

YOU CANNOT KILL THE TRUTH

Scripture Reading: John 18:33-38, RSV

It's six o'clock in the morning. Jesus has been up all night. First He was with Annas and then about three o'clock in the morning He was sent to Caiaphas where He was interrogated and insulted for three hours. Now He stands before the highest Roman official in the land of Palestine. He will be there approximately six hours until He is sentenced to death. With Annas and Caiaphas, Jesus was subject to Jewish law. But Pilate had the last word, and under Pilate Jesus had to be convicted under Roman law and according to Roman procedures. It is often claimed that the trial of Jesus by the Sanhedrin was illegal. The gospels do depict some very curious things happening, but we are not sure that the trial was illegal. In fact, we are not really sure it was a trial at all. The Jews were very meticulous about the judicial process. They didn't break the rules very often. Some scholars have concluded that because they picture Jesus as being tried in a way that does break the rules in the New Testament, accounts must be erroneous.

There are several ways to handle that:

1. To say that the trial procedures at the time of Jesus were very different than the trials that came later or even some of those that came earlier. When the temple and the city of Jerusalem were destroyed in 70 A.D. all records of the kinds of procedures that were followed were also destroyed.
2. All we have recorded in the gospel before Annas and Caiaphas is a kind of preliminary unofficial hearing, not a formal trial. The formal trial was something that had to wait until the Romans had Jesus in their custody. So a preliminary trial wouldn't need the full judicial procedure, which certainly wasn't allowable at night, and the kind of testimony that was accepted against Jesus would certainly not have been admitted.
3. Or a third answer, which is a possibility, is simply that the Jews did in every way break the law in the way that they tried Jesus that night.

What was the real complaint against Jesus? What was it that caused them to hate Him and crucify Him? Was it that He claimed to be the Messiah? That was no crime in the Jewish law. Other people had claimed to be the Messiah but they hadn't been killed for it. Was it that He had violated the Mosaic law? Perhaps He had on an occasion or two, but it was very hard to prove because Jesus was always dealing with the interpretative questions and they never could really pin it down.

The Talmud has an interesting charge against Jesus which does appear in the gospel in two places. They charge Jesus with being a sorcerer (Matt. 10:25), somebody who is acting in concert with the devil. That may be one reason why He was crucified. He had also defied the priests by cleansing the temple. He had refused to defend His actions against their criticisms, and He even made them look ridiculous on a couple of occasions. That may have been part of it too.

They were also afraid He would spearhead a political uprising and this would bring retaliation from Rome. And they also accused Him of blasphemy, claiming to be God when in fact He was only a man. Many reasons contributed to Jesus' death. Perhaps the most significant one is simply that the Jews had

YOU CANNOT KILL THE TRUTH

closed minds and couldn't accept any kind of teaching that varied from what they had been led to believe was true.

The Sanhedrin, the Jewish supreme court, lacked the authority to condemn anyone to death. To execute anyone under Roman law, they had to get Pilate's authorization. Some of you may say, what about Stephen? He was tried and then he was stoned. But the story of Stephen in the book of Acts ought not to be seen as an official trial by the Jews which resulted in an execution that was legally authorized. Scholars say what happened to Stephen was nothing more than a lynch mob. He was stoned out of the fury of the mob, not because they had the legal authority to do it.

You might be surprised when you realize that Jesus had been up all night and then at six o'clock in the morning the leading Roman official was able to greet Him in the palace. But it was common for the Romans to be at work at daybreak. In fact, the Emperor Vespasian reputedly got to work so early that by dawn he was finished with all of his paper work and was ready for other things. So Pilate's being in the palace is not a surprise.

There is an interesting difference between John's report of the trials and the other gospels. Matthew, Mark, and Luke all spend a lot of time describing the Jewish trial. John barely mentions it but spends a lot of time talking about the Roman trial. Why would John virtually ignore the Jewish trial and then emphasize the Roman?

This gets into John's theology. In other words, what is John trying to say by giving so much attention to this trial, and particularly to Pilate and his reactions?

I have a kind of belief and it's this: that John used Pilate as a symbol, even as he used a Samaritan woman, Nicodemus, and other main figures in his gospel as figures or representatives of the kinds of reactions that were possible to Jesus Christ who claimed to be the Son of God. These people symbolized postures that you could adopt in relationship to Christ. I am inclined to think of Pilate as another one of those figures. But to understand how Pilate would be such a figure you've got to know the historical background, particularly the details of Pilate's career.

Pilate is one of the few New Testament figures that we know a great deal about from non-Biblical material. The famous Jew, Philo, tells us that Pilate was a robber, a murderer, a blasphemer, and an inhumane beast. Josephus writes extensively about his many blunders and atrocities. When you look at the story nobody can doubt that Pilate did not believe one word the Jews were telling him about Jesus. He believed that everything they were saying was really nothing but a pack of lies. There was no doubt in his mind that Christ was innocent and he did not want to condemn Him to death.

First he refused even to deal with Jesus. He talked to him for a minute or two, walked out and said he found no fault in this man. The Jews put pressure on him and then Pilate tried to coax them by releasing a prisoner, as was customary at the Passover. I will give you a choice: either Barabbas or Jesus. Pilate thought that Barabbas was so repulsive to them that they would never select him as the one to be released and condemn Jesus to death. But they said to give them Barabbas. Thinking that their fury could not be abated unless he punished Jesus in some way short of crucifixion, he decided to have Him scourged. To be scourged in Roman times was like being beaten within an inch of your life. Pilate obviously hoped that the sight of Jesus almost dead, beaten unmercifully, would pacify them

enough so that they would let Him go. But they didn't.

