

Dear members of the jury:

I thank you for your kind attention this morning as we recall a case and conviction of quite some time ago. Please understand: We are not here to overturn the verdict. The verdict cannot be overturned. There is no appeal for what happened that day. Even so, I call your attention the facts of the case to ask you this important question: Is this justice? Consider the evidence you have before you. Consider the case of the Innocent Man.

On a Friday, the day before Passover, the Man named Jesus is executed. He has been accused of blasphemous offenses by the religious leaders of His nation: Namely, He claims to be the Son of God and has threatened to destroy the temple, rebuilding it in three days. To claim to be God is blasphemy, punishable by death. Besides these charges, all sorts of witnesses have made all sorts of accusations against Him; few agree with each other, but the statements have been introduced into the court record. However, He has not been condemned only by the religious authorities: The secular rulers have pronounced Him guilty as well. Both Herod and Pilate have heard His case, and both have approved of His execution.

Poll numbers indicate that the rulers have acted in agreement with the wishes of the people. When Pilate gives them the choice between this Man and a notorious murderer and troublemaker, they choose to have the known felon live in their neighborhood. Furthermore, as the soldiers follow their orders and carry out the execution, the crowd gathers once again, publicly protesting the life of Jesus, declaring that He deserves what's coming to Him.

So far, it all looks quite damning for the Man. The religious leaders-the moral guardians of the people-declare the sentence to be just. The secular rulers hand down the death sentence. The people cheer the decision. Furthermore, not one witness stands to defend the Man who is condemned.

This is not all: Consider the Man Himself. When He is accused of all of these crimes, how does He defend Himself? He doesn't. Like a lamb led to slaughter, He just stands there, silent, offering no rebuttal to the charges. In fact, the only time He speaks is to acknowledge that He is the King of the Jews. As far as the rest of the accusations go-some of them fantastic and obviously false, He doesn't say a word. Maybe His silence damns Him as much as all the rest: When an innocent man is accused of all sorts of horrible things, he doesn't just stand there and take it. He objects to preserve his name and reputation. He speaks to set the record straight. But not Jesus. Even when He's on the cross, He speaks seven times; but not once does He protest His innocence.

You have the facts in evidence before you, and the verdict seems appropriate: He sure looks guilty.

But don't forget my question: Is this justice?

I would propose that, before we do anything else, we consider those who want this Man put to death.

The chief priests, elders and scribes are the ones who first bring charges against Jesus; and given their position in society, that ought to count for something. But observe what else they do: They premeditate His murder: They plot to have Him arrested and killed. They arrange for false witnesses to testify against Him, and the witnesses are so bad that they can't get their stories straight. If Jesus were truly guilty, why the need for false witnesses? The only charge that they can make stick is that the Man says He is the Son of God and the King of the Jews. Therefore, He is guilty of blasphemy...unless He is the Son of God and the King of the Jews. When they call for Jesus' death, they have no proof of any guilt or wrongdoing on His part. He's innocent, but they do it anyway. Is this justice?

Then, of course, there's Pilate. As the local Roman ruler, it's his responsibility to dispense justice. He knows Jesus is innocent. He knows that the chief priests are acting out of jealousy. He knows the right thing to do, and even tries to set Jesus free-three times! In the end, however, he abandons the law and acts to gratify the crowd. He releases the guilty Barabbas. Of Jesus he says, "I find no fault with this Man." He declares Him faultless-innocent! After he declares Jesus not guilty, he sentences Him to die. Once again, note: Even as Pilate sentences Jesus to death, he declares that Jesus does not deserve to die. He knows Jesus is innocent, but he does it anyway. Is this justice?

There's the crowd, of course: Popular opinion wants Jesus dead. Of course, popular opinion has been wrong before, and everyone ought to know the dangers of a mob mentality. When the crowd calls for Barabbas' freedom, they do so because the chief priests are swaying popular opinion with their public relations campaign. When they mock Him at the cross, it's the safe-and socially acceptable thing to do. And when they mock Him there, they mock Him for claiming to be the Christ. They make fun of Him for exactly who He is. Is that justice? Or is it just peer pressure?

Then there are the soldiers, simply following orders. But while "soldier" is an honorable vocation, soldiers must act honorably. Is He guilty? Doesn't matter; they've got a job to do. Is that justice?

Is any of this justice? After looking at those who call for Jesus' death, we have quite a list of sins: Those involved premeditate evil, lie and promote lying to get Him killed. They blackmail the judge and corrupt the justice system. They wish ill upon others and justify that they are only following orders. They fail to examine the facts, and just go along with what everybody else is saying. They give into cowardice and selfishness, caring more about pleasing the crowd than doing the right thing. That's hardly a list of virtues. Clearly, Jesus is put to death because He is the innocent Man. He is the only One who is not guilty. That's why they want Him dead: Darkness can't stand light. Evil can't stand holiness. Sinful man wants the Son of God gone.

But there's one more piece to the puzzle: If Jesus is so innocent, why doesn't He speak? Why doesn't He defend Himself? If everybody else is so guilty, and He's the only one who isn't, why does He stay so silent and take the blame?

Here's the thing. Here's the paradox of the cross: The innocent Man stays silent and takes the blame because He's there to take the blame. There is no other reason for His Passion, His betrayal and suffering and death. He is innocent. Man is guilty. Man deserves death and condemnation for his sin; and there is no greater evidence of sin than to put the Son of God to death. But Jesus comes to be the perfect Sacrifice. He comes to be the Scapegoat, the substitute whipping boy. He isn't guilty, but He takes the blame: at the cross, He prays, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." Because He has taken the blame and suffered the judgment for the sins of the world, He prays that His Father would accept the exchange that He's making.

This is the salvation of the world: The Son of God takes the blame and dies the death of sinners so that sinners can live. The innocent Man dies so that the guilty might be saved. This is why you are forgiven. Christ has been judged in your place. He has suffered your condemnation and died your death. That is why the Father now declares you "not guilty." Jesus has taken your blame, and this verdict cannot be overturned.