

The Last Week of Jesus' Ministry

Last time we left Jesus and his disciples after the Transfiguration. From there Jesus set his face resolutely towards Jerusalem and the suffering he knew he must face there. We can't be sure how long that journey lasted, the gospels do contain quite a lot of material between the two events, but as I've already said they aren't arranged completely chronologically. Several noteworthy things did happen on the way, but I'm going to skip over those for reasons of time.

Jesus's arrival in Jerusalem was a special event often called the Triumphal Entry. The events of the Triumphal Entry or Palm Sunday, mark the beginning of 'Holy Week' or the last week of Jesus' ministry prior to his crucifixion and resurrection. There are some difficulties concerning the chronology of the events which took place during that week, but I believe we can be sure of the following: (i) the cleansing of the temple took place shortly after the triumphal entry, (ii) the Last Supper took place just before the crucifixion (1 Corinthians 11:23), (iii) the arrest of Jesus took place in a garden outside Jerusalem late in the evening, after the Last Supper (John expressly mentions that the soldiers sent to look for Jesus were carrying lanterns and torches (John 18:3)), (iv) the following morning Jesus was transferred from the house of the high priest (Caiaphas) to the residence of the Roman Governor to be tried by Pontius Pilate on a political charge, (v) during the hearing with Pilate the question of a Passover amnesty for Jesus was raised by Pilate, (vi) Pilate condemned Jesus to death and an inscription fixed to his cross stated that he was crucified as 'the King of the Jews', (vii) the crucifixion took place on a Friday (Mark 15:42), (viii) Jesus' garments were divided among the soldiers forming his execution squad (four Roman soldiers according to John (John 19:23)), (ix) Jesus died on the cross, (x) he was immediately buried in a rock tomb, and (xi) the resurrection took place on the following Sunday (Mark 16:1).

Before we look at cleansing of the Temple, I'm sure you're all familiar with the story of Jesus driving out the money changers and sellers of sacrificial animals – but why did Jesus do this, what do you think his motive was?

The Cleansing of the Temple

The temple of Jerusalem in Jesus' day was a truly magnificent structure. It bordered on the Kidron valley in the east and on the Tyropean valley in the west, abutted the old city of David in the south and the fortress of Antonia in the north, altogether occupying an area of some 17,000 sq. metres, more than a dozen football fields. It was not a square or rectangular area, but trapezoidal, with the north and west sides being longer than the south and east.

This was the largest site of its kind in the ancient world, bigger than a dozen football fields. The platform of the temple area was supported by massive walls that contained the huge quantity of rubble that had been used to flatten the site as well as supporting the great weight of the temple itself. These walls descended more than 50 feet below the level of the street, rested on bedrock, and ascended more than 80 feet above the level of the street. Some of the stones of that wall still visible today are more than 40 feet long and weigh more than 100 tons. If we are to believe Josephus' account many larger stones were originally incorporated.

This temple was the result of continual building and restoration. After Solomon's temple was destroyed by the Babylonians in 587 BC, it was rebuilt by the returning exiles around 516 BC after Cyrus had allowed their return from exile in 538 BC. This reconstruction was

continuously modified, but the most important work occurred under the rule of Herod the Great. In 20 BC he commenced a massive rebuilding programme involving 10,000 workmen, 1,000 wagons and 1,000 priests. This rebuilding continued until shortly before its destruction in 70 AD.

The temple was mostly covered with gold and what was not gold was bright white stone. The roof consisted of gold spikes to prevent birds from defiling it. It was truly magnificent.

Access to the temple was via numerous gates. Each gate led into a large area called the court of the gentiles, which made up most of the temple area. In the middle of the temple area was a stone balustrade, about four and a half feet high, which led into the temple proper. All the gates through this balustrade into the inner part of the temple had inscriptions warning non-Jews that they were prohibited upon pain of death from entering.

After passing the balustrade were 14 steps leading to another 35 foot high wall. Nine gates in this wall gave access to the inner temple courtyard area. The eastern third of this courtyard was the women's court, the larger western part was called the court of Israel which was the men's court. Women were only allowed as far as their own courtyard. From the court of Israel one could enter the court of priests (which contained the altar of burnt offering) and the temple proper. This consisted of a porch leading into the temple, the holy place and the holy of holies.

