

An Arresting Agenda

Matthew 26:47-56

19 February 2023 | Grace Bible Church Corinda | Ben Shannon

Big Question: Whose agenda was Jesus following?

Big Idea: Nothing will interfere with Jesus' agenda.

Introduction

When I get an invitation to a meeting, it's often accompanied by an agenda.

As far as I can tell, just about no one actually reads it though, myself included.

Because when it comes time for the meeting, they usually start with everyone asking what we're going to be discussing.

Often, it feels like there's really no need for an agenda.

A good meeting needs an agenda, even if it doesn't look like it.

It's there for when someone wants to take over.

A meeting can easily be hijacked by someone who's got a different agenda to everyone else.

The chairperson of the meeting can politely point them to the agenda to keep the meeting on track.

In our passage this morning, there are people with all kinds of different, competing agendas.

Despite that, we'll see that one agenda will dominate all the others.

Outline

This talk is part of our series on Matthew chapters 26 through 28.

I've summarised these chapters with the phrase, "The power and the passion," because at the end of this gospel, we see Jesus demonstrate his power by going to the cross.

Jesus' power is displayed through his passion.

The crowning achievement of God's servant is to die on the cross for his people as he wins a victory over sin, before rising again in victory over death.

Last week, we saw the strength of Jesus, even as he struggled under the weight of sorrow in the Garden of Gethsemane.

Though he pleaded with his father, asking if there was anyone else or any other way, more than anything else, Jesus wanted to do his father's will.

There was a stark contrast between Jesus and the weakness of his friends who fell asleep because they couldn't stay alert and watch with him in his hour of need.

Their spirits were willing, but their flesh was weak.

This week, the action really ramps up with Jesus being arrested.

What we're going to see today is that **nothing will interfere with Jesus' agenda.**

The outline for today's talk looks like this:

- Judas' Agenda to Betray Jesus (vv47-50a)
- The Disciple's Agenda to Fight for Jesus (vv50b-54)
- The Crowd's Agenda to Eliminate Jesus (vv55-56)

I won't leave this up for a long time because it's also printed on the back of the weekly sheet that you should've received as you came in the door.

There's also room on there for you to take notes if that will help you to follow along, engage and remember what's said.

Judas' Agenda to Betray Jesus (vv47-50a)

Firstly, we see Judas' agenda to betray Jesus.

If the Garden of Gethsemane was walled, the eight disciples left at the entrance didn't do a very good job of guarding it.

Probably because they were watching the blanket show rather than watching with Jesus.

Last week, we finished in verse 46, where Jesus rouses his disciples and says to them:

Matthew 26:46 NIV11 ⁴⁶ Rise! Let us go! Here comes my betrayer!"

Those words aren't even out of Jesus' mouth, when in comes Judas.

Judas was familiar with the garden because Jesus and his disciples had been there many times before.¹

This time he's come with an agenda... and a whole crowd of people with him.

Some people have suggested it could've been as many as a thousand people.

While that's certainly possible, I feel like it's probably a bit of an overestimate.

What's clear is that this wasn't just some random band of vigilantes who just happened to be wandering down the lanes outside of Jerusalem that night.

They were sent from the chief priests and elders.

In other words, they were officially sent by the Sanhedrin or ruling council of Israel.

Armed to the hilt with swords and clubs, they've come ready to fight, if necessary.

Or at the very least they're going to make sure that Jesus is definitely going to come with them, even if it's not quietly.

If we dip into the other gospel accounts of these same events, we find that some of them were temple guards.²

Although the Romans were in charge, they delegated some of their governing powers to the local Jewish people, especially to deal with religious matters.

There were also some Roman soldiers there, probably eager to keep the peace when the city was swollen full of crowds during Passover.³

While the Romans generally weren't too interested in internal Jewish squabbles over religion, they were very keen not to let a rebellion kick off.

Judas came with an agenda.

His actions were premeditated, even if they weren't that well thought out.

He's called 'the Betrayer' by Matthew.

Let there be no doubt about his intentions on this night.

He'd arranged a signal with them beforehand.

