

## Jesus on Trial

John 5:31-47

The Rev. Dr. L. Gregory Bloomquist  
*Anglican Studies Programme (Saint Paul  
 University, Ottawa, ON)*  
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Exodus 32:7-14; Psalm 103:1-12; John 5:31-47

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Were I to teach “Gospel Interpretation: Mark”, here’s a question I might ask on an exam: “How are the Gospels like “Law and Order”? Discuss”

You might start by thinking: Well, let’s see: the Gospel story does not start with a crime, but it does have a trial at the end, followed by the court’s decision. Ok. Unlike “Law and Order”, you get to see the carrying out of the punishment. Hmmm. That’s more like Mel Gibson. And, then, something that no film does well, there is a surprising reversal at the end. Also, a big difference is what happens in between: “Law and Order” is predictable: you know that there will be a crime, then a police drama, then a court room. In the Gospels: who knows what will happen next! But, yeah, the trial at the end is where the whole drama is headed. That must be what Bloomquist wants! Then you write.

That’s the way a lot of people look at the Gospel story, say, in Mark: a long introduction to, what they call, a passion narrative. But I hope that all of you here also know that there is another canonical way of looking at the story of Jesus. John’s Gospel presents us with a very different approach to the story of Jesus. John tells us that the “trial of Jesus” actually is the narrative from the beginning to the end.<sup>1</sup> Jesus is on trial not just on one night but over the three-year course of his ministry. John’s narrative also is the reason we popularly speak of Jesus’ ministry as lasting 3 years, because there are Passovers (Jn 2, Jn 6, and Jn 13-20).

In John, the drama starts not with Jesus’ baptism -- Jesus isn’t even explicitly baptized in John! - - but with Jewish religious leaders questioning John, who here is known not as the “baptizer” but as the “witness”: who are you? why were you sent? are you the Messiah?

Then, Jesus is questioned: at the cleansing of the Temple (Jn 2): on what authority do you do this? by Nicodemus (Jn 3): we know this about you, but who are you? by the Samaritan woman (Jn 4): surely you are not greater than Jacob? by the people in the desert (Jn 6): surely you are not greater than Moses? by the people in the Temple: surely you are not greater than Abraham?

In fact, a detailed, rather than a superficial, look at the Synoptics would reveal much the same thing: Jesus is on trial for his life all the way through the Gospel. But, we are interested in John because of John 5, the Gospel reading for today. If there is one place that could dispel any

doubts that Jesus was on trial throughout his life, this is it! This is the perfect snapshot of what happens throughout the Gospel.

You know the story: Jesus is brought before judges for having healed a crotchety old lame man on the sabbath. Jesus is anything but silent, though he refuses to speak in his own defence. Instead, he calls witnesses. First, he recalls one that they have already questioned, John. Then, he calls as witness the works that he has done. Then, he calls on the Father Himself as his witness. Then, he calls on the Scriptures, to which the Jewish judges appeal.

At this point, there is a turning point in the drama, something way beyond what you will ever see on “Law and Order”. For at this point Jesus turns the tables on the judges and lawyers. He tells them that they are on trial, not he. He tells them that the Scriptures are not only a witness for him but also a prosecuting attorney against them! For though they profess to confess with their lips that the Scriptures are their authority, they deny it with their lives.

From here on, we begin to see more clearly that Jesus was on trial, and that someone wanted him dead, from the very beginning because the very appearance of the Word of God threatened the reign of lies that women and men create around themselves to protect themselves. Most men and women do so in an unwitting way, like the crotchety old lame man.

But, there are some who build a reign of lies in a witting way. These are the “people of the lie” as Scott Peck called them: M. S. Peck, People of the Lie: The Hope for Healing Human Evil (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1983). smart people who know they have a serious problem but are also smart enough to prevent the truth about them from being told.

According to Peck, these people find a ready place for hiding in religious institutions, often in positions of power and leadership. There they can hide and keep their story safe. They do so, as the leaders in Jesus’ day did, by preying on the first group, the unwitting liars in those institutions, because they need them to promote their agenda. Some are traditionalists, like the Sadducees; some are revisionists, like the Pharisees.

Yet in his mercy, God had pity on the world. It was for the sake of the first group, the unwitting, like the crotchety lame man Jesus heals, the very people who throughout can swing either way and who are eventually complicit in putting Jesus on trial, that the Son of God took flesh: he did not take flesh to condemn the world, but to take away the sin of the world, which is the masking of the truth.

We know that millions of men and women, tribes and nations, who lived lies but didn’t know it have been willing to have their eyes opened, the lies removed, and their lives healed.

But, we also know that the Word’s work continues, largely because there are still “people of the lie” who, under the authority of the ruler of this world, continue to mask the truth and, like cowards, take refuge in the safety of darkness and prey, not pray.

Because he knew that this would be the case, the Son of God imparted the ministry of telling the truth, of revealing where truth lies and where evil, hides to his disciples: “as the Father sent me,

so I send you”.

Like Jesus as well, these disciples will be on trial not at the end, when their comfortable life has drawn to a close, but throughout the whole of their lives. John’s Gospel again evidences this. Remember how the judges turn their venom on the blind man healed by Jesus in John 9: who do you say that this man is? what did he do to you? who do you say he is? and again, what do you say about him? who are you to teach us? Remember how at Jesus’ nighttime trial in the house of the High Priest there is only one question that Annas asks of Jesus: tell us about your disciples, those who heeded you.

But, fear not, Jesus counsels those he first frees from lies and then sends out under a sentence of death: even as I have been able to call witnesses in my case, so you shall be able to call witnesses. In fact, you shall be surrounded by a whole cloud of witnesses, including those like John who suffered for their proclamation of truth against the illicit sexual activity of the king. Like me, you shall have the transparency and purity of your works that will speak for themselves. Like me, you will be to call on the Father’s own assurance of His favour towards His faithful servants. Like me, you will have the full and integral witness of Scripture itself, a witness that includes promises of blessing and the assurance of the self-condemnation of those unwilling to come to the light. And you will have the Holy Spirit as your defence attorney, speaking on your behalf.

And, as in Jesus’ case, while the world may see that you are on trial, those who are actually on trial will be the leaders of the “world”. They will know it, and they will not be satisfied until you are dead, since the witnesses will reveal not only the truth of the Word but also the lies and the fate of those who hold the truth captive to unrighteousness.

So, if any of you here count yourselves disciples, know that you carry on the ministry given to the Son of God, pleading with God for the disobedient, following both Moses’ and Jesus’ example. Know that you, too, will die in doing so. I don’t know how, and I don’t know the form it will take: physical, or social, or financial, or otherwise. But we are, after all, members of a living Church that bears its fruit in dying, if we hold firm with him. Thanks be to God.

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<sup>i</sup> J. O. Tuñí, “Pasión y muerte de Jesús en el cuarto evangelio: Papel y significación,” Revista catalana de teologia 1 (1976) 394.