On entering the temple area (probably through the golden gate which faced the Mount of Olives), Jesus saw in the court of the Gentiles the selling of sacrificial animals and the exchanging of money. Each year, around the time of the Passover, every adult Jewish male had to pay a temple tax of a half shekel (Exodus 30:13-15). However, much of the coinage of ancient times had idolatrous images or words and the only coin deemed acceptable for the temple tax was the Tyrian silver half shekel. These coins were not easily available throughout Israel, so to facilitate the payment of this tax, tables were set up in the court of the Gentiles around the 25th day of Adar (the month proceeding the Passover). Sacrificial animals were generally on sale in the court of the Gentiles.

In one sense, the changing of money and the selling of sacrificial animals could be seen as a service to pilgrims – an attempt to make the temple more 'user friendly'. In most areas there would have been no access to the required Tyrian coins and sacrificial animals needed to be absolutely pure and unblemished, so bringing them from afar would have been a perilous business. However, these activities were conducted with the primary objective of making large profits for the priestly leadership, the money changers typically charged a whole days wages to change your money and another days wages if you needed change, whilst a sacrificial lamb could cost half a years wages. Also the commercial clamour and smell of the animals severely detracted from the God ordained purpose of the temple. It is likely that these activities had only recently been moved into the temple area, as there is evidence that the stalls of these merchants were previously situated on the Mount of Olives.

In righteous indignation, Jesus cleansed the temple of these rather sordid commercial activities. He overturned the tables of the money changers and chased away those in the business of selling sacrificial animals – and indeed their customers. The picture of Jesus given by the Gospel accounts of this incident is far from the weak, rather effeminate figure that Christians often imagine. Here he is God's righteous servant, armed with right and empowered with zeal. No one could stand against him.

However, neither the Jewish leadership nor the Roman authorities seem to have perceived these events as a major threat. It is even possible that some of the Jewish authorities may have approved of his actions. We know from the Jewish Talmud that the famous Rabbi Gamaliel himself took action when an excessive price was being charged for sacrificial pigeons in the temple.

It is clear that this event in the life of Jesus was regarded as extremely important as it is one of the few events recorded in all four Gospels. However, we must be careful not to overestimate the extent of Jesus' actions. Only a part of the massive temple area was affected and the incident was probably on a smaller scale than a simple reading of the Gospel accounts might suggest. The Gospel writers focus on this incident because of its theological importance.

In the Synoptic Gospels, the cleansing of the temple is intimately associated with the Triumphal Entry. In Mark it takes place on the following day (Mark 11:12) whilst Matthew and Luke place it immediately after the Triumphal Entry, connecting the two events with the word "then" (Matthew 21:12; Luke 19:45). Mark may have arranged it in this way to associate it with the cursing of the fig tree (Mark 11:12-14 and 20-25) so as to make it clear that the cleansing was an act of judgement. As I have said previously, we must always remember that the Gospel writers were much more concerned with spiritual truth than historical timelines.

In John's gospel the cleansing of the Temple comes at the beginning of Jesus's ministry, but again as I've said the gospel writers were more concerned with theology and themes than chronology.

So, what is the meaning of the cleansing of the Temple. Scholars have advanced a number of theories ranging from a desire by Jesus to end the traditional Jewish sacrificial system of worship, through a prophecy by Jesus of the destruction of the temple, to a call by Jesus for a political revolution. However, I don't believe that any of these theories are justified. Jesus generally approved of offering sacrifices to God (Mark 1:40-45; Luke 17:11-19 etc). Other sayings of Jesus prophecy openly of the destruction of the temple (Mark 12:1-12; Luke 19:41-44), so such an act would have been unnecessary as a pure symbol. Jesus always rejected any call to assume temporal power and rule and if he were doing so here we could have expected the Jewish authorities and the Roman soldiers in the fortress of Antonia to have intervened.

In my view, the cleansing of the temple is best seen as an expression of Jesus' desire to purify the temple. Here he was eliminating dishonest commercialisation. On other occasions he refused to allow the temple to be used as a shortcut from one part of Jerusalem to another (Mark 11:16). At the same time, I believe that Jesus was also proclaiming divine judgement on the temple. He was not merely prophesying this but proclaiming it and declaring that he would bring it about.

