageous statement that turns them against him again. It's during the Passover feast. Now the Jews have a strong belief in God providing Moses and their ancestors with bread (or manna) from heaven while they wandered in the desert. This was a belief dear to their hearts and central to the Passover. And Jesus goes and says to them, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me shall never hunger and whoever believes in me will never thirst."

Jesus has a vigorous discussion with them and the upshot of it is that many people turn away from him. He's upset them; He's caused outrage; He's caused division.

So what's happening here?

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Jesus is on trial. And the jury is still out. Innocent or guilty? People are divided. Jesus – the Dividing One - has divided them.

But his closest friends and support – his disciples – they are united! They love Jesus and have given everything to follow Him. After many of his followers turn away from him, Jesus asks them a question, “Would you also like to leave?” Jesus is giving them an option here.

Simon Peter answers him, “Lord, to whom would we go? You have the words that give eternal life. And now we believe and know that you are the Holy One who has come from God.”

Top marks, Peter. You've nailed it. You know exactly who Jesus is and what He came here for. Let's pick up the story here:

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John 7:1-13

After this, Jesus went around in Galilee. He did not want to go about in Judea because the Jewish leaders there were looking for a way to kill him. But when the Jewish Festival of Tabernacles was near, Jesus' brothers said to him, “Leave Galilee and go to Judea, so that your disciples there may see the works you do. No one who wants to become a public figure acts in secret. Since you are doing these things, show yourself to the world.” For even his own brothers did not believe in him.

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Therefore Jesus told them, “My time is not yet here; for you any time will do. The world cannot hate you, but it hates me because I testify that its works are evil. You go to the festival. I am not going up to this festival, because my time has not yet fully come.” After he had said this, he stayed in Galilee.

However, after his brothers had left for the festival, he went also, not publicly, but in secret. Now at the festival the Jewish leaders were watching for Jesus and asking, “Where is he?”

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Among the crowds there was widespread whispering about him. Some said, “He is a good man.”

Others replied, “No, he deceives the people.” But no one would say anything publicly about him for fear of the leaders.

There's a lot happening here. So let's break it down.

First, we have Jesus not wanting to go to Judea because the Jewish leaders are trying to kill him and are waiting for him there.

Second, we have Jesus' brothers urging him to make a public spectacle of Himself in Judea at the Festival of Tabernacles – but they don't even believe in Him. Nothing like family huh?

Third, Jesus saying He's not going to the festival, but then secretly going.

And finally, we have the crowd *again* divided on Jesus – some saying He is a good man; others saying he deceives people.

To understand more about what's happening here, it's helpful to know a bit more about what this Festival of Tabernacles is.

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In Jewish culture there are three pilgrimage feasts anchored in the agricultural cycle of Judaism. These are feasts or festivals that Jews from all around would “go up” to Jerusalem to attend. As a Jewish boy, Jesus would have likely gone up to these Festivals on a yearly basis with his family.

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The first was Passover, which recognized the beginning of the grain harvest in spring. This is where Jesus declared He is the bread of life.

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The second was Pentecost, which occurred seven weeks later, celebrating the end of the grain harvest.

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And the last was Tabernacles – the one we're talking about today - which celebrated the autumn harvest of tree and vine.

As I've mentioned, the Passover Festival was celebrated in the previous chapter in John's gospel, where the Jews celebrated that God provided bread (or manna) from heaven for them. Now in terms of a timeline, there is about six months between the Passover Festival and Tabernacles, so we know that by the time we're reading about this in John's gospel, the Pentecost festival has also been and we are in the feast of Tabernacles.

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During the Feast of Tabernacles, Israelite farmers built temporary shelters similar to this in the field to protect their crops. This reminded them of the temporary shelters in the desert that their ancestors used. The Festival was not only about praising God for the harvest, but also about studying this desert period and its meaning.

God was with them in their desert period.

Let's face it. Most, if not all of us, have been through desert places in our lives – maybe we're even in one now. Places where hope seems faint and answers are not coming. We can relate to this desert period. This wandering. This need for shelter. For covering. For God to intervene. This is what the Festival is about.

The Festival lasted a week and involved numerous sacrifices of bulls, rams and lambs.

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Each day of the Feast included a water ceremony in which a procession of priests descended to the south border of the city to a place called the Gihon Spring. A priest would fill a golden pitcher as a choir chanted Isaiah 12:3:

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“With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation.”

