

## JESUS AND PILATE

### John 19:1-16

The background to our reading today is the arrest of Jesus, recorded by John at the beginning of John chapter 18 and his subsequent questioning by the high priest Caiaphas and a former high priest Annas. Given the horrific death by crucifixion that Jesus was about to endure, the words that Caiaphas had spoken when Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead:

“You do not realise that it is better for you that one man die for the people than that the whole nation perish.” (John 11:50 NIV) were truly prophetic, although not in the way that Caiaphas had intended.

John records the questioning of Jesus by the Jewish authorities and his subsequent questioning and sentencing by Pontius Pilate in much greater detail than is provided by the synoptic gospels. Just before our reading today, Pilate could find no reason for Jesus to be sentenced to death and attempted to have him released as we read at the end of chapter 18 of John’s gospel. That attempt failed, so now Pilate tries a different tactic. Let’s look at that in verses 1-6 of our reading:

“Then Pilate took Jesus and had him flogged. The soldiers twisted together a crown of thorns and put it on his head. They clothed him in a purple robe and went up to him again and again, saying, "Hail, king of the Jews!" And they struck him in the face. Once more Pilate came out and said to the Jews, "Look, I am bringing him out to you to let you know that I find no basis for a charge against him." When Jesus came out wearing the crown of thorns and the purple robe, Pilate said to them, "Here is the man!" As soon as the chief priests and their officials saw him, they shouted, "Crucify! Crucify!" But Pilate answered, "You take him and crucify him. As for me, I find no basis for a charge against him.” (John 19:1-6 NIV)

At first sight it seems surprising that Pilate would have Jesus flogged if he believed him to be innocent. However, Pilate’s plan was

probably to punish Jesus with a lesser punishment than death (which would have been the sentence for the treasonous offence of claiming to be king) – which he hoped would satisfy the Jewish demand for Jesus to be punished – and then release him. There were three types of flogging in the Roman judicial system, the *fustigatio* the least severe flogging for minor offences, the *flagellatio* a more severe flogging for fairly serious crimes, and the *verberatio* the most severe flogging which could kill the victim. Given that Jesus had not been pronounced guilty of any offence and Pilate seemed to deem him innocent, it is likely that the flogging given here was the least serious, the *fustigatio*.

After this beating Jesus was mocked by the Roman soldiers who also hit him in the face. These gentile soldiers spoke more correctly about Jesus than they knew when they referred to him as King of the Jews – for that is exactly who he was. This mockery indicates to us that the charge the Jewish leadership had probably brought against Jesus to Pilate was that he claimed to be king of the Jews, thus setting himself up against Caesar. This was probably the only crime they could reasonably charge him with which would carry the death penalty under Roman law. Pilate then emerged once again and told the Jewish crowd that he could not find any basis for a charge against Jesus and presented Jesus to the crowd. As soon as the chief priests and Jewish officials saw Jesus they shouted for him to be crucified. They hated Jesus and would not be satisfied with anything short of his crucifixion. Pilate rather petulantly told them that they should crucify Jesus, knowing full well that they did not have the authority to do so, and repeated his statement that he could find no basis for a charge against Jesus. The Jewish leaders had brought Jesus to Pilate for a trial but refused to accept his judgement.

Let's move on and look at verses 7-11:

“The Jews insisted, "We have a law, and according to that law he must die, because he claimed to be the Son of God." When Pilate heard this, he was even more afraid, and he went back inside the palace. "Where do you come from?" he asked Jesus, but Jesus gave him no answer. "Do you refuse to speak to me?" Pilate said. "Don't

you realise I have power either to free you or to crucify you?" Jesus answered, "You would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above. Therefore the one who handed me over to you is guilty of a greater sin.'" (John 19:7-11 NIV)

Pilate was afraid when he heard that Jesus claimed to be the Son of God, perhaps on account of the dream his wife had about Christ's innocence (Matthew 27:19) and went back inside the palace. Although Pilate, as Roman Prefect was primarily responsible for keeping Roman Law and protecting the interests of Rome, he also had a duty to keep the peace and uphold local laws. Thus the pleading by the Jewish leadership that Jesus's claims breached local Jewish Law, presumably the law against blasphemy; although this was not automatically true as the anointed king of Israel was sometimes referred to as "Son of God" in scripture (Psalm 2:7; 89:26-27). Perhaps Pilate was somewhat superstitious and that may be why he became afraid; whatever the reason he tries to resolve his fears by questioning Jesus about his origins. However, Jesus refused to speak to him. Probably there was no answer Jesus could have given which would have been both truthful and comprehensible to Pilate. Pilate responds by stating his absolute judicial authority, to which Jesus replies that Pilate has only the authority given by God the Father. Here, it's important to remember that the fact that human authority is that bestowed or at least permitted by God, BUT that does not absolve us from responsibility for the decisions we make in the exercise of that authority. We can decide on sinful actions like Adam and Eve or we can decide to do what is good and lawful. If we had no freewill we could not be held responsible and thus there would be no human sinfulness and Christ's mission would not have been necessary. Jesus's words at the end of verse 11 don't completely exonerate Pilate, the person handing him over (presumably either Judas or the Jewish leadership, or perhaps both) are guilty of a greater sin. But, this is only relative, Pilate retains a significant sinfulness.