The Last Supper

In spite of difficulties with chronology which are too complex and lengthy for us to tackle this morning, I'm firmly of the view that the Last Supper was a Passover meal. This not only accords with the Synoptic accounts, but also makes much more theological sense and there

are many indications within the various Gospel accounts pointing towards the Last Supper having been a Passover meal. Firstly, the disciples did not return to Bethany that night, as they had on previous days, but remained within the walled city to eat. That is consistent with this being a Passover meal – which had to be eaten within Jerusalem proper. Secondly, we are told that Jesus and the disciples ate this meal reclining. Normally people sat for meals and it was only for festive meals such as the Passover that they would recline facing a low table with their feet radiating outwards like spokes. Thirdly, people usually only ate two meals per day with the last of these being in the later afternoon and not the evening, but we are told that the Last Supper was eaten in the evening (Mark 14:17). This corresponds with the Passover meal which had to be eaten at night (Exodus 12:8). Fourthly, the Last Supper ended with a hymn (Matthew 26:30; Mark 14:26) and we know that it was customary to end the Passover by singing the last part of the Hallel Psalms (Psalms 113-118). Finally, the night of the Passover had to be spent within Jerusalem. At the time of the Passover, the population of Jerusalem increased from its normal 25,000 to more than 250,000. Not all of these pilgrims could be accommodated within the walled city. Accordingly, Jerusalem was redefined to include all the hills facing the city. The garden of Gethsemane lay on the western slopes of the Mount of Olives facing Jerusalem. We know that on the night of the Last Supper, Jesus and the disciples did not return to Bethany, but stayed at Gethsemane, which was part of ‘greater Jerusalem’. This all fits well with the Last Supper having been a Passover meal.

We see from the Synoptic Gospels that Jesus sent Peter and John into Jerusalem to prepare the Passover meal (Luke 22:8). Jesus told them to look for a man carrying a jar of water and to follow him. They were then to ask the owner of the house the man entered if the room was prepared for the ‘Teacher’ and his disciples to eat the Passover. They were to prepare for the feast in that place.

As with the provision of the colt for the triumphal entry, it would appear that Jesus prearranged this event, as the disciples were simply to mention the ‘Teacher’ to the householder and expect that everything would be ready for them. Certainly, it is unlikely that a choice upper room would be available at the busy time of the festival unless matters had been prearranged. It would also appear that Jesus utilised his divine powers to direct the disciples, as it would have otherwise been difficult to time the meeting with the water carrier. Carrying water was a woman’s work, and thus a man doing this would have been an unusual sight and readily apparent to the disciples.

Peter and John were to prepare for the meal. Perhaps they had to sacrifice and roast the lamb, or perhaps this had already been done by the house-owner and they just had to make sure everything was ready – we don’t know.

All four Gospels also inform us that Jesus foretold his betrayal by one of the disciples. The Gospel writers thought this was important, not merely because it portrayed Jesus as a true prophet, but also because it makes it clear that the coming crucifixion was no accident, but rather a part of the divine plan from the beginning.

Aware that his hour had come Jesus used the occasion of the Passover celebration to institute a new ‘rite’ or sacrament – which we celebrate even to this day as the Eucharist or the Lord’s Supper. Jesus began his ministry with the sacrament of baptism and, as it was drawing to a close, he initiated the sacrament of the Holy Eucharist. The Gospel accounts differ slightly as

to the details, but let's start by considering what Mark's Gospel has to tell us in Mark 14:22-26

"While they were eating, Jesus took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to his disciples, saying, "Take it; this is my body." Then he took the cup, gave thanks and offered it to them, and they all drank from it. "This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many," he said to them. "I tell you the truth, I will not drink again of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it anew in the kingdom of God." When they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives."

We see clearly here all the elements of our current sacrament of the Eucharist. In fact, the term 'Eucharist' derives from the Greek term for 'giving thanks' in verse 22 of Mark's text.

Matthew's account of this rite is identical in all important elements with that of Mark. However, Luke's account (and Paul's text in 1 Corinthians 11:23-26 – which is the earliest account of the Lord's Supper) apparently derived from a different tradition and differ in one or two particulars. The most important of these is that Luke (and 1 Corinthians) adds the words "which is given for you; do this in remembrance of me" after the "this is my body" in verse 22 of Mark's text.

What do you think the significance of the last supper is in terms of our modern Eucharist? Is it just a memorial or do we really feed on Christ's body?

