

*Very early in the morning, the chief priests, with the elders, the teachers of the law and the whole Sanhedrin, made their plans. So they bound Jesus, led him away and handed him over to Pilate. <sup>2</sup> 'Are you the king of the Jews?' asked Pilate. 'You have said so,' Jesus replied. <sup>3</sup> The chief priests accused him of many things. <sup>4</sup> So again Pilate asked him, 'Aren't you going to answer? See how many things they are accusing you of.' <sup>5</sup> But Jesus still made no reply, and Pilate was amazed. <sup>6</sup> Now it was the custom at the festival to release a prisoner whom the people requested. <sup>7</sup> A man called Barabbas was in prison with the rebels who had committed murder in the uprising. <sup>8</sup> The crowd came up and asked Pilate to do for them what he usually did. <sup>9</sup> 'Do you want me to release to you the king of the Jews?' asked Pilate, <sup>10</sup> knowing it was out of self-interest that the chief priests had handed Jesus over to him. <sup>11</sup> But the chief priests stirred up the crowd to get Pilate to release Barabbas instead. <sup>12</sup> 'What shall I do, then, with the one you call the king of the Jews?' Pilate asked them. <sup>13</sup> 'Crucify him!' they shouted. <sup>14</sup> 'Why? What crime has he committed?' asked Pilate. But they shouted all the louder, 'Crucify him!' <sup>15</sup> Wanting to satisfy the crowd, Pilate released Barabbas to them. He had Jesus flogged and handed him over to be crucified. <sup>16</sup> The soldiers led Jesus away into the palace (that is, the Praetorium) and called together the whole company of soldiers. <sup>17</sup> They put a purple robe on him, then twisted together a crown of thorns and set it on him. <sup>18</sup> And they began to call out to him, 'Hail, king of the Jews!' <sup>19</sup> Again and again they struck him on the head with a staff and spat on him. Falling on their knees, they paid homage to him. <sup>20</sup> And when they had mocked him, they took off the purple robe and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him out to crucify him.*

It is clear from this account and that in Luke's Gospel how determined the Sanhedrin were to have Jesus put to death. Only the Romans had the power to hand out a death penalty. The chief priests, elders and scribes knew that someone claiming to be the Messiah, the anointed one of God, from some prophecies or other in some Holy books the Romans had never read, and who had not raised up a rebel army responsible for attacks on Roman soldiers, would not be sufficient evidence for a pagan Roman governor to execute someone. Whatever negative stuff we may have learnt from history about the Romans, one thing about most of them that history reveals is that they usually used logic and reasoning in their decision making. Ruthlessness, cruelty, self-interest, and personal ambition coloured decisions, but Senate appointees, like governors, consuls, tribunes and commanders of legions all knew they had to maintain order and not stir up unnecessary trouble for no good reason. Luke 23:1-2 says *Then the whole assembly rose and led him off to Pilate. <sup>2</sup> And they began to accuse him, saying, 'We have found this man subverting our nation. He opposes payment of taxes to Caesar and claims to be Messiah, a king.'* Subverting the nation, advocating non-payment of taxes, and claiming to be a king were three charges that potentially would be troublesome to a Roman governor, even though there was no evidence that any of these charges had actually caused trouble.

Pilate does his job questioning Jesus to see for himself whether Jesus is guilty and is met by silence, which amazes Pilate as the innocent usually protest their innocence when falsely accused. With the Sanhedrin and others watching the silence of Jesus can be taken in a number of ways. The silence of contempt, the silence of fear, the silence of deep grief and anger are common reasons why people do not respond to accusations. There is also the silence of tragedy: when there is nothing more to be said because any words said would not change minds already made up and deaf to any argument. The Sanhedrin had presented false charges and refuting them was pointless as their minds were closed and blinded by hatred driven by self-interest, envy, pride and embarrassment that Jesus could do what they, as leaders of the Jews, couldn't do: perform miracles, heal the sick, and defeat them in every debate they had had with him. John's account is fuller and there is dialogue between Jesus and Pilate, because Pilate has Jesus taken inside for a private conversation

away from his accusers. None of the other Gospels record this. John 18:33-39 *Pilate then went back inside the palace, summoned Jesus and asked him, 'Are you the king of the Jews?' 34 'Is that your own idea,' Jesus asked, 'or did others talk to you about me?' 35 'Am I a Jew?' Pilate replied. 'Your own people and chief priests handed you over to me. What is it you have done?' 36 Jesus said, 'My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jewish leaders. But now my kingdom is from another place.' 37 'You are a king, then!' said Pilate. Jesus answered, 'You say that I am a king. In fact, the reason I was born and came into the world is to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me.' 38 'What is truth?' retorted Pilate. With this he went out again to the Jews gathered there and said, 'I find no basis for a charge against him. 39 But it is your custom for me to release to you one prisoner at the time of the Passover. Do you want me to release "the king of the Jews"?'*

Pilate finds himself in a tricky position: he understands Jesus is innocent, but he doesn't like Jesus playing word games with him. Today if someone claimed that "his kingdom was not of this world and that he came into the world to testify to the truth, and that everyone on the side of truth listens to me", most people who didn't know anything about that person would ask, as did Pilate, "what is truth?". We live in a world where truth is increasingly no longer based on proven reality, but rather based upon feelings, emotions, fantasies and beliefs: none of which can be proven with logic or scientific evidence. Educated Romans were rational people brought up with Greek ideas of logic and the need for proof based on evidence. There were things that couldn't be proven, like religious belief, but nonetheless there was evidence of such belief in the practice of religions, of which there were many forms throughout the Empire. The Jews were among the most stubborn of all religious believers and for Romans they were a pain in the neck because of their unwillingness to be flexible and accommodating when required. Pilate's had enough and the mob outside is getting rowdy. So he goes back to face the crowd.