A kiss – this act of close camaraderie and affection – will be the sign of betrayal.

The one I touch is the one you take.

Lots of people have suggested this signal was a way of making sure that they were getting the right man on a dark night in the middle of an olive grove.

However, Passover always happens on a full moon, so that seems unlikely.

Or perhaps it was designed to be a clever way of making sure that Jesus didn't know what was happening until the very last moment.

To my mind, it shows just how outrageous this situation is.

Judas makes a beeline for Jesus.

The plan was never to take the disciples.

There's only one agendum – Jesus.

Going straight to him, Judas meets him by saying, "Greetings, Rabbi."

This should remind us of the way that Judas addressed Jesus at the last supper, calling Jesus, 'Rabbi' rather than 'Lord'.

Jesus is only directly called 'Rabbi' twice in Matthew's gospel and both times it's by Judas.

I expect that for most of us, the idea of two men who are just friends greeting each other with a kiss seems more than a little bit awkward.

Of course, there are lots of cultures today where it's a perfectly normal thing to do, just like it was in first century Palestine.

Kissing someone's feet or the edge of their robe was seen as a sign of submission.

A step up from that was kissing someone on the hand as a sign of respect.

But kissing on the cheek? That was a sign of close friendship.

Yet this is the sign that Judas uses to betray his friend.

There are lots of names that we could give Judas to describe what he's doing: Liar, fraud, slimeball, traitor, scumbag, sell-out.

What other choice names would you have to describe him?

We feel the urge to demonise Judas, but none of the gospel writers slander him as they give their accounts.

And what about Jesus? What does he call Judas?

He calls him 'friend' in verse 50.

Jesus and Judas were friends.

At the beginning of this scene, Matthew reminds us that he was one of the Twelve.

Judas isn't an outsider, but one of the insiders.

They'd travelled together, sharing the good times and the struggles.

No doubt, Judas could've told story after story detailing his experiences of the amazing things that he'd seen.

Which only makes the betrayal all the more appalling when he sells out his friend for the fairly small sum of 30 pieces of silver.

In movies and books, we want nice, neat characters.

We want people to be either goodies or baddies.

We want to support the good people and see the bad people get the outcomes they deserve.

But that's just fiction.

In the real world, people are complex.

Life's not as simple as being friends with the good people because we like them and refusing to have anything to do with the bad people.

Yet that's the advice that a lot of people give and it's exactly the way that a lot of people behave.

Instead, we need to see friendship like Jesus does.

Jesus doesn't write him out of his will, even as Judas comes to betray him.

There's no doubt that Judas is one of the bad guys.

That's why Matthew describes him as the betrayer in verse 48.

Instead of recognising Jesus as Messiah and worshipping him though, his agenda is to betray the Saviour of the world.

And yet, knowing this is exactly what's going on, Jesus calls him 'friend'.

Good friends are a great blessing, a gift from God.

They encourage us, spur us on, help us, empathise with us and most importantly, point us to Jesus.

An enemy might only say positive things to us, but the best friends also know when to say the tough things that need to be said.

Proverbs 27:5–6 NIV11 ⁵ Better is open rebuke than hidden love. ⁶ Wounds from a friend can be trusted, but an enemy multiplies kisses.

Just because someone's a friend, it doesn't mean that they'll always get things right though.

We sometimes get surprised when the people closest to us hurt us.

It's the people who are closest to us who know our weak spots and therefore know how to cause the most damage, even if they don't mean to.

If we've got a Biblical anthropology – which is just a fancy way of saying understanding of man – then we won't be surprised when good people, when our friends hurt us.

Because whether we're sinners or saints saved by grace, this side of the eternity, none of us are free from sin.

That's a Biblical understanding of humanity and it's a fundamentally different way of seeing the world and relationships.

As Paul Tripp says, when two sinners marry each other, "What do you expect?"

We're not always going to have loving feelings towards each other.

If feelings are what the relationship is built on, then it's not going to last very long.

True love expresses itself in forgiveness, mercy and grace.

We need grace to weather the storms of friendship otherwise we won't have any friends.