Over the years there has been much controversy surrounding the word "is" in relation to the body and blood of Christ. The Roman Catholic Church holds that the bread and wine literally become in substance, in underlying reality, Christ's body and blood (although in so far as our physical senses can perceive they remain bread and wine) when the priest speaks the appointed words (known as transubstantiation). The Lutheran Church holds that the bread and wine remain bread and wine, but that in and around the elements there is present the actual body and blood of Christ (known as consubstantiation). Other churches interpret the Eucharist as essentially a memorial at which Christ's body and blood are not literally present, whilst yet others believe that Jesus is spiritually (but not physically) present as we consume the elements.

Without wishing to offend anyone, I have to say that my own belief is that the Eucharist is essentially both a memorial and a spiritual feeding not involving an actual transformation of the elements. It is one of the great mysteries of our Christian faith. As Professor Duncan said whoever takes away our mystery takes away our Sacrament. The fact is that in Aramaic Jesus did not use the word "is". In any event, we know that Jesus frequently used metaphor and other figures of speech and I think it would be inappropriate to insist on a literal interpretation of his words here.

However, all four gospel accounts do associate the cup with "blood" and "covenant". The Jews would have seen this "blood of the covenant" as atoning for the sins of the people. Matthew makes this explicit in Matthew 26:28 when he says "This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins."

In the Last Supper, Jesus taught that a New Covenant would be inaugurated and sealed through his blood – that is through his voluntary sacrificial death, which was to come. This New Covenant was not a repudiation of the Old Covenant, but its ultimate fulfilment and

culmination. Jesus did not see his death as a tragic human error, but as the fulfilment of God's will and plan.

There has also been controversy over the authenticity of the words "do this in remembrance of me" as they are not found in the Gospels of Matthew and Mark. I believe they should be accepted as authentic, both because they are found in the earliest account of the Lord's Supper we possess (in 1 Corinthians 11:23-26 AD), and because it is theologically sensible that Jesus would teach that the New Covenant he was instituting should be remembered in just the same way as the Passover constituted a regular remembrance of the events leading up to the Old Covenant. Here it's interesting to note that as our Paschal Lamb Jesus has initiated a New Covenant which derives not from the Old Levitical Sinai covenant, but from the Passover which preceded it. I believe this symbolises the culmination of the Sinai covenant with the New Covenant in Christ's blood. That is why we are no longer "under the Law" as law.

The Lord's Supper reminds both us and the Church that the cross and Jesus' death were not an accident or misfortune, but the crowning event of human redemption. The bread and the cup point to the 'old rugged cross' and the redemption achieved there by Jesus. The Lord's Supper also points to the future and speaks of a glorious reunion of Jesus with his followers.

Gethsemane, Betrayal and Arrest

After eating the Passover and instituting the Lord's Supper in the city of Jerusalem, Jesus and the disciples proceeded to the Garden of Gethsemane (Mark 14:32). By spending the night here rather than returning to Bethany, Jesus was fulfilling the requirements of the Law concerning the Passover, since you will remember that we have already noted that 'Jerusalem' for this purpose included the surrounding hills. However, Jesus would not spend the whole night there because his 'hour' had come.

When they arrived at Gethsemane, Jesus took with him Peter, James and John and separated himself from the rest in order to pray (Mark 14:32-33). He asked them to share his agony by keeping awake whilst he prayed and also to pray for themselves that they would not fall into temptation (Luke 22:40). Proceeding ahead of the three disciples, but remaining within their hearing (Luke 22:41 says he went about a stone's throw), Jesus agonised in prayer. Probably our knowledge of Jesus' prayers comes from the three disciples, as it would have been normal for Jesus to pray aloud.

The Gospel accounts make it clear that Jesus suffered great torment at this time. He was said to be "distressed and troubled" and "overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death" (Mark 14:33-34). His prayer to his Father was "Abba, Father," he said, "everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will." (Mark 14:36).

After a time, Jesus came back to the three disciples and found them sleeping. Warning them to keep watch so that they would not fall into temptation, Jesus again went to pray. The Gospels of Matthew and Mark (Matthew 26:42; Mark 14:39) tell us that he prayed the same prayer again. Upon returning to the disciples, Jesus found them sleeping again.

