

Malcolm's Monday Musings : 16 August 2021

Greetings.

This is my 'Monday Musings' email.

As you know, we are now halfway through the month of August. You may or may not know that we owe the name of this month to the first Roman emperor, Augustus Caesar.

'Augustus' was not the emperor's *name* (which, in full, was Gaius Julius Caesar Octavianus); it was his *title*, meaning 'the great' or 'the venerable'. In 8 BC, the Roman Senate renamed the eighth month of the year in honour of the emperor; hence, our 'August'.

But, as Christians, you and I owe much more to Augustus Caesar than the name given to a month on our calendar.

Let us start with the words of John 18. 31-32:

'Pilate said to them, "You take Him and judge Him according to your law". Therefore the Jews said to him, "It is not lawful for us to put anyone to death", that the saying of Jesus might be fulfilled which He spoke, signifying by what death He would die'.

The Jewish council knew only too well that it was not lawful for them to execute the death sentence. This was because, when Judea had been brought under direct Roman rule in AD 6, the then emperor, Augustus Caesar, had banished its previous ruler and appointed the Roman knight, Coponius, as its first governor.

The Jewish historian, Flavius Josephus, records that 'Caponius, one of the equestrian order of the Romans, was sent as a procurator, *having the power of life and death put into his hands by Caesar*' (Flavius Josephus, 'Wars of the Jews', Book II, Chapter VIII, Paragraph 1). That is, from that moment, the Sanhedrin lost its ability to pass the death sentence. (The only concession made was that the Jewish authorities were able to execute the death sentence against any Gentile who entered the inner section of the Jerusalem temple; cf. Acts 21. 27-36.)

Had the Jewish council possessed the authority to execute Jesus, they would doubtless have *stoned* Him on the charge of blasphemy (see Matt. 26. 65-66 and John 10. 33).

But where, we must ask, would that have left (i) the Old Testament prophecies (Psa. 22. 16; Zech. 12. 10) and (ii) our Lord's own repeated predictions (Matt. 20. 19; 26. 2), both of which pointed clearly to His death's being by crucifixion?

But, as John notes, the Jews were forced to concede to Pilate that 'It is not lawful for us to put anyone to death', to which John adds the comment, 'that the saying of Jesus might be fulfilled which He spoke, signifying by what death He would die'; namely, by being lifted up from the earth – on a cross, that is. (See John 18. 31-32 with John 12. 32-33).

Little did Augustus Caesar imagine, when he conferred the power of life and death on Coponius in AD 6, that God was using him to pave the way for the fulfilment, well over two decades later, of Old Testament prophecies regarding *the mode of our Lord's death*.

Nor, of course, had he realised several years earlier that the decree which he then passed, commissioning an empire-wide census (Luke 2. 1), was God's way of securing (right on schedule) the fulfilment of an Old Testament prophecy which identified *the precise location of our Lord's birth* (Mic. 5. 2). 'Caesar meant to *fill* his coffers; God meant to *fulfil* His prophecies' (Bishop Joseph Hall, 'Contemplations on the Historical Passages of the Old and New Testaments', pages 410-411).

Oh, yes, you and I owe Augustus Caesar much more than the name given to the present month. For he was the unwitting instrument, under God, of both:

- (i) locating the birthplace of One infinitely greater and more 'venerable' than he, and
- (ii) ensuring the correct mode of His death.

The Roman historian, Suetonius, claims that Augustus, 'Upon the day of his death', asked 'his friends who were admitted into the room, "*Do you think that I have acted my part on the stage of life well?*"' (Source: C. Suetonius Tranquillus, 'De Vita Caesarum: Divus Augustus', Chapter 97.)

'Yes, Augustus', I think we can say today, 'in terms of the part which you played in the outworking of God's purpose, you kept most faithfully to the script. *We really do owe you far more than the name of the current month*'.

Yours in our Lord Jesus,

Malcolm

(i) Scripture.

Then they led Jesus from Caiaphas to the Praetorium, and it was early morning. But they themselves did not go into the Praetorium, lest they should be defiled, but that they might eat the Passover.

Pilate then went out to them and said, 'What accusation do you bring against this man?'

They answered and said to him, 'If He were not an evildoer, we would not have delivered Him up to you'.

Then Pilate said to them, 'You take Him and judge Him according to your law'.

Therefore the Jews said to him, 'It is not lawful for us to put anyone to death', that the saying of Jesus might be fulfilled which He spoke, signifying by what death He would die.