As Christians, we should expect people close to us to hurt us, knowing that we're going to hurt others too.

That doesn't make it okay, but it does mean it's not a surprise.

So much of what I hear around the traps about friendship assumes that everyone else has a problem and assumes that I've got my stuff together.

I'm not perfect, but they're toxic.

All of us – myself included – think that we've got a far better Emotional Quotient (EQ) than what we really do.

Usually, our first inclination is to start with the other person rather than ourselves.

But we need to be forgiven every bit as much as – if not more than – we need to forgive others.

Which means we need to start by doing business with God.

That's why Jesus taught us to pray:

Matthew 6:12 NIV11 ¹² And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.

Here we see the graciousness of our Saviour.

Jesus wasn't the least bit surprised by his friend's betrayal.

No doubt because he's God and knew exactly what happened.

But I suspect also he knew human nature, far better than we know ourselves.

Jesus still treats Judas as a friend, even though he's going to be a traitor.

Jesus is the God who doesn't treat traitors like they deserve.

Which is truly fortunate for anyone who's ever betrayed God, which, in fact, is each and every one of us.

The Good News is that God doesn't wait until we're good enough, or kind enough, or clean enough to make people his friends.

It was while we were enemies that Christ died for us, as Paul wrote to the church in Rome.⁴

Jesus didn't go to the cross for people who had themselves mostly together, but for people who were completely unable to save themselves.

Through the death of Jesus on the cross, we can have peace with God and be friends with him.

Judas had an agenda to betray Jesus.

Jesus isn't supporting his friend in this agenda.

Matthew only uses this word for friend three times in his gospel, and on each occasion it's to lovingly confront the other person.⁵

But what Judas intends for harm, Jesus intends for good.

Hopefully you can see what's going on here.

Even this agenda that seems to work against Jesus is part of his own agenda.

The Jewish leaders, the Roman soldiers, the Governor, the crowd – they all play their part, but here Matthew highlights for us that it's Jesus' friend's nefarious agenda that's key to him going to the cross.

It's hard to know exactly how to translate verse 50, but it's probably best as a statement like the NIV puts it:

Matthew 26:50a NIV11 ⁵⁰ Jesus replied, "Do what you came for, friend."

Jesus knows that Judas is about to carry out his agenda to betray him.

The Disciple's Agenda to Fight for Jesus (vv50b-54)

Secondly, we see the disciples' agenda to fight for Jesus.

It's an arresting moment when the men grab hold of Jesus and arrest him.

Now we're into the real action of the passage because as they grab hold of Jesus, one of his companions reaches for his sword.

Spoiler alert: John tells us that it was Peter.⁶ Of course.

However, like Mark and Luke, Matthew doesn't tell us who it was and they're not lying by leaving that detail out.

It's possible this was to protect the guilty, but my guess is that it's because Peter's not meant to be the focus of the story here.

This unnamed associate – Matthew doesn't describe him as a friend, but simply as "one of those with Jesus" – chops off the ear of the high priest's servant.

It'd make quite a dramatic scene in a movie, wouldn't it?

Was he going for his neck and somehow missed, clipping his ear off instead?

It seems unlikely that an ex-fisherman would be so skilled with a blade that he could cut a man that accurately in the middle of the tension and drama of the moment.

If I was in a certain ***ahem*** different culture, the tempting application here would be, “This’s why we need to pack heat, even in church on a Sunday morning.

“Someone might come in to arrest us and infringe on our rights!”

As an Aussie, it leaves me more puzzled, wondering, “Why does one of Jesus’ disciples have a sword with him anyway?”

Luke tells us that more than one of them was armed, which is why not all of them are eared.⁷

Perhaps the disciples had an agendum to fight for Jesus.

It wasn’t long before, in verse 31, that Jesus told all his disciples that they’d fall away on account of him.

Peter, like all the disciples, said he was willing to die for Jesus and he meant it.⁸

Maybe he thought that this was the time for the final showdown, his opportunity to fight for Jesus and prove him wrong by not running away.

I reckon it must’ve been a big surprise when Jesus tells him to put his sword back in its place.