In Luke's account Pilate seeks advice from Herod. Luke 23 <sup>4</sup>*Then Pilate announced to the chief priests and the crowd, 'I find no basis for a charge against this man.'* <sup>5</sup>*But they insisted, 'He stirs up the people all over Judea by his teaching. He started in Galilee and has come all the way here.'* <sup>6</sup>*On hearing this, Pilate asked if the man was a Galilean.* <sup>7</sup>*When he learned that Jesus was under Herod's jurisdiction, he sent him to Herod, who was also in Jerusalem at that time.* <sup>8</sup>*When Herod saw Jesus, he was greatly pleased, because for a long time he had been wanting to see him. From what he had heard about him, he hoped to see him perform a sign of some sort.* <sup>9</sup>*He plied him with many questions, but Jesus gave him no answer.* <sup>10</sup>*The chief priests and the teachers of the law were standing there, vehemently accusing him.* <sup>11</sup>*Then Herod and his soldiers ridiculed and mocked him. Dressing him in an elegant robe, they sent him back to Pilate.* <sup>12</sup>*That day Herod and Pilate became friends – before this they had been enemies.* <sup>13</sup>*Pilate called together the chief priests, the rulers and the people,* <sup>14</sup>*and said to them, 'You brought me this man as one who was inciting the people to rebellion. I have examined him in your presence and have found no basis for your charges against him.* <sup>15</sup>*Neither has Herod, for he sent him back to us; as you can see, he has done nothing to deserve death.* <sup>16</sup>*Therefore, I will punish him and then release him.'*

Here we have another detail not in Mark's Gospel. Pilate sends Jesus to King Herod, who had heard a lot about Jesus. However Jesus disappointed him by refusing to answer his questions and refusing to perform a sign of some sort. King Herod then sends Jesus back to Pilate.

We have the chief priests and scribes making accusations, Pilate asking questions, then Pilate sending Jesus to Herod with chief priests and scribes going along, then Jesus is back with Pilate, who speaks to him privately, and gets nowhere. From Pilate's point of view, his day has been spoilt by having to deal with a large bunch religious nutters at the crack of dawn on a seemingly trivial matter,

which develops in something worse as the crowd gets stirred up. Pilate is doing his best, but things are getting out of hand.

Going back to Mark's account

*The crowd came up and asked Pilate to do for them what he usually did. <sup>9</sup> 'Do you want me to release to you the king of the Jews?' asked Pilate, <sup>10</sup> knowing it was out of self-interest that the chief priests had handed Jesus over to him. <sup>11</sup> But the chief priests stirred up the crowd to get Pilate to release Barabbas instead. <sup>12</sup> 'What shall I do, then, with the one you call the king of the Jews?' Pilate asked them. <sup>13</sup> 'Crucify him!' they shouted. <sup>14</sup> 'Why? What crime has he committed?' asked Pilate. But they shouted all the louder, 'Crucify him!' <sup>15</sup> Wanting to satisfy the crowd, Pilate released Barabbas to them.*

A week earlier the crowds had strewn palm leaves and their cloaks as Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey. Now this crowd wants him dead. Can they be the same people? Probably not. The arrest at night was done in secret. The events taking place are early in the morning, shortly after dawn. Most people in Jerusalem would not know what was going on. This was a crowd seeking the release of a prisoner, and in particular Barabbas, who we know little about other than from the Gospels. Barabbas was a murdering rebel who had his followers, and they wanted him released using a custom which even the Romans maintained. Friday was execution day, so Barabbas's followers would be there to petition Pilate for his release, and as the chief priests lent their authority to get him released, others present would assume they were doing the right thing to get him released instead of Jesus. A mob is a strange thing in human society. Mobs aren't driven by reason or justice, but by emotion and the human desire not to oppose the crowd but be part of the crowd. Lawlessness is often part of crowd behaviour. The usual rules of right and wrong, justice and injustice, fairness and unfairness are often swept away in the knowledge that no one is going to be accountable, no one is going to get caught and so people can do what they like. In these circumstances, the mob often chooses violence instead of peace, hatred instead of love, revenge instead of forgiveness, and injustice instead of justice. The mob is getting a bit wild so Pilate chooses the easy option: placate the crowd as he cares little about these Jews himself. We have to understand the Roman system. If you belonged to the Patrician class, your family was expected to serve in various positions in the empire. You would be appointed to serve somewhere as part of maintaining your family's position in the Senate and keeping in with whoever the emperor was. Appointments were all short fixed terms, usually of a year or two. Getting sent to Judea wasn't a great posting and keeping your nose clean by avoiding getting unwelcome attention from superiors was the main aim of most governors. Moving on out of one posting to another which was easier and wealthier required a record of competence, measured by no reports of rebellions, no soldiers being killed and all taxes being collected. Pilate hasn't got into any Roman history books to such an extent that he was suspected of never having existed by sceptics of Christianity. He obviously kept himself out because nothing untoward happened so far as the Romans were concerned on his watch. Until 1961, there was no archaeological evidence of his existence, but now there is.

