

THE GREAT DECISION

Husbands and wives, or young ones, think of your mums and dads, how do you differ in your approach to car navigation? Those tricky decisions when you come to a fork in the road? [SLIDE] Claire and I have different methods. She just follows the sun and at times has gone spectacularly wrong, particularly on the net of Autobahns around Frankfurt. Even though Claire has all the maps in the car she will decide to follow her instinct to follow the sun, being brought up in Madagascar. This is also a real problem when it's cloudy. [SLIDE] I like to check the map but would definitely confess to misreading it from time to time. Maps tell the truth but I overlook it...I use the maps but then trust in memory being overconfident and miss the road signs. Both our decisions can go wrong.

Decisions are influenced by what we trust in, and what feelings we allow to motivate us. The arrest and trial of Jesus was a time of decision for all concerned, human and divine. And we have an eyewitness account, word for word, in the Gospel of John. [SLIDE] Here's a quick summary of John 18:1-19:16 that we shall be looking at today. The Jewish High Priests wanted to have Jesus killed. So they had bribed Judas to bring a detachment of soldiers to him. The soldiers arrested Jesus but let the disciples go. They took Jesus to the High Priest for questioning who then took him to Pilate the Roman governor. In the meantime Peter had denied he knew Jesus, when questioned in the High Priest's courtyard. Pilate questioned Jesus and found him not guilty of any capital charge, but the High Priests persuaded him that Jesus should be crucified.

Despite knowing the truth about Jesus, all the human actors' decisions went wrong out of selfish motives, while the divine decisions were consistent and self sacrificing. Thinking about these can help us to make the right decision next time we face a fork in the road of our lives. Especially the most important one, when we have to decide to follow Jesus and what he would do in the situations we find ourselves. Let's start with the human decisions, which were made by the High Priests the religious leaders of Israel, [SLIDE] Judas the disciple, [SLIDE] Peter the disciple [SLIDE] and Pilate the Roman Governor of Israel [SLIDE].

[SLIDE] Take the High Priests. They had devoted their lives to being men of God. They were "Israel's teachers", wise in learning and the Scriptures. They knew a great deal about Jesus and they could have seen how he fulfilled prophecy. Like Isaiah 42:7 where the servant of God – Jesus – is predicted to "open eyes that are blind" and Deuteronomy 32:39 where God has the power to "bring to life". Two of the big controversies between Jesus and the religious leaders followed Jesus giving sight to the blind man, and raising Lazarus from the dead.

They were men of God but...they were blind to Jesus' true nature. John 12:37 says "Even after Jesus had done all these miraculous signs in their presence, they still would not believe in him." They feared that he threatened their power and position; John 11:48 "If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and then the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation." They hated him for showing them in a bad light, as Jesus knew in John 7:7 as he said to his brothers "The world cannot hate you, but it hates me because I testify that what it does is evil".

[SLIDE] So the High Priests made a decision to kill him. As Caiaphas the High Priest has said earlier in John 11:49 "You know nothing at all! You do not realize that it is better for you that one man die for the people than that the whole nation perish."...So from that day on they plotted to take his life. They had Jesus arrested. They decided against a fair trial. All they could say to Pilate as they bundled the captive Jesus into his presence was "If he were not a criminal, we would not have handed him over to you" (John 18:30) for they knew that their case would not stand up in a Roman court. And as for their relationship to God, they said later to Pilate "we have no king but Caesar" (John 19:15), effectively disowning God himself as their king. These were all wrong decisions

motivated by blindness, fear and hate. But aren't we like them sometimes? When we really dislike someone for example?

[SLIDE] Let's look at Judas. He was a disciple from the start; of whom Jesus said "Have I not chosen you, the Twelve?" (John 6:70). Judas knew the truth about Jesus; he had witnessed all of Jesus' miracles. He knew Jesus could multiply food, could turn water into wine. He had heard all of Jesus' wonderful promises such as "Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him" (John 7:38) they will be filled with the Holy Spirit, as we Christians can be today.

Judas knew all this. He was a disciple but...he was greedy for money; John 12:6 says "he was a thief; as keeper of the money bag, he used to help himself to what was put into it." And he was disappointed that Jesus was not leading a rebellion. Possibly, he was impatient, hoping to provoke Jesus into military action.