It might be significant what Jesus DOESN’T say here.

He doesn’t rebuke his disciple for bringing a sword along, nor does Jesus say that the sword should be thrown away, never to be used again.

What he seems to be saying is that this is the wrong thing, in the wrong place, at the wrong time.

Verse 52:

Matthew 26:52 NIV11 ⁵²“Put your sword back in its place,” Jesus said to him, “for all who draw the sword will die by the sword.

Jesus doesn’t need the skills of his twelve disciples to protect him.

He reassures them that there are twelve legions of angels that he can call on at any moment.

A legion is about 6,000 men, so that’s somewhere around 72,000 angels that he’s got at the ready to call on.

To give you some perspective, at this point in time, the whole of the Roman Army only had about 25 legions of troops in total.

It’s unlikely that half of the Roman army was stationed nearby so there’s simply no question of Jesus being out-gunned.

And these aren’t soldiers, they’re mighty angels of God.

We tend to think of angels as being gentle and kind beings because we often get the sweet little girls to play the angels in the nativity play.

Angels do some powerful and mighty things in the Old Testament, like destroying cities by setting them on fire.

According to 2 Kings, in one night an angel defeats an army of 185,000 that were laying siege to Jerusalem.⁹

Calling down the angels would be a great plan for Jesus to escape because he's got more firepower in his lunchbox than they do.

And it would fit nicely with the disciples' agenda too.

It would show the might and power of Messiah who'd come to liberate his people from foreign rule.

They've been waiting for Jesus to free them from their oppressive Roman overlords.

And yet Jesus deliberately chooses not to call on the angels for the reason he gives in verse 54.

Jesus isn't going to fight his way out because then the Scriptures wouldn't be fulfilled.

If he did, he'd be subverting the very thing that he just prayed – that he'd do his father's will.

God's plan wasn't to free his son, but to crush him so that his people could be liberated from the oppression of sin.

As I'm sure you can imagine, there's a broad range of ways that Christians have understood what Jesus says here.

Some have understood it as a demand for complete passivism: that there's never a place for Christians to take up arms whether that be personally or by serving in the police or military.

I was listening to a podcast this week in which an army officer was being interviewed and the interviewer revealed that he'd previously copped a lot of flak from Christians for even suggesting a Christian could be a soldier.

Many Christian pacifists extend this to protecting yourself, property and family in self-defence on the basis of Jesus' words earlier in the gospel:

Matthew 5:39 NIV11 ³⁹ But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also.

At the other extreme, there are times in history where Christians have given others a choice: convert or die.

I can't say this clearly enough: you can't make someone a Christian by putting a sword to their neck.

That's about as ridiculous as Christians bombing abortion clinics – it just doesn't make sense.

Christians need to stand up for the lives of vulnerable human beings and some of the laws that we have in Queensland around life issues are morally bankrupt.

But we do that by being the squeaky wheels on social media and bugging our democratic representative with our relentless voice and joining the march for life (which is going to be held in March), not by using the sword.

Jesus told his associate to put his sword back in its place.

It's possible that he was simply talking about putting his sword back in its scabbard.

However, it's also possible that he was talking about putting the sword back in its rightful place.

There is a place for the sword, and that's to be wielded by governments and their representatives to keep the peace by maintaining good law and order.

Even in the face of the ruling authorities using the sword the wrong way, Jesus doesn't allow his disciples to respond in kind because that's not the role they've been given by God:

Romans 13:4 NIV11 ⁴ For the one in authority is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for rulers do not bear the sword for no reason. They are God's servants, agents of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer.

I think the problem here is that he's brought a physical sword to a spiritual fight.

We don't use the means of swords to spread the gospel.

We're not fighting for ourselves and our rights.

In our memory verses, it DOESN'T say that we're to make disciples by slaying, parrying and maiming.

We make disciples by going, teaching and baptising.

Yes, we're at war, but the sword is the wrong tool.

2 Corinthians 10:4 NIV11 ⁴ The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds.

Our war as Christians isn't primarily physical, but for holiness against the world, the flesh and the devil.