The water was then carried back up the hill to the “Water Gate” (Not to be confused with the infamous 1970’s political scandal), and the priest was followed by crowds carrying tree branches in their right hand (reminiscent of the Desert Shelters or booths) and citrus branches in their left hand (reminiscent of the Harvest). The crowd would shake these and sing psalms as the procession went through town. When they arrived at the Temple, the priest would climb the altar steps and pour the water onto the altar while the crowd circled him and continued singing.

Now, on the seventh day, this symbolic and significant procession took place seven times! That’s a whole lot of walking and water-carrying.

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The point is this: ‘Water’ was very important to the Israelites and this water ceremony was symbolic on multiple levels. On the one hand, they were praying to God for rain since autumn often brought drought to Israel. On the other hand, it was symbolic of the desert when God brought water from a rock for His people (seen in the story in Numbers 20:7-11), and here water was flowing from the sacrificial rock altar of the Temple.

So in a drought-stricken land, this was a spectacular vision of water, life-giving water, flowing from God’s life-giving Temple. To sum up, The Festival of Tabernacles was a combination of images from agriculture (the harvest), climate (sun and rain), and Israel’s history (wandering in the desert).

That’s the background to the Festival and that helps guide us as we follow Jesus through it, who makes these images serve his purposes as he stands in the Festival and makes His identity further known, causing further division.

It is not until the middle of the Festival when Jesus enters the Temple courts and starts teaching publicly. The Jewish leaders and people are amazed at his teaching, but they’re also frustrated and have three questions for him.

Jesus is on trial. Imagine the court room. Jesus is on the stand, the Jewish leaders and people have their lawyer ask him the first question.

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Jesus, where did you learn how to teach?

The jury leans in closer to hear his response.

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John 7:16-18

Jesus answered, “My teaching is not my own. It comes from the one who sent me. Anyone who chooses to do the will of God will find out whether my teaching comes from God or whether I speak on my own. Whoever speaks on their own does so to gain personal glory, but he who seeks the glory of the one who sent him is a man of truth; there is nothing false about him.

Strike one!

This rattles the prosecution. Jesus says He gets his teaching or 'authority' from God. But they're thinking that in Jewish culture, "authority" is passed down from rabbi to rabbi through ordination. The thought behind this was that the authority of Moses – who had direct access to God - has been preserved from generation to generation through each successive ordination. If that chain was broken, authority might be lost. Along with direct access to God.

So we have a problem. This Jesus is not ordained – not in the Jewish tradition anyway. So on whose shoulders or authority is he standing? Not on Moses, but on God's Himself.

Oh dear! The Jewish leaders are not happy with Him or this answer.

The jury look divided.

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The trial continues. Their lawyer looks at Jesus and asks him, Where are you from?

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John 7:28-29

Then Jesus, still teaching in the temple courts, cried out, "Yes, you know me, and you know where I am from. I am not here on my own authority, but he who sent me is true. You do not know him, but I know him because I am from him and he sent me."

Strike two!

The Jewish people know that Jesus is Jesus, son of Joseph of Nazareth or Arimathea. See, the culture back then didn't have surnames, so the place of origin was how people personally identified others.

I would be Matthew, son of Barry, of Hamilton.

What's happening here is that the people are examining Jesus purely on an earthly level and because they can trace his human origins, He can't really be the Messiah He claims to be. But he *does* claim to be the Messiah. He claims to have come from God Himself. But not only that, he claims to be in direct relationship and communion with God.

This *really* upsets the Jewish leaders as it's a divine claim that shatters all the beliefs of Judaism. Jesus is claiming to not only know God, but to be His Son. There is venom in their eyes and malice on their tongues. This is blasphemous!

Well, this Jesus is the dividing one and his words cause further division in the crowd. The jury are hanging in there. This is big stuff to take in. Some look sympathetic; others perhaps irritable. Hard to tell really.

In the crowded room there are those who want to seize him and those who want to hear more. Jesus knows this his time has not yet come so he continues his defence:

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John 7:33-34

"I am with you for only a short time, and then I am going to the one who sent me. You will look for me, but you will not find me; and where I am, you cannot come."

This causes further confusion. Where is He going that we can't find him? And why can't we go there? What's He talking about?

Their lawyer knows the immediate question to ask him: Jesus, where are you going?

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The jury seem very interested in this response. Jesus rises to his feet. This must be important what He's about to say. It's the last and greatest day of the Festival. What's He going to say?

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John 7:37-38

On the last and greatest day of the festival, Jesus stood and said in a loud voice, "Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as Scripture has said, rivers of living water will flow from within them."

Final strike!

This is Jesus' greatest proclamation so far! We know how important the last day of the Festival is and how much emphasis the Jewish people place on the symbolic and physical act of water-gathering from the Temple. God's Temple.