So he made a decision to betray him. He, a believer, allowed Satan to enter into him. He led the high priests' soldiers to Jesus and received his prize, a bag of silver....which led on to his hanging himself. A decision motivated by greed, disappointment and impatience, betraying his intimate relationship with Jesus. But aren't we like him sometimes? Like when we put making money before what we know is right, or when we let our friends down?

[SLIDE] Peter was also a disciple. He was one of the inner circle, who witnessed all of Jesus' greatest moments. Peter knew who Jesus was "You have the words of eternal life. We believe and know that you are the Holy One of God." (John 6:68). Peter was brave. He promised Jesus that "I will lay down my life for you." (John 13:37) And he fought for him in the garden with his sword against a detachment of soldiers.

He was a disciple, devoted and brave but...maybe his courage had limits. He feared the consequences of being associated with Jesus. Maybe he would be lynched too.

So he decided, on the spur of three moments, to disown Jesus, as Jesus had predicted. As Jesus stood on trial for his life for standing up for truth, Peter denied it, as we see in John 18 starting at 17. As Peter entered the High Priest's garden, "You are not one of his disciples, are you?" the girl at the door asked Peter. He replied, "I am not." And he denied he knew Jesus again and again. Each decision was motivated by fear, under pressure. But aren't we like him sometimes? When we fear we'll be bullied for associating with someone unpopular?

[SLIDE] And finally Pilate, the Roman governor. He could see that Jesus was not guilty of a charge. See how the interrogation went in John 18:35-36. "What is it you have done?" Jesus said, "My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jews. But now my kingdom is from another place." So Pilate knew he was not a dangerous rebel. With this he went out again to the Jews and said, "I find no basis for a charge against him." (John 18:38) He repeated this conclusion three times to the Jews. It's clear he knew more. Repeatedly he announced Jesus as a king, in seeming irony, but I believe understanding in his heart. When told that Jesus claimed to be Son of God he was "full of fear", fearing he would have to answer for his decision before God.

He knew Jesus was innocent, and perhaps someone important, but...he was weak willed. Afraid for his reputation in Rome. The Jews kept shouting, "If you let this man go, you are no friend of Caesar. Anyone who claims to be a king opposes Caesar." (John 19:12) So a key motivation was fear of making the wrong decision and angering Caesar. Pilate cynically cared little for truth. Jesus

had said "Everyone on the side of truth listens to me." "What is truth?" Pilate asked (John 18:37-8). Just as the world does today – in the name of tolerance, truth has got a bad name.

So Pilate made a decision to let Jesus be flogged and executed. . . . he aligned himself with the Jews having said earlier, indignantly, "Am I a Jew?". A decision motivated by fear and cynicism. But aren't we like him sometimes? Like when we judge what people are like much too quickly?

A sad bunch of decisions ruled by hate or greed or impatience or fear or cynicism. See also how they wrecked relationships, of the High Priests with God, of Judas with Jesus and the other Apostles, and with God, and Peter with Jesus too. Pilate's guilt before God was established also.

And yet – thank God! – these were not the only protagonists. God the Father and Jesus the Son made decisions too. And their decisions were not a turn in the wrong direction, there was no "but". They go back to the beginning of human history, when Adam and Eve disobeyed God and brought a curse down on mankind, separating us from him and enslaving us to sin.

[SLIDE] God decided to send his only beloved Son to earth to die on a cross. The motive for God the Father's decision was love. He decided as recorded in John 3:16 that he "so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." And he had a plan for accomplishing this. The curse on mankind was to be undone by it falling on Jesus, as God inspired Isaiah 53:12 to predict (the Message) "Because he looked death in the face and didn't flinch, because he embraced the company of the lowest. He took on his own shoulders the sin of the many, he took up the cause of all the black sheep" The curse could only be undone by Jesus being crucified. The book of Deuteronomy 21:23 "anyone who is hung on a tree is under God's curse". Jesus could only be crucified if he were executed by the Romans, the Jews weren't allowed to execute anyone. So God granted Pilate his power over Jesus. God's decision motivated by love healed relationships between him and the sinful human race.