We're engaged in a spiritual battle against the evil forces in the heavenly realms.

I know that sounds completely ridiculous if you think that only what you can see and touch and feel is real.

But the Bible teaches us that there's more to reality than what we see:

Ephesians 6:12 NIV11 ¹² For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.

It was part of the disciples' agenda to fight for Jesus and win against the authorities.

But that would've prevented Jesus from winning the greater war.

Jesus has a much greater agenda, to go to the cross to defeat sin and death once and for all.

Using their swords would've achieved the wrong outcome.

The Crowd's Agenda to Eliminate Jesus (vv55-56)

Finally, we see the crowd's agenda to eliminate Jesus.

The Jewish leaders had been plotting to eliminate Jesus for a long time.

What held them back was that "they were afraid of the crowd because the people held that he was a prophet."¹⁰

According to John's account, they'd tried it before and failed because it wasn't Jesus' time.¹¹

They'd even decided not to deal with him during the festival, verse five.

Then Judas came along with an agenda that gelled with their own.

He offers them the opportunity to catch Jesus away from the busy hustle and bustle of the festival happening in Jerusalem.

But it's also a bit gutless, isn't it?

Jesus also calls them on it, pointing out just how ridiculous this is.

He speaks to the crowd that's come out to arrest him in verse 55.

"Why," he asks, "Have they come out to arrest him away from everyone else?"

It's true that during this part of history, it was a thing that there were constant rebellions and uprisings springing up.

But that mud won't stick because that's just not what Jesus has done.

Generally, people were expecting him to raise up an army and lead them to victory in battle against the Romans, yet that's the strange thing about Jesus.

He's the one who said to render to Caesar what's Caesar's.¹²

He's not about undermining governments for the sake of it or so that everyone to do their own thing.

And it's not like he's been setting up a secret society with clandestine meetings and secret handshakes.

Every day, he sat in the temple courts teaching.

He took on each one of their questions and verbal challenges, answering them masterfully.

Sure, I expect that the Jewish leaders weren't happy with the woes he declared against them in chapter 23.

But they wouldn't, couldn't arrest Jesus until the time when their agenda aligned with his own.

Now they've come out to get him on a major holiday weekend.

They're going to arrest him under the cover of darkness.

To trap Jesus where no one else is around to ask difficult questions.

He asks them why they didn't do this when he was openly teaching in the temple?

Again, Jesus said that this took place to fulfil prophecy.

It's hard to know exactly what prophecy Jesus was thinking of, that's if he even had just one in mind.

My suspicion is that he means all the Old Testament and all of history, really.

However, there are some very specific passages that he might have in mind like Isaiah 53 and Psalm 22.

God's agenda from before the beginning of time has been to redeem a people who will glorify him forever.

The point is that this didn't take Jesus by surprise.

This was God's very deliberate plan, not a mistake or even Plan B.

In his speech on the day of Pentecost, Peter boldly declares to the Jewish people in front of him in Jerusalem:

Acts 2:23 NIV11 ²³ This man was handed over to you by God's deliberate plan and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross.

Their agenda was to take Jesus and deal with him quietly, but that's not what happened.

Because the Jews weren't allowed to execute someone themselves, they had to go to the Romans.

And that meant, as we'll see in the coming weeks, a very public trial and execution.

Although their agenda was to do this on the quiet, that wasn't Jesus' agenda.

Jesus' death and resurrection were very public, rather than some quiet action done off to the side.

In Acts 26, Paul is called to give an account before King Agrippa.

He makes the argument that the events surrounding Jesus' death and resurrection were well known to the king because "they weren't done in a corner."¹³

More than that, Paul testifies to that what he teaches is what the prophets always said.

Luke records that King Agrippa quietly conceded that Paul did nothing wrong.

Acts 26:22b–23 NIV11 I am saying nothing beyond what the prophets and Moses said would happen—²³ that the Messiah would suffer and, as the first to rise from the dead, would bring the message of light to his own people and to the Gentiles."

There's one specific prophecy that gets fulfilled immediately though.

All the disciples run off into the darkness and leave Jesus behind.