John 18. 28-32 (*The New King James Version*)

(ii) Food for thought.

Little things used by God.

(i) God used a 'little oil' to supply the need of His servant in a time of 'great famine' (1 Kings 17. 12; Luke 4. 25).

(ii) God used a 'little cloud' to herald the coming of 'great rain' (1 Kings 18. 44).

(iii) God used a 'little maid' to help provide healing and cleansing for a 'great man' (2 Kings 5. 1-3).

(iv) God used a 'few little fishes' to feed a 'great multitude' (Matt. 15. 33-34).

(v) God used a "little child" to be an object lesson on true 'greatness' (Matt. 18. 1-2).

'For just such a time as this', Esther 4. 14.

When I read Mordecai's words to Esther ('who knows whether you have not come to the kingdom for just such a time as this?'), I am reminded of some words of the famous war-time British Prime Minister, Winston Churchill.

Referring to the time when King George VI made him Prime Minister in May 1940, Mr Churchill wrote: 'I felt as if I were walking with destiny, and that all my past life had been but a preparation for this hour and for this trial'. (Source: Martin Gilbert, '*Winston S. Churchill: Finest Hour, 1939-1941*', Volume VI; Part 1; Chapter 16, 'The Tenth of May 1940'.)

I have no doubt that, given Mordecai's assessment of the situation, Esther might well have said those very words of herself, that 'all my past life had been but a preparation for this hour and for this trial'.

But, as things developed, there was one obvious difference between Esther and Mr Churchill. Because, for all his best efforts, Mr Churchill could do nothing to save some six million Jews of his day from Hitler and the horrors of the Holocaust, whereas Esther was the instrument that God chiefly used to save the whole Jewish nation of her day from Haman and the 'extermination' decree he had so carefully crafted (Esther 3. 12-13; 8. 5, 8).

'Glory to God in the highest', Luke 2. 14.

His law He enforces; the stars in their courses,
And sun in its orbit obediently shine;
The hills and the mountains, the rivers and fountains,
The deeps of the ocean proclaim Him divine.
We, too, should be voicing our love and rejoicing;
With glad adoration, a song let us raise,
Till all things now living, unite in thanksgiving:
'To God in the highest, hosanna and praise!'

(Katherine K. Davis, '*Let all things now living*', published as an anthem in 1939.)

Forsaken!

(i) God forsaken: 'My people have committed two evils; they have forsaken me the fountain of living waters, and hewed them out cisterns, broken cisterns, that can hold no water' (Jer. 2. 13).

(ii) The Saviour forsaken: 'Jesus cried with a loud voice, saying, "Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?" which is, being interpreted, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"' (Mark 15. 34).

(iii) The law forsaken: 'He (Rehoboam) forsook the law of the Lord' (2 Chron. 12. 1).

(iv) Man's sins forsaken: 'He that covers his sins shall not prosper, but whoso confesses and forsakes them shall have mercy' (Prov. 28. 13).

(v) The apostle Paul forsaken: 'Demas has forsaken me, having loved the present age' (2 Tim. 4. 10).

'Do not be anxious', Matt. 6. 25.

"Glass, with anxiety!" Strange expression this! What does it mean? These words accompanied a parcel sent from Norway to England, and they were intended to indicate that the sender feared, from the fragile nature of the contents, that some mishap might befall it.

Is there not a lesson here for Christians? Might not some of us be rightly labelled, “Christians with anxiety?”

In many instances, there is no need for a label, as anxiety is only too plainly stamped upon the countenance’.

(F. E. Marsh, *‘One Thousand New Bible Readings’*, page 12, number 25.)

‘Matthew ... and Simon who was called the Zealot’, Luke 6. 15; cf. Acts 1. 13.

‘It gives one a pleasant surprise to think of Simon the zealot and Matthew the publican, men coming from so opposite quarters, meeting together in close fellowship in the little band of twelve. In the persons of these two disciples, extremes meet — the tax-gatherer and the tax-hater: the unpatriotic Jew, who degraded himself by becoming a servant of the alien ruler; and the Jewish patriot, who chafed under the foreign yoke, and sighed for emancipation.

This union of opposites was not accidental, but was designed by Jesus as a prophecy of the future. He wished the twelve to be the church in miniature or germ; and, therefore, He chose them so as to intimate that, as among them distinctions of publican and zealot were unknown, so in the church of the future there should be neither Greek nor Jew, circumcision nor uncircumcision, bond nor free, but only Christ’.