As seven water processions are climbing the steep hill of South Jerusalem, Jesus is publicly proclaiming: "Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink!" This brings back memories of Jesus meeting with the Samaritan woman and telling her whoever drinks the water that He gives will never be thirsty again. But Jesus ups the stakes here and doesn't tell just one person; he tells everyone who can hear at the most important part of the entire Festival!

Now why would He do that? Doesn't He know what's going to happen? Doesn't He realise how this is going to anger the Jewish people even more? This is back to the Jesus we met earlier that people have a hard time accepting.

The Jewish leaders and people are really struggling now. All their life they've been taught That God is God and they are to worship Him alone. There is only one God. And Jesus has made three great claims against this: First, that He gets His authority from God. Second, that He comes directly from God and is His Son. And finally that He offers life-giving water to any who come to Him. What He's talking about here is the Holy Spirit.

This has completely messed up their belief system. It's no wonder the Jewish people are divided. It's no wonder that Jesus is on trial! It's no wonder the jury is split.

In his defence, Jesus knew who He was and didn't want people to have any misunderstanding about who He claimed to be.

But more than that He wanted to show without a doubt that He is the Messiah. He is the New Jerusalem. The New Temple. The new life-giving water through the outpouring of the Holy Spirit.

Jesus is the true fulfilment of the Festival of Tabernacles.

He is the one who provides shelter. He is the one who brings the harvest. He is the one who provides relief from drought; from desert periods. He is the one who satisfies and quenches thirst. Jesus is the fulfilment of all these things.

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But Jesus is still on trial and the jury is still divided. At the beginning of the Festival, some say Jesus is a good man; others call Him deceptive. Half way through the Festival, some put their faith in him while others try to seize him. At the end of the Festival, some proclaim He is the Messiah; others do not believe.

But all in one way or another examine Jesus and pass judgment on Him.

Jesus is on trial.

The jury is divided. Some declare Him innocent and the Son of God. Some declare Him guilty and completely deluded.

And so the hammer comes down. It's a mistrial. And the jury is still out.

Jesus - the dividing one. We've been examining the trial from the jury's point of view. We've been looking at the life of Jesus through the lens of Judaism. Through the people around him. There were those who chose to *believe* in who He claimed to be and those who chose to deny who He claimed to be.

Jesus completely upset their religious belief system. He didn't fit into the mould of who they wanted the Messiah to be. He claimed to get his authority directly from God. He claimed to come directly from God in heaven. He claimed to offer living water to all who believe in Him.

This divided the people and split the jury.

Jesus was on trial then and Jesus is still on trial today. And the jury is still divided.

Some are open and receptive; others are cynical and hostile.

Some are sympathetic and believe; others are hardened and do not believe.

Some have given their all to follow after Him; others are somewhere on the journey on the lookout for Him.

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How about you? Where do you stand on the jury?

Will you give your all to follow Him? Or will you turn the other way?

What's your verdict on who Jesus is?

As you think about that, God has given His verdict on us. He has declared us innocent because of the sacrifice of this man Jesus that we've been talking about today. The Scriptures say that Jesus is *our* great High Priest.

He is the priest who doesn't offer sacrifices on our behalf; rather He became the sacrifice on our behalf.

He doesn't go find a lamb to pay for all the wrong things we have done; He is the lamb who pays for all those wrong things.

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Ultimately, Jesus paid a debt he did not owe, because we owed a debt we could not pay.

There's only one reason that Jesus went to the Cross on our behalf – and that was love. Pure and simple. Pure and holy. Pure and forever.

Jesus poured out His life for us. He went through the awful agony and sheer suffering of the Cross so that we don't have to. He made a way to make things right between God and people when there was no way. And when He cried out on the Cross, "It is finished," His work was complete.

Some of us know our Saviour very well. We're on a first name basis with Him if you like. We have given our all and growing to become more and more like Him each day. We have declared Him innocent.

Some of us here don't know our Saviour very well. We're interested to know Him more and we kind of believe who He says but we don't know if we're ready to give our all for Him. We are split in our verdict.

Jesus' invitation to all is to come. Come and get to know me. Come and place your trust in me. Come and find out who I truly am.

And so I too invite you to come. Come and be refreshed. Come and receive the living water that only Jesus offers. The Holy Spirit. Come and share in Jesus' suffering. Come and eat the bread (symbolising his body broken) and drink the wine (symbolising his blood shed), remembering Jesus' sacrifice.

He paid a debt he did not owe, because we owed a debt we could not pay.

Communion