The image of Jesus presented to us here is not that of someone going to their death with a complete lack of concern, so what was Jesus afraid of? To some extent, he probably feared

pain and physical death – after all Jesus was completely human as well as completely divine. However, I am convinced that his main concern was not pain and death itself, but the unique death he knew he was to die. He who had no sin feared being made sin for us (2 Corinthians 5:21), he feared bearing our sins in his body on the cross (1 Peter 2:24), he feared dying for our sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous (1 Peter 3:18). Jesus feared the consequences of drinking the ‘cup’ that God had ordained for him (Mark 10:38), the experiencing of the divine wrath that is our righteous God’s only response to sin and the consequent separation from his Father for the very first time.

We are given God’s promise that he will never leave us or forsake us in our trials (Hebrews 13:5), Jesus, however, knew that he would be separated from his Father at the very time of his greatest trial. Nothing tells of the seriousness of sin in God’s eyes more than Jesus’ anguished cry from the cross “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Mark 15:34).

Do you think there was any other way that God could have saved mankind other than by sending Jesus to his death on the cross? Do you think Jesus thought there might be another way?

Given Jesus’ complete divinity and the numerous predictions he had given concerning his death, I don’t believe he really thought there was another way for God’s salvation plan to be accomplished when he prayed in the garden. I think this prayer is best understood as an agonised expression of his pain. In this pain, we see perhaps the first occasion on which Jesus needed the disciples to share in his agony. The tragedy was that they failed him – indeed they were already beginning to forsake him.

Jesus was about to be betrayed by Judas, why do you think Judas betrayed Jesus?

Numerous theories have been advanced as to why Judas betrayed Jesus, but none of them are convincing, the Gospel writers were more concerned to show that this was part of the divine plan than to detail the human factors involved. In any event that betrayal was now come. Having left the Last Supper early (John 13:27-30) he had supplied the necessary information of Jesus’ whereabouts to the Jewish authorities. Jesus’ hour had now come. In one sense, it was the hour of Jesus’ opponents, but it was actually God’s hour.

Aware that Judas was approaching with an armed band, Jesus went out to meet them. This was no weak, frightened or defeated Jesus, but a conquering Christ who went out to meet and defeat his opponents by the cross. Apparently, a considerable number of people came to arrest Jesus. Mark refers to a crowd with swords and clubs (Mark 14:43) and John adds a ‘detachment’ of soldiers (John 18:3). The word John uses ‘speira’ can refer to either 600 or 200 soldiers – probably the smaller number in this case.

To cause as little disturbance as possible Judas agreed to identify Jesus by kissing him – which was the usual way for a disciple to greet his teacher. This is very credible as it would have been difficult for the crowd or the soldiers to identify Jesus in the darkness, particularly as the authorities wanted to arrest Jesus with the minimum of disturbance (Mark 14:1-2). Jesus’ response to this betrayal of Judas with a kiss is not angry, but full of sorrow: "Judas, are you betraying the Son of Man with a kiss?" (Luke 22:48) – indeed the Greek here indicates that the greeting was a passionate kiss. Judas’ betrayal of the man with whom he had shared food and hospitality and who had taught him was utterly despicable, even more

despicable within Israelite culture than it would seem to us today. It was a terrible act and history will forever remember Judas Iscariot for it.

Jesus' response to those coming to arrest him was full of sarcasm:

"Am I leading a rebellion," said Jesus, "that you have come out with swords and clubs to capture me? Every day I was with you, teaching in the temple courts, and you did not arrest me. But the Scriptures must be fulfilled." (Mark 14:48-49)

He knew they lacked the courage to move against him openly and he rebuked them.

The disciples reacted to these events with consternation and fear and fled – apparently with the exception of Peter who lashed out with his sword and struck the ear of the high priest's slave (John 18:10). Jesus rebuked Peter, for those who live by the sword die by the sword. Peter now felt rejected in addition to being fearful and confused and he too fled.

Mark also records a young man who fled naked (Mark 14:51-52). Some have dismissed this as fanciful or mythical, but I see no reason to depart from the earliest commentators who believed that the story was autobiographical and that the young man was Mark following the Last Supper having been celebrated at his house.

Above all these scenes from Jesus' life reveal to us the terrible nature of sin. Jesus was overwhelmed at Gethsemane by the horror of what was to come – his taking our sins on his shoulders – because he well knew that these sins merited and would receive the full wrath of God.

The Trial

The events surrounding the trial of Jesus are a matter of some controversy because the majority of people approach the trial and crucifixion of Jesus with an agenda which is already fixed, rather than seeking to make sense of the accounts of the eyewitnesses – the Gospel writers.