(A. B. Bruce, *‘The Training of the Twelve’*, page 21.)

Found.

(i) The sinner found *by Him* (Luke 15. 4-10).

(ii) The saint found *in Him* (Phil. 3. 9).

(iii) The servant found *of Him* (2 Pet. 3. 14).

Jesus and ‘a woman of the city’, Luke 7. 36-50.

‘Who has the right to forgive sins? If someone robbed you of your life’s savings or murdered your spouse, I would not have the right to forgive the perpetrator. On the human plane, the only one who can forgive is the injured party.

From God’s perspective, of course, regardless of how many human beings are injured, the primary offence is against God Himself (cf. Psa. 51. 4). Thus, God can forgive any sin, because He is always the injured party.

On the human plane, the sinful woman in this narrative had not injured Jesus in any way. At that level, He did not have the right to forgive her.

But the narrative turns on Jesus’ forgiveness of this woman (Luke 7. 48)—and the other guests, a bit confused by this development, raise the question, “Who is this who even forgives sins?” (Luke 7. 49). Who, indeed?’

(D. A. Carson, *‘For the Love of God (Volume 2)’*, 23 November.)

Peace because of the Lord Jesus.

(i) Peace *procured*: ‘Peace through the blood of His cross’ (Col. 1. 20)

(ii) Peace *possessed*: ‘We have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ’ (Rom. 5. 1).

(iii) Peace *personified*: ‘He is our peace’ (Eph. 2. 14).

(iv) Peace *proclaimed*: He ‘preached peace to you which were afar off, and to them that were nigh’ (Eph. 2. 17).

(v) Peace *promised*: ‘Peace I leave with you, my peace I give to you’ (John 14. 27).

‘God, who hath reconciled us to Himself by Jesus Christ’, 2 Cor. 5. 18.

‘Where reconciliation is spoken of in St. Paul, the subject is always God, and the object is always man. The work of reconciling is one in which the initiative is taken by God, and the cost borne by Him; men are reconciled in the passive, or allow themselves to be reconciled, or receive the reconciliation. We never read that God has been reconciled. God does the work of reconciliation in or through Christ, and especially through His death ...

The work of reconciliation is not a work wrought upon the souls of men, though it is a work wrought in their interests, and bearing so directly upon them that we can say God has reconciled the world to Himself; it is a work ... in which God so deals in Christ with the sin of the world, that it shall no longer be a barrier between Himself and men’.

(James Denney. *‘The Death of Christ’*, pages 85-86.)

Divine Fulness in Ephesians.

(i) The Fulness of *God* (Eph. 3. 19).

(ii) The Fulness of *Christ* (Eph. 4. 13).

(iii) The Fulness of *the Spirit* (Eph. 5. 18).

‘Seeing we also are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses ... let us run with patience the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith’, Heb. 12. 1-2.

'We must not think of the cloud of witnesses, as if they were overlookers of the scene of our conflict like spectators in the amphitheatre. Our English word "witness" indeed conveys this sense, but has another, namely, one who bears witness. The Greek word has the latter meaning only: they are witnesses by the testimony they bore, or that was borne to them in Scripture. And now they are summoned, as it were, each in the special circumstances in which by faith they triumphed, to encourage us in the race ...

The word for "looking" is found only here in the Greek Scriptures, having the force of turning the eyes away from other things and fixing them on one. Much blessed encouragement for faith may be found in the testimonies of Hebrews 11, but none of the witnesses could be an object for the eye of faith to rest on. There is but One who could take that place, and He must have it exclusively'.

(J. A. Trench, *'The Contradiction of Sinners'*, 'Truth for Believers' Volume 2, Article 30.)

'The word of the Lord endures forever', 1 Pet. 1. 25.

'Dr W. Graham Scroggie told a story of a boy who received on his birthday three gifts: a box of chocolates, a silver watch and a beautiful Bible. Asked some weeks later what had become of his birthday gifts, he replied: "The box of chocolates—well, it's gone. The silver watch is going. But the Bible is the word of the Lord and it endures forever"'.
(A. Naismith, *'1200 Notes Quotes and Anecdotes'*, number 101.)

Peter writes of one thing thought strange and of one thing not thought strange.

(i) 'They think it strange that you run not with them to the same excess of riot' (1 Pet. 4. 4).

