

## Sermon – 01/10/2006 am

### Trial of Jesus – Roman

Study Text: John 18:25-40

The Exclusive Brethren have been receiving some bad press lately. Some ex-members have spoken out about their teaching on separation and the practice of ‘withdrawing’ from a member who breaks the rules. They refuse any fellowship and will not eat with such people. But even more than this, they actively encourage wives to leave their husbands if they are under discipline, and brainwash their children into rejecting their own father or mother. Meanwhile, the leaders of the sect were reported to be money grabbing, whisky drinking, and adulterous.

Many people are much more concerned about rules and ceremonies, than they are about personal morality.

#### Persistent Plotters

The Jewish leaders were prime examples of such people; people concerned about ritual and traditions, but not morality. In the midst of plotting to kill an innocent man they were careful not to defile themselves by entering the residence of a Gentile, namely Pontius Pilate. John is adept at pointing out ironies and this is but another. It is incredulous, even laughable, if it were not true and so widespread even today. Just what particular defilement they feared we are not told. Most defilement could be cleansed at the end of the day, but contact with a corpse required seven days.

Jesus had celebrated the Passover with his disciples before going out to the Mount of Olives. Jews from all over the world were gathered in Jerusalem for this important feast. This was the holiest time of the year for Jews. This was a sacred night. But these religious leaders had more important things to attend to. They were intent on getting rid of their arch enemy, the Messiah, the Son of God.

That verse 28 speaks of Passover as future creates a problem for some scholars. Some even say that, according to John, Jesus ate the Passover on the Wednesday night and that his trial was on Thursday. But others point out that the Passover feast as such went on for seven days. There was a special meal the day after the Passover supper called the *chigagah*.

Alternatively, it is clear that the High Priest and his associates were preoccupied from the moment Judas came to betray Jesus, so they may not have had time to partake of the Passover lamb. No doubt they could bend the rules somehow to eat this sacred meal after they had completed their dastardly deed. ‘Once Jesus is actually hanging on the Cross (mocked by them!) they can go home and eat the lamb’.

The carefully hatched plot of the Jews was working well so far. The arrest went smoothly, and their own trial, though a sham, was sufficient to get a guilty verdict. They convicted Jesus of blasphemy through words from his own mouth (Luke 22:71). They could have taken him out and stoned him according to their law. However, Roman law, which was over-riding, did not allow them to execute anyone.

Besides, to stone anyone, least of all Jesus, in the city at this time would have been risky. The city was crowded with pilgrims and was crawling with soldiers ready to quell any unrest. Pilate himself has come from his usual residence in Caesarea. The Jews later managed to stone Stephen, but see

what happened when they tried to stone Paul (Acts 21:31). John understood all this as being fulfilment of Jesus own words *signifying by what death he would die* (18:32).

The Jews it appears had a prior arrangement with the Governor to bring Jesus early in the morning. Their own trial, conducted ‘as soon as it was day’, was a brief formality. The arrangement probably included some understanding about the charge and assurance of a guilty verdict, for the Jews were upset when Pilate asked them to bring forth a charge. Partners in evil can rarely be trusted.

Pilate was looking for some valid charge, a semblance of justice perhaps. All they could say was ‘we would not have brought him if he were not a criminal’. It was as if their integrity was under examination. What integrity! How amazing are the ways of wickedness. But then, even Satan can parade as an angel of light!

A charge of blasphemy meant nothing to Pilate, so the Jews had to frame some other charge. Luke (23:2) tells us that they said Jesus was *perverting the nation, forbidding to pay taxes to Caesar, saying that he himself is Christ a King*. This provides the background for Pilate’s first question to Jesus, recorded in all four gospels, ‘are you the King of the Jews?’ Pilate had taken Jesus inside leaving the Jews at the gate.

The Jews would not be put off by Pilate’s stalling tactics. ‘How dare he question us about a charge just to have this man executed’! They stood at the gate fuming. They persisted in their evil plot. They would have Jesus killed no matter what. When Pilate cynically offer to release ‘the King of the Jews’, they immediately cried out, No! *not this man but Barabbas* (18:40). They preferred a terrorist who robbed and murdered to walk free, rather than the Son of God.