That's a fulfillment of what Jesus said about them all abandoning him.

They left the nets to follow Jesus and now they're leaving Jesus to flee into the night.

Matthew 26:56b NIV11 Then all the disciples deserted him and fled.

The crowd's agenda is to eliminate Jesus.

But that's only possible when their agenda aligns with Jesus'.

Nothing will interfere with Jesus' agenda.

Conclusion

As we wrap up, let's get personal.

What's your agenda for your life?

It's a good idea to sit down and be clear about what the agenda – what the mission and purpose for your life is.

Because everyone has an agenda, even if you don't know it.

Your agenda might be just to drift along and see what comes.

Maybe it's to retire when you're 40 or to marry a great woman or bloke.

To climb to corporate ladder, see the world or just to make a lot of money.

The Westminster Shorter Catechism is a series of questions and answers.

Catechisms have been used since the beginning of Christianity to teach people good theology.

The very first question and answer summarises God's agenda for humanity:

Q1: What is the chief end of man?

A: Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him for ever.

The first part of the answer teaches that our ultimate purpose is to glorify God.

That's God's purpose for all human beings and it's your very own purpose if you're a Christian.

Does your agenda for your life align with God's?

That's a really BIG agenda and the details are going to look different for different people, but they should all work towards that big purpose.

The second part of the answer shows that's not a burden or a chore – God is a delight to be enjoyed.

Following Jesus isn't just following rules, but it's the freedom of being able to enjoy living by grace.

As we meet Jesus on the pages of the Bible – and especially in our passage this morning – it's a good thing to consider how our agenda sits with God's agenda for our lives.

It could well be that your agenda is to take Jesus down.

Maybe you're interested and intrigued and wanting to find out more.

Our upcoming Life course is a great opportunity to do exactly that.

Come along for four Monday nights from the sixth of March and discover a bit more about Jesus and why he's the key to life.

There's lots of opportunities for you to ask any question you'd like about life, faith and the meaning of everything.

Or it may be that you're someone who had Jesus at the centre of your agenda in the past.

But slowly, over time and perhaps without you even noticing, your agenda has drifted, changed off that course.

Other pressing things have been crowding in – family, job, relationships, career, fitness, pleasure, entertainment.

It may be that now's the time for a realignment.

The only way to true happiness, contentment and fulfilment now and forever is to align ourselves with Jesus' agenda.

His agenda was to go to the cross and he wasn't going to let anything get in the way of that.

The cross is where he died as a sin offering and afterwards rose again proving that he'd defeated death.

God's agenda was carried out so that we can be saved from our sin and delight in him forever.

Knowing that his agenda couldn't be interfered with in the past should also give us great certainty and confidence for the future.

Jesus dying, rising and ascending isn't the end.

He's is going to return a second time when he will make all things new and call all people to come and dwell with him forever.

Nothing will interfere with Jesus' agenda, so get on board.

-
- ¹ John 18:2
 - ² Luke 22:52
 - ³ John 18:3, 12
 - ⁴ Romans 5:10
 - ⁵ Matthew 20:13, 22:12
 - ⁶ John 18:10
 - ⁷ Luke 22:49
 - ⁸ Matthew 26:35
 - ⁹ 2 Kings 19:35
 - ¹⁰ Matthew 21:46
 - ¹¹ John 7:32
 - ¹² Matthew 22:21
 - ¹³ Acts 26:26

An Arresting Agenda

Matthew 26:47-56

19 February 2023 | Grace Bible Church Corinda | Ben Shannon

Big Question: Whose agenda was Jesus following?

Big Idea: Nothing will interfere with Jesus' agenda.

Discussion Questions

1. Why did this crowd come to arrest Jesus?
2. What is the significance of Judas kissing Jesus?
3. What can we learn from the way Jesus responds to Judas?
4. Why did the disciple cut an ear off the high priest's servant?
5. What do you think are the implications of verse 52 for us as Christians?
6. Why didn't Jesus call on the angels to help him?
7. What is Jesus' rebuke in verse 56?
8. What are some ways that the agenda of our lives might fail to match up with Jesus' agenda?