(ii) 'Beloved, think it not strange concerning the fiery trial which comes upon you' (1 Pet. 4. 12).

'Mind the gap' when reading Scripture.

'Even though the Bible is for us, it was not written to us, nor was it written about us. When we read the Bible, we are entering into a historically and culturally distant world and we must "Mind the Gap" as they say on the London Tube. In the rush to make the Bible instantaneously relevant, we can inadvertently misuse it by not recognizing the specific situation of the authors'.

(M. J. Bird, *'Seven Things I Wish Christians Knew About the Bible'*, chapter 4.)

Prayers for 'me'.

(i) To be saved: 'Lord, save me' (Matt. 14. 30).

(ii) To be kept: 'Keep me as the apple of the eye' (Psa. 17. 8).

(iii) To be taught: 'Teach me your paths' (Psa. 25. 4).

(iv) To be led: 'Lead me in the way everlasting' (Psa. 139. 24).

(v) To be remembered: 'Remember me, O my God' (Neh. 13. 14, 22, 31).

'At His coming'.

(i) The time of Resurrection: 'Every man in his own order: Christ the firstfruits; afterward they that are Christ's at His coming' (1 Cor. 15. 23).

(ii) The time of Review: 'Now, little children, abide in Him; that, when He shall appear, we may have confidence, and not be ashamed before Him at His coming' 1 John 2. 28).

(iii) The time of Recompense: 'What is our hope, or joy, or crown of rejoicing? Are not even you in the presence of our Lord Jesus Christ at His coming?' (1 Thess. 2. 19).

'You shall be blessed, and it shall be well with you', Psa. 128. 2.

Through the love of God our Saviour,
All will be well.
Free and changeless is His favour;
All, all is well.
Precious is the blood that healed us,
Perfect is the grace that sealed us,
Strong the hand stretched forth to shield us:
All must be well.

Though we pass through tribulation,
All will be well.
Ours is such a full salvation,
All, all is well.
Happy, still in God confiding,
Fruitful, if in Christ abiding,
Holy, through the Spirit's guiding;
All must be well.

We expect a bright tomorrow,
All will be well.
Faith can sing through days of sorrow,
All, all is well.

On our Father's love relying,
Jesus every need supplying,
Or in living, or in dying,
All must be well.

(Mary Peters, née Bowley or Bowly. This hymn was first published in 1847, when she was 34 years of age; she died nine years later. A short biography of Mrs Peters – written by R. Cargill – was published in the Believer's Magazine in June 2015.)

(iii) Go on, smile.

Two sad stories for you this week!

1. A church-going man, by name George, suffered a heart attack and was rushed to the local hospital. George was allowed very few visitors and wasn't to be excited.

But so happened that, while he was in the hospital, George's very rich uncle died and left him three million pounds.

George's family thought hard and long about how they could give him the good news without exciting him too much.

Finally, they decided to ask the Minister of George's church to visit him and to pass on the news quietly to George.

As requested, the Minister went, and, by way of leading up to telling him what had happened, the Minister asked George what he would do if he suddenly inherited three million pounds.

Without so much as a moment's hesitation, George replied, 'I would give half of it to your church'.

The Minister had a heart attack.

2. A Jewish lady who lived in London wanted to take her much-loved pet dog to Israel. When she asked her local travel agent how to go about this, he told her to go direct to the airline. 'It is no problem', he said, 'they will give you a special pet's container. You simply put your dog into it and hand it to the staff. They will put it into the hold of the plane and, when you arrive at Tel Aviv airport, you go to the Special Luggage collection point and collect your dog'.

The lady did as she was told, but, when she arrived at Tel Aviv and went to collect her dog, the staff at the Special Luggage collection point could find no trace of it.

A search was made, first around the terminal and then all around the airport. Eventually, two of the staff found a dog in a special container at another terminal. But the dog was dead.

'Whatever can we do?' they asked their supervisor. 'It looks as though the flight proved to much for her dog. There will be trouble over this'.

'I've an idea', the supervisor responded. 'It's a cocker spaniel. That's quite a common breed. There's a pet shop not far from the airport. We can buy one the same size, colour and gender. She'll never know'.

Sometime later, the supervisor presented the lady with the purchased spaniel. 'That's not my dog!' the lady insisted.

'But it must be', the supervisor said firmly. 'Why do you say that it isn't your dog?'

'Because', the lady replied, *'my dog died in London. I was bringing it to Israel to bury it'.*