In Matthew's account we see Pilate wash his hands, symbolising his abnegation of responsibility.

*<sup>24</sup> When Pilate saw that he was getting nowhere, but that instead an uproar was starting, he took water and washed his hands in front of the crowd. 'I am innocent of this man's blood,' he said. 'It is your responsibility!' <sup>25</sup> All the people answered, 'His blood is on us and on our children!' <sup>26</sup> Then he released Barabbas to them. But he had Jesus flogged, and handed him over to be crucified.*

In both accounts, Pilate has Jesus flogged, though why isn't explained. Probably because they flogged all those to be crucified.

The next passage is about the soldiers mocking Jesus.

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Herod's soldiers in Luke's account put an elegant robe on Jesus, mocking him as a king. Now the Roman soldiers have a go at Jesus. Life was probably boring in Jerusalem, and there was little fun to be had, so being cruel to prisoners was what so many Romans thought was entertainment. In our eyes the Romans were pretty cruel – watching fights to the death and being torn apart by wild animals was their idea of a good day out. Watching people die on crosses or being executed in other ways was also a spectator sport. This wasn't malicious: it was just that those about to die were mocked and beaten – normal procedure for all those convicted. It was cruel, but it is an example of what Christians can expect from the world. We can all expect to be mocked for believing that Jesus is alive, that he is who he says he is, and that he is the way, the truth and the life. Some today will be killed for being a believer as they are killed every day, mostly in Asia. Tens of thousands have been martyred in last 20 years, most by Muslims, but many by Hindus and Chinese communists. We are fortunate that we can still be open about our faith, but more and more of the people in Britain are becoming hostile to Christianity and Truth. Jesus shows us that arguing with those who have their minds set on mocking or persecuting you is pointless. On the Alpha course, one memorable quote was that winning a debate or argument about the existence of God and Jesus rarely encouraged someone to become a follower of Jesus. Throughout Mark's Gospel we have seen that whenever Jesus won an argument with the Pharisees and teachers of the Law, he failed to win them over to him... they all went away angry that they had lost the argument and were made to look foolish in front of everyone. That anger, resentment, and hatred resulted in the death of Jesus, as if silencing with death is the way to win an argument.

- (1) If this story happened today, what would it look like?**
- (2) What is this story saying to us today?**
- (3) Could the story make a difference to my life? If so, how?**

- (1) In Britain, we don't have lynch mobs that want to kill those who say things that the establishment finds unacceptable. However, we do have mobs in the form of what is euphemistically called "keyboard social justice warriors" who go on line to condemn anyone who they find unacceptable. There is no presumption of innocence, no presentation of facts and evidence, no allowance of a defence, and the outcome is a foregone conclusion based on what is perceived to have been said from a comment made, a sound bite taken out of context or a reply to various other matters ignored before being found by the mob – guilty. Activists whose agenda is to make their views and opinions the only ones allowed by anyone to hold, seek to shout down all who oppose them by accusing them of some phobia or other, hatred and extremism. The modern day chief priests and teachers of the Law are those who hold views opposed to Christianity, and these people are in our schools, universities, government offices and organisations, in the media, in quangos, in large and small organisations of all kinds. Their teachings and beliefs shape what can and cannot be said, what is acceptable and unacceptable, and they are intolerant of any who disagree with them.
- (2) This story tells us that silence before unjust accusations, turning the other cheek, expecting justice from those whose job is to provide justice and fairness will often result in the guilty

going free and the innocent being convicted. Being found guilty in the so-called “Court of Public Opinion” which is controlled by those activists who swamp the media with their opinions, is where today’s mob resides. The majority of the people may not agree with those views, but are told that these are the only acceptable views which should be held by “right thinking people”. These activists are usually “wrong thinking people” when measured against what the Bible says is right and wrong. Love, mercy and forgiveness are rarely found in the mob because it operates to hate, malign, condemn and punish anyone it finds guilty of whatever offence it deems worthy of condemnation.

- (3) What difference will this account in all four Gospels make in our lives? For me, it shows that we cannot place our trust in what appears in the media as being reporting of facts when so much is the reporting of just some (and not all) of the facts muddled with opinions and disinformation. We cannot place our trust in people who are supposed to act justly and fairly because their self interest will colour the way they behave, (like that of the self interest of the chief priests and teachers of the Law). We have to place our trust in God, for He just and loving.

Next week, we will look at the crucifixion.