

March 31, 2019 Crosswords Pt. 4 John 18:28-38

I said last Sunday that Jesus was held in the house of Caiaphas overnight. Tradition going back to the time of the first Christian pilgrims visiting the Holy Land indicates that Jesus cell was a dry cistern in the home of the High Priest. Jesus would have been bound and lowered through the lid of that cistern in the floor. I believe that tradition is true for 3 reasons. First of all John's account states very clearly (vs. 28) that members of the Sanhedrin...the Rabbinical Council in Jerusalem...led Jesus from Caiaphas to the palace of the Roman Governor. In other words it is clear Jesus spent the night in the house of Caiaphas. According to that same verse it is now early morning. The only remaining question can be, where in the house of Caiaphas did Jesus spend the night?

I believe the "cistern tradition" because the fact is you cannot get behind it. If there were other versions of this truth (the answer to the question where did Jesus spend the night) they would have been unearthed. As I said, as long as Christian pilgrims have been visiting Jerusalem to walk in the footsteps of Jesus, this has been the story. The house is identified. The cistern has been opened up so that visitors can descend a stairway down to the cistern floor and enter on that lower level through the cistern wall.

The third reason is this: the cistern as a holding cell is not something the church has taught us. It is Jewish information. You only hear about the cistern in the city of

Jerusalem. It is part of a mass of material that has been passed down through the centuries by word of mouth as Jerusalem information. Modern tour guides are licenced by the government. To get that licence they have to take a 3 year course that is at least as rigorous and Biblically informed as the 3 years Presbyterian ministers spend at Knox College, or any other seminary within or without the denomination. My impression was that our tour guides knew the Gospel accounts better than I do. In addition they would point out chapter and verse with the conviction of local history on their side and say... this is where it happened.

Early on the morning of Friday, the High Priest, his entourage and Temple Guards moved the prisoner. They took Jesus to Pontius Pilate. He had an official residence in Jerusalem. He spent as little time as he could there because he did not enjoy the heat, and he did not enjoy the culture. Everything in Jerusalem swirls around the traditions and teachings of the Jewish faith. Pilate was a Gentile, and a secular man. He was not interested in religious philosophy. And he did not the enjoy the politics, the “games” played by those who were religious. He was first and foremost a soldier. He was continually having to deal with Judea as a province of the Empire that would not recognize it had been conquered.

To Pilate Jesus is a problem. The High Priest and the Sanhedrin think there is room for discussion. Pilate has to exercise patience. He has to be diplomatic lest the province of

Judea revolts. Rome is not supposed to play these games. Pilate does not understand this God fearing people. He does not like them. He wants to do his job and get on with his career in the Roman military. He does not enjoy the local food...that is a three times a day irritant.

The members of the Sanhedrin refuse to enter the palace of the Roman Procurator. He is a Gentile. If they touch anything, including walking on the floors, their point of view is that they will be made ceremonially unclean. It is Passover. It is unthinkable that they would do something which would mean they cannot participate in the celebrations, rituals and meals that are part of the greatest religious festival in the Jewish year. They demand to see Pilate but they will not enter. He therefore has to go outside to meet them. He is therefore in a bad mood to begin with. He is the Roman Procurator. He is supposed to be in charge. He cannot even demand they meet with him in his "office," hall, whatever.

On the other hand Pilate is a Gentile. The disrespect of the High Priest and his entourage is obvious. They come trying to make demands. They show no care about Roman law or Roman ways. They want this done in their way. They want to subject Pilate to the Jewish will. They want Jesus executed and they do not want to debate or negotiate the matter. The dialogue reveals the testiness on both sides. The delegation makes it clear what they want is to have Jesus put to death. Pilate has a very real problem. He is not in Judea to do things in

a Jewish way. He must dot his I's and cross his T's according to Roman Law and Roman procedure. Pilate cannot just order that someone be killed. There has to be a trial. There has to be hearing. He must know more. And that means he is cornered into actually having to talk to the prisoner. He will have to file a report. The report will be read in Rome. He is not a happy camper.

It is something to be noted. John is writing this account late in life. He was close enough to hear what went on. Pilate goes back inside where these Jews cannot follow. He orders the prisoner be brought inside. Roman guards have to bring him. Based on what Pilate has been told he asks his first question. He thinks he is going to the heart of the matter. "Are you the king of the Jews?" Jesus does not answer. He asks a question of HIS own. "Is that your own idea, or did others talk to you about me?" Pilate comes close to blowing a fuse. "Am I a Jew?" He does not understand any of these people. They love to argue. They think they can take charge. Pilate is the Procurator of Rome in Judea! He may have to take this nonsense from their religious leaders. He has no intention of playing games with a prisoner. "It was your people, and your chief priests who handed you over to me." He manages to take a deep breath. He can feel a headache coming on. He starts over. "What have you done?" The implication is, "to make them so angry."

Jesus offers an explanation. “ My kingdom is not of this world. If it were my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jews. But now, my kingdom is from another place.” Do you hear his answer? It is about a kingdom. He has not tried to start a rebellion. Jesus kingdom is not a worldly kingdom. I am not a prince. I am not at liberty to behave as the world at large might. The church has made huge mistakes when she has forgotten that fact or lost her way. But at this point we do come to heart of the matter. Pilate has asked the right questions. And he hears what he thought he heard. So he asks. “You are a king then!” The KJV says it was a question. “Are you a King then?” The reason for the ambiguity is that the Greek of the New Testament documents is without punctuation. And Jesus reply is also subject to interpretation. This translation says Jesus replied, “You are right to say that I am a king.” The KJV says Jesus replied, “You say that I am a king.” But there is no ambiguity in what follows. Jesus went on to say, “For this reason I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me.” At this point Pilate breaks off the interview saying, in utter frustration, “What is truth?” He is not looking for an answer.

So let us just follow on Pilate’s question. What is truth? I will offer you a simple answer. It is based on my experience and whatever qualifications I have as a scholar. I will spend the rest of my life as I have spent most of my life urging people this is the one and only answer to the question,

What is truth? Jesus said, "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep." It was the reason for which Jesus was born and came into our world. It was the reason HE died on Calvary's cross. It was the reason He was raised the 3rd day. He is the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords. To God be the glory!

Let us pray:

The prayer this morning is taken again from the words of a famous hymn. The theologian Karl Barth said this was greatest single thing he had learned in all of his life. I have taken some liberty with the words.

O Lord our God;

Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so. Little ones to HIM belong. We are weak, but HE is strong. Yes, Jesus loves me. The Bible tells me so. Amen