Wicked men and women are always happier in the company of people more wicked than themselves. This is the basis for so much of our news. People cry out for news about all sorts of sin – violence, fights, murder, greed, divorce and so on. They do not want to read about righteousness and truth, they do not want to read the Bible, for they do not want to examine their own hearts and admit their sin.

The devil entered the heart of Judas leading him to betray his Master. The devil was already master in the hearts of these religious leaders. Like a dog with a rabbit they were not going to let go of their prey until they had devoured him. But unknown to these men of the world, God was working all things together for the good of his chosen people. Jesus would die on a tree to fulfil Scripture – *cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree* (Deuteronomy 21:23). He took our curse as covenant breakers upon himself on the Cross.

### **Proud Pleaser of Men**

Pilate is the only figure who appears in every scene in this passage. The life of Jesus, it would appear, was in his hands. At his word Jesus could be executed. The Jews thought this and Pilate also, but Jesus knew otherwise. *You have no power over me unless it be given you from above* (19:11).

Pilate’s first love was for himself. His first concern was for his position. His concern for justice came second. After interrogation he found no fault in Jesus but would not release him for fear of the Jews. The Jews could make trouble for him all the way to Rome. He had no love for them but had to keep them happy for his own sake.

Pilate was a vacillating, superstitious character. He did not believe in God but did fear the dream of his wife. It is surprising how the lives of so many people are ruled by superstition – I hope that no

believers are superstitious. Many sports people are very superstitious. I heard of a woman who carried all manner of objects around in her handbag – a rabbit's foot, shark tooth and so on. How many people read and take seriously their horoscope? Pilate was such a person.

Pilate called Jesus into his palace and asked him if he was king of the Jews. What did Jesus answer? Jesus was careful to ascertain what Pilate meant by this question. What did he understand by the term 'king'? The Jews had made this accusation, but did Pilate understand what they meant? Pilate was a Gentile, an unbeliever, with no knowledge of Scripture. Jesus explained to Pilate what sort of king he was. He posed no threat to Pilate or the emperor in Rome for *My kingdom is not of this world* (18:36).

In speaking to unbelievers, particularly those who have no knowledge of the Bible we must establish some common understanding regarding the terms we use. We can be talking to one another using terms we understand but an outsider has no idea what we mean. If you ask a Muslim or a Hindu if they believe in God they will answer 'yes', but their understanding of God will be vastly different to yours. Jesus is King. What did Pilate understand by this? What do people today understand? What do you understand?

## Profound Truth

*Christ witnessed the good confession before Pontius Pilate* (I Timothy 6:13). Jesus confronted the religious powers in their envy. He confronted the civil powers in their ignorance. He confronted the lies of both religious and pagan people with the truth of God. He revealed to them a new dimension in life, a kingdom not of this world.

*You rightly say that I am a king. For this cause I was born and for this cause I have come into the world, that I should bear witness to the truth* (18:37). Jesus was not made king by a popular vote. He did not become king by the sword. He was born the King. He rules over the eternal kingdom of God. He rules not just over men's bodies but their hearts. He rules not by the sword but by the word, the living and enduring word of God.

God's word is truth. Jesus came to witness to that truth. He witnessed to the Jews and now he was witnessing to a leading Gentile. The truth of God is for all people. It is the truth about life and death, the concern of all people. The truth is that this world and all that is in it is passing away. Only the kingdom of God will remain.

*What is truth* asked Pilate, as Jesus explained to him the nature of his kingdom, and invited him to hear his voice? This profound question has echoed down through history. It is the question in the hearts and on the lips of many. Some, like Pilate, give up the quest as they hurry back to their busy lives, making the most of their brief time on this earth. Others pass over the question thinking there is no answer. 'Truth is what you say it is' others have concluded as they go off in their own beliefs. But Jesus said 'I am the truth'. *I am the way the truth and the life. No one comes to the father but by me.*

If Pilate had heard the voice of 'the Truth' standing before him he would have been changed. He would have become a new man. He would no longer fear man but God alone. Peace would have flooded his troubled soul. Are you *of the truth*? Do you hear the voice of Jesus? Have you believed in him and submit to him as your king?

*Rev. Dr. Dennis K. Muldoon*