Let's move on again and look at verses 12 and 13

"From then on, Pilate tried to set Jesus free, but 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." When Pilate heard this, he brought Jesus out and sat down on the judge's seat at a place known as the Stone Pavement (which in Aramaic is Gabbatha)." (John 19:12-13 NIV)

Pilate continues to try and release Jesus, but the Jewish leadership threaten Pilate, saying that they will report him to Rome. To fully understand the magnitude of this threat we need to consider the date of Jesus's crucifixion. We don't have time this morning to explore all the detailed reasoning underlying the determination of this. Let me just say that we know that the crucifixion was on Friday the 14<sup>th</sup> of Nissan and that this would necessarily be before the end of Pilate's rule in Judea in AD 36-37 and no earlier than AD 30 as we need time for Jesus to conduct his ministry after the beginning of the ministry of John the Baptist in AD 28 or 29 as Luke 3:1-2 tells us. This means that the crucifixion must have taken place in AD30, 33, or 36. Many scholars opt for AD 30, but I prefer AD 33 as this allows time for 4 or 5 years of ministry by Jesus, which is implied by the three or possibly four Passover feasts attended by Jesus (John 2:13; John 6:4; John 11:55-57 and possibly John 5:1). AD 33 also fits better with the prophecy about the anointed one in Daniel 9:25. This means that the threat of reporting Pilate to Rome took place in AD 33, after the failed coup against Tiberius Caesar in AD 31. Following this coup, Tiberius purged most of the officials who had been appointed by Sejanus. Pontius Pilate had been appointed by Sejanus and would therefore have been very afraid for his life. I think this explains why the Jewish mob was able to intimidate the ruthless anti-Semitic Pilate into crucifying Jesus.

Pilate concedes in verse 13. He has Jesus brought out and sits in the judgement seat. Let's look at the last few verses of our reading: "It was the day of Preparation of Passover Week, about the sixth hour. "Here is your king," Pilate said to the Jews. But they shouted, "Take him away! Take him away! Crucify him!" "Shall I crucify your king?" Pilate asked. "We have no king but Caesar," the chief priests answered. Finally Pilate handed him over to them to be crucified. So the soldiers took charge of Jesus." (John 19:14-16 NIV)

There is considerable dispute amongst scholars as to what precisely the “day of Preparation” was, and I’m not going to detail the arguments, but I think it means the day before the Sabbath (i.e. Friday) and not the day before the Passover. Pilate cannot resist taunting the hated Jewish leadership one last time “Here is your King” he says to them. He knows that their profession of allegiance to Caesar back in verse 12 was nothing more than hypocrisy designed to ensure Jesus was condemned. Yet like Caiaphas before him Pilate spoke more truly than he realised, the real King of the Jews stood before them all and no-one recognised him.

With mock concern and more taunting, Pilate says “shall I crucify your King”. The Jews respond we have no King but Caesar. It’s ironic, they apparently don’t know the God of Hebrew scripture whom they should have proclaimed as their king, so they really do have no king but Caesar. Their repudiation of Jesus in the name of a feigned loyalty to their earthly emperor, amounted to a repudiation of God and his Messiah. This takes us back to the prologue to John’s gospel – “He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him.” (John 1:11). John’s gospel portrays the condemnation of Jesus, the true King of Israel, as an enormous betrayal of the Jewish people by their leadership.

Our reading ends without any formal statement by Pilate that Jesus is to be crucified, but his fate is made quite clear by his being handed over to the soldiers to be crucified.

We’re also Jesus’s own, will we receive and honour him this Eastertide? Will we proclaim the gospel message that Jesus died for all the people. Caiaphas and Pilate proclaimed Jesus without knowing or understanding the real implications of what they said – let us proclaim him with the advantage of what we know on the other side of the cross and Christ’s crucifixion. This crucifixion is the most important event in the history of mankind. Like Paul, may we know nothing else but Jesus Christ and him crucified (1 Corinthians 2:2). This Easter let us proclaim Jesus and how he gave his life to save us

from our sins to those around us who like the Jews have still not recognised and received Jesus as their King.