

March 11, 2018    The Question    John 18:28-40

This portion of John in chapter 18: it is morning. Early in the morning. Friday morning, and it is going to be a very busy, full, and pain filled day. Jesus spent the balance of the night in the cistern at the house of Caiaphas. You will not find that in the Scriptures but it is one of those bits of information that has been passed down by Jews from the time of Christ to the present. It is one of those things that pilgrims to the holy land have been told generation after generation. The cistern in all likelihood was dry. Jesus was lowered down into it through a trap door in the floor. At first light, the agenda of the Sanhedrin, the Rabbinical Council of Jerusalem moves into high gear.

Jesus is moved to the palace of the Roman Procurator, Pontius Pilate. Immediately there is a problem. The representatives of the High Priest want to meet with Pilate. But it is Friday. At Sundown it will be Sabbath. And not just any Sabbath. This is the weekend celebrating and commemorating the Passover. That night when the angel of death passed over the Hebrew homes in Egypt, identified by the painting of lamb's blood on the door posts and the lintel. But the first born sons of their Egyptian task masters perished. The result would be the liberation of the Hebrew slaves. They would be allowed to leave under the leadership of Moses. The march toward Jewish nationhood with a homeland of their own begins.

These priests want to celebrate the Passover. They want to eat the Passover dinner with their families. And then means they must not enter the home of a Gentile....like Pontius Pilate.

And that is the reason that Pontius Pilate comes out to meet them. He meets them in the courtyard of his official residence in Jerusalem. To him it is a pain. These stiff necked Jews who treat the subject of religion and the nature of their God so literally create for him, problem after problem. And of course it is from them we inherited a certain streak of stubbornness where faith in God is concerned. It is not that I think they got Pilate out of bed. They may have disrupted his morning meal, or caused him to set aside important administrative duties. He wants to settle this matter quickly. His questions and his attitude are terse. He wants to get back to things he regards as more important, and frankly more rational.

His first question to them is typical of judicial system. "What charges are you bringing against this man?" And immediately there is a clash of cultures. "If he were not a criminal, we would not have handed him over to you!" They are not used to having their authority questioned in the slightest way. They are not accustomed to having to explain themselves to a Gentile...and they are not used to behaving like a conquered province of any Empire. They answer to God and God alone.

Pilate's response is curt. If it is possible he does

not want to be involved at all. He tells them to take the prisoner and judge him according to their own law, and their own systems. He wants to avoid getting caught up in a religious controversy. He does not like these people. He does not like having to be a diplomat. He does not want to make nice with them. It really is that simple.

And that is when it becomes clear why they have come to the Roman Procurator. They are subjects of the Empire. They cannot by Roman Law find a prisoner guilty of a capital offence and execute him. That is what they want. And Pilate understands immediately that he in this, whether or not he wants to be up to his imperial neck. "We do not have the right to execute anyone." He is going to have to deal with them. He is going to have to concentrate on what they say. And he is going to have to be careful. One of the things we forget about ancient Rome. They have laws. It is not that life is viewed as a precious commodity. But Pilate has to get this right or his life will be on the line. His career could come to quick end. And he has to keep Judea at peace...and yet these priests have clearly decided how Jesus should be dealt with. Caiaphas had said it... "Better that one man should die, for the relative peace of this people and this province of the Empire." And John the disciple of Jesus explains to us as part of his account, that Jesus has said HE would be crucified. And the words of Jesus, mirroring the prophecies concerning the Messiah must be fulfilled....because Jesus

is the Messiah.

Pilate wants time to think. He goes back inside. It is his safe place. The religious leaders will not try to follow him. And he decides to interview Jesus inside the palace. Again, this strategy means there will be privacy. He will not have to listen to the argumentative priests. He can try to get at the issue of what Jesus has done that has so riled the Sanhedrin against HIM. Pilate knows enough to ask the basic question. "Are you the king of the Jews?" If Jesus answers that question in the affirmative...Pilate will have grounds to proceed. Rome permits no rebellion. Leaders of rebellion die.

Jesus answers with a question. "Is that your own idea?" He is aware that the Sanhedrin wants HIM eliminated because he stirs up the people. He understands they will have poisoned the waters. Jesus in fact is insisting that if that is the question...HE will answer it in His own words and on HIS own terms. Pilate's frustration bubbles out. He makes the point he is not a Jew. The Jewish Sanhedrin has brought Jesus to Pilate. He asks the basic question. "What have you done?" What he means is what did you do to get them so riled up?

Jesus explains that HE is not the ruler of an earthly Kingdom. You can almost see Pilate's eyes roll. Religion. In Judea it is always about religion. But he snaps at the one thing he thinks he understands. This could be serious. "You are a king then?" Jesus is direct. His reply

amounts to “Yes. I was born for this. I came into the world to testify to the truth.” He is talking about Biblical truth. Old Testament truth. “Everyone on the side of truth listens to me.”

Pilate is dismissive. “What is truth?” To Pilate this is religion and philosophy. In the real world, the person who holds political power defines truth. It changes every time someone else is in power. Every time someone new has the power to decide how things will unfold. Truth in Pilate’s world is defined by the one who has the most powerful army...there are not absolutes. And he takes neither the gods of Rome, nor the God of Judea seriously. He is not interested in a discussion about the meaning of truth. He ends the interview. He goes outside to talk to the priests.

Remember that John the disciple and author of this account was in the courtyard. Because he is known by Caiaphas he has been allowed to tag along as it were. He has no part in the discussions. But he is a witness. Pilate announces that he finds no reason for a capital charge against Jesus. He offers them a bone. It is part of the Passover custom in Roman Judea that one prisoner in the judicial system of Rome is given amnesty. He offers to free Jesus in keeping with that custom. There is shouting, disorder, they do not want Jesus released at all. They want Barabbas released. Barabbas had been involved in rebellion. Pilate goes back inside. There will be no easy

solutions. His attempt at diplomacy has failed. And a real rebel could go free.

It is early in the day. Pilate has a headache. He is going to have to make a decision. If anything it has gotten harder instead of easier. Pilate hates being in Judea.

Let us pray;

Lord be with us as we remember the details of this episode. Grant that we might remember it is for us that Jesus was arrested. It is for us that Jesus was on trial. It is for us that people wanted HIM to die. Most of all help us to remember YOU gave HIM into the world to redeem those who believe in HIM. Grant that we may taste your grace and love. Amen