[SLIDE] Jesus made decisions too, motivated by love and obedience, love for God, love for his friends and love for humanity:

Out of love for God he had decided to obey his Father's will in all things, even going to his death. He decided in advance: "The reason my Father loves me is that I lay down my life--only to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord." (John 10:17). When Peter sought to defend Jesus from arrest, Jesus commanded him, "Put your sword away! Shall I not drink the cup the Father has given me?" The cup of suffering, signifying his crucifixion.

Out of his love of his friends he had decided to ensure none of his disciples would be lost. He decided again in advance: "Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends" (John 15:13) See how it played out. "'I told you that I am he," Jesus answered to the soldiers come to arrest him in John 18:8. "If you are looking for me, then let these men go." And the soldiers let the disciples go free. Later from love Jesus redeemed Peter. He knows we are like Peter sometimes. . . . but he loves, and he forgives. . . . he loves us all personally and forgives us all personally for anything we do wrong that we're truly sorry about.

[SLIDE] Out of love for humanity he had decided to proclaim the truth, even at the cost of his life. As he said earlier to his disciples "you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." (John 8:32) and "I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned" (John 5:24). Before the High Priest he refused to renounce the truth of his teaching, even if it could save his life "'I have spoken openly to the world," Jesus replied. "I always taught in synagogues or at the temple, where all the Jews come together. I said nothing in secret. Why question me?" Then the High Priest's servant beat him for speaking the truth. (John

18:22) We saw Pilate cared little for truth. So finally, Pilate handed him over to them to be crucified.

Jesus' decisions motivated by obedience, love and truth healed relationships between God and mankind. See how he fulfilled perfectly the triangle of relationships Wayne taught us about last week. Up – obey the Father. In – save his friends. Out – save humanity. All from love.

[SLIDE] We too are faced with decisions. Who is Jesus? And what does he mean to us? The Gospel proclaims who Jesus is; the eternal Son of God, the creator and bringer of life to humanity. "He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of men." (John 1:3-4) Even the arresting soldiers knew they were in the presence of God; they drew back and fell to the ground when Jesus said "I am he". Or as C S Lewis put it "let us not come up with any patronising nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to". The High Priest, Judas, Peter and Pilate knew the truth about Jesus too, but...things of this world, selfish motives intruded. So as recorded in John 1:10; "he was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him." How ironic – he created the world but its people rejected him.

Will we receive him? Will we follow him? He who sets us free? Will we love like the Father, and follow Christ's obedience? Will we encourage our friends and not criticise the, for example? Will we tell others about him and proclaim his truth? Or will we let hate or greed or impatience or fear or cynicism or any other selfish motive get in the way?

[SLIDE] We can overcome these hurdles by remembering Jesus' promises to us if we put our trust in him. If we follow him, we are children of God and new creations. "Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God." (John 1:12-13) As Paul says, "if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!" (2 Corinthians 5:17).

So, as children of God, newly created, we don't have to take wrong decisions like the High Priest, Judas, Peter and Pilate. We needn't be ruled by hate or greed or impatience or fear or cynicism or any other selfish motive. We can pray for Jesus' guidance through his Holy Spirit when we face difficult decisions. As Jesus said when he promised the Holy Spirit to live with and in his followers "I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counsellor to be with you forever-- the Spirit of truth." (John 14:16)

So let's make a decision for Jesus, guided by the Holy Spirit of truth. We needn't take wrong turns for he is the "way and the truth and the life". Let's decide in our minds and in our hearts, and let it show in all our actions. Let's decide to love our Lord Jesus, the Lion of Judah as our personal saviour and friend, let's decide to love one another as Christian brothers and sisters. And let's decide to tell people who don't believe about him at every opportunity. [SLIDE] If you have not yet accepted Jesus as your Saviour, I urge you to say this prayer of decision with me in your hearts. And those of us who do follow him, let us recommit to our decision, the decision of our lives:

Lord Jesus Christ,

I am sorry for the things I have done wrong in my life Please forgive me. I now turn from everything which I know is wrong.

Thank you that you died on the cross for me so that I could be forgiven and set free.

Thank you that you now offer me this gift of forgiveness and your Spirit. I now receive that gift..Please come into my life by your Holy Spirit to be with me forever.

Thank you, Lord Jesus. Amen

No one ever made a better decision than that. If you prayed that prayer for the first time, be sure to speak to someone before you leave. There will be a chance for ministry and prayer for everyone during the remainder of the service.