The accounts of the trial (or trials) in Matthew and Mark say that Jesus was tried by the Sanhedrin under Caiaphas on the religious charge of blasphemy on the night of his arrest. Luke states that Jesus was interrogated by Caiaphas and some of the high priests the morning after his arrest (but implies that this was not a formal trial), who then send Jesus off to Pilate. John states that Jesus was interrogated by the former high priest Annas and then sent to Caiaphas who sent him on to Pilate, without any formal trial, to be tried on a political charge of treason. The question of the competence of a Jewish court to execute a capital sentence (mentioned by John) is also relevant here. It would seem to me most likely that the accounts in John and Luke are both correct (they are largely in agreement other than the additional detail of the interrogation by Annas added by John) and that Mark and Matthew misunderstood the informal interrogation of Jesus as a formal trial.

In the interrogation before Caiaphas, Jesus refused to answer the questions put to him for some time, but he then started to respond. I believe this is because Caiaphas put Jesus under oath before God and at that point Jesus was impelled to answer (Matthew 26:63) – Jewish Law contained no protection to prevent the accused having to testify against himself. When compelled to answer, Jesus (perhaps reluctantly) confirmed that he was indeed the Messiah. Caiaphas then tore his clothes – a formal judicial act confirming that he found Jesus guilty.

During the questioning of Jesus under Caiaphas, Peter failed Jesus again with his famous triple denial of his Lord.

Caiaphas and the remainder of the Sanhedrin formulated various political charges on which they would commit Jesus to trial by the Roman authorities – probably because they lacked the power to execute Jesus on their own authority. All the Gospels agree that Jesus was sent to the praetorium for trial before Pontius Pilate.

Matthew's Gospel provides a short aside at this point and tells us that Judas hanged himself in remorse, having previously failed to return the blood money he received for betraying Jesus to the chief priests.

We know that Jesus was eventually condemned to death – who do you think was responsible, the Jews, the Romans or someone else?

Pilate appears to have focussed his questioning on the charge that Jesus was 'King of the Jews' – the only thing of which Jesus had been accused which would have been a capital crime under Roman Law. Jesus said that he was, but that his kingdom was of another world. In any event Pilate was convinced that Jesus was not guilty of any crime worthy of the death penalty and, having discovered that Jesus was born in Galilee, attempted to rid himself of the problem by sending Jesus off to Herod who was tetrarch of Galilee.

Jesus remained silent before Herod and, in apparent frustration after mocking Jesus (Luke 23:11), Herod sent Jesus back to Pilate.

Upon Jesus' return, Pilate continued to seek his release, perhaps spurred on by his wife's dream concerning Jesus' innocence (Matthew 27:19) and offered to have him flogged in an attempt to appease his opponents. This attempt was rejected so Pilate appealed to the custom of releasing a prisoner at Passover (Mark 15:6). There is no evidence for this custom in Israel outside the Gospels (although a similar practice did exist in Egypt), but such a practice would clearly have been very appropriate for the Jewish Passover festival. No doubt, Pilate was confident that the crowd would ask for the release of the popular Jesus rather than the other candidate – the notorious murderer Barabbas. However the crowd, stirred up by the chief priests called for the release of Barabbas.

Pilate continued to argue for the release of Jesus. However, his reluctance to convict him was finally overcome when the Jewish leaders called out "If you release this man you are no friend of the emperor" (John 19:12). This should be seen in the context of a matter we mentioned earlier – the fact that if Jesus' trial and subsequent crucifixion were in 33 AD (as I have argued) then they fell just after Sejanus' attempted coup against the emperor Tiberius who subsequently purged almost all those appointed by Sejanus. Pontius Pilate was appointed by Sejanus and would thus have been very afraid for his life at the time and therefore very reluctant to seem disloyal to Rome. The release of Barabbas is interesting here as his name can be interpreted to mean the "Son of the Father".

Although, as I have argued, the Jewish authorities were the ultimate cause of Jesus' death, this should not be seen as a reason or an excuse for anti-Semitism. Jesus was Jew. His earliest followers were all Jews. That makes the charge that Jews are anti-Christian because they killed Jesus absurd. In fact, you and I are the cause of Christ's death. He went

voluntarily to the cross in fulfilment of God's salvation plan for humanity because of sin – my sins and your sins – and for no other reason. The death of Jesus was a divine necessity.