You can't imagine what a scourging was like unless you have read some of the grotesque accounts of what happened to human beings when they were scourged. Scourging was done with a whip that was weighted with iron that had filed iron tips in it. When a strong, robust Roman soldier took that thing to a human being's back, it was nothing but a mass of bloody pulp in just a few minutes. Many people died under a scourging.

Pilate had done everything to try to get the Jews to compromise, to take less than Jesus's death. But they would not. The interesting thing is that he kept giving in. He never said to them, 'No, I am not going to do it.' They kept pressuring him and he kept coming up with another solution.

The answer to Pilate's mysterious behavior, given the fact that he had the power he had, lies with his previous relationships with Judea. It was customary for the Romans not to send any troops to a portion of the empire where they did not have any problems. In fact, the Senate tended to rule to some extent from Rome itself. They didn't worry about it, the people were loyal, there was no need to station garrisons there to quiet riots. But Palestine knew the sights and sounds of Roman legions because it was a trouble spot. The Jews were fiercely nationalistic. They were fanatically religious, and they were very stubborn. The mere fact Pilate was asked to be the procurator is some testimony to the faith that the Roman leadership had in his ability as an administrator.

But the Peter principle caught up with Pilate in Palestine. He failed completely. He seemed to be so insensitive to the Jewish mind and culture that the very first day he arrived in Jerusalem he made one of the most incredible blunders of his career. Josephus tells us about it.

In the Jewish mind any image of the emperor was considered to be an idol. The emperor was a god in the Roman Empire and even the mere image of the emperor in the precincts of the temple was considered to be an idolatrous act. All Roman regiments carried standards to symbolize the regiment. On top of each Roman standard was a little metal bust of the emperor. In deference to the Jews' religious beliefs and sensitivity about this, all previous governors had come into Jerusalem with the metal bust of the emperor missing from the standards.

When Pilate came into Jerusalem, the soldiers were carrying the standards with the emperor's bust on top of it. He wasn't going to baby these Jews. He was going to show them who was boss. Of course the Jews weren't going to put up with that, so they tried to get to see him. He ignored them but they just kept hanging around. He finally left Jerusalem and went to Cesaerea where his main palace was. They followed him there and hung around for five more days. Finally he said he would meet them in the amphitheatre. The Jews gathered in the amphitheatre and Pilate sent his soldiers. Then he stood up and said, "If you people do not stop bothering me and nagging and pestering me with this nonsense about the idols, I am going to have you killed on the spot."

A good administrator never gets himself into a position where he can't maneuver. But that is what Pilate did. The Jews said, "You might as well kill us because we are not going home." Pilate had a problem and he backed down.

That took care of Pilate and his threats. He couldn't kill defenseless men for adhering to their religious

YOU CANNOT KILL THE TRUTH

principles the first week in office. So he acquiesced. But the Jews were angry and they would not forget what he had done very quickly. They also knew that Pilate could be intimidated. It might take a lot of pressure but he would yield.

In another incident, Pilate decided to build an aqueduct in Jerusalem. There was a chronic water shortage in the city and a new aqueduct would solve it. But he needed money. Apparently quite innocently he went to the temple treasury and took the money out. There were millions of dollars in the temple treasury. He probably did not take the money that was given for the services itself, known as the sacred money, but took the Korban, which was the money designed to be used for non-sacred purposes. In fact, it could not be used for sacred purposes.

The aqueduct would certainly benefit the temple because a great deal of water was used in the temple services just for the cleansing ceremonies. Pilate probably never expected that he would get any kind of negative reaction to something he was doing for the city and for the temple. But the people resented Pilate going into the temple treasury and taking the money without permission. So they rioted. Pilate, in another one of his brilliant maneuvers, decided that he would send his soldiers armed into the middle of the mob disguised as civilians. He apparently also went down into the middle of the mob, disguised. At his given signal the soldiers pulled out their swords and started killing people. That was a mistake. By the time it was finished Pilate had been somewhat censured by the emperor himself and the Jews were now really angry.

Following Jesus' trial, Pilate did it again. He decided to decorate the wall of his palace with shields picturing the emperor. The Jews heard about it and they refused to take 'no' for an answer; the shields had to come down off the walls. Pilate wouldn't take them down, so the Jews went straight to the emperor. He sent word to Pilate to get the shields off the wall. Anytime the emperor himself had to interfere with the administration of a local province, that governor was in trouble. Later on Pilate was recalled, according to the historians of the period. That is the kind of man we are dealing with in this narrative.

By the time Jesus came to trial, Pilate's relationship with the Jews was terrible and he really could not afford to anger them again. So the words, "If you let this man go you are not Caesar's friend," are clearly words of blackmail. 'If you do not accede to our request, Pilate, we are going to the emperor and you know what that means.'

In the story Pilate stands as a representative of a particular kind of person and how he relates to Christ. John has described the mindset of Jews in Palestine that utterly refused to accept Christ as the Messiah, regardless of the evidence, as one group. But Pilate seems to be a symbol of the group that neither refuses to believe nor fully accepts Jesus as the Messiah, the group that likes to stay in the middle, the indecisive group.

Many people like this are well-intentioned and more honest perhaps than Pilate may have been. But by trying to adopt a neutral position in a conflict in which you have to take sides and give a total commitment, tragedy is the inevitable result. By avoiding decisions you end up in a tragedy, just as Pilate did.

Jesus told Pilate 'My kingdom is not of this world, you don't have to worry about Me trying to usurp

Roman authority here. If my kingdom were of this world my servants would be fighting with you right now.' That gave Pilate some comfort. But then Jesus said to Pilate, "I want you to recognize the truth, that is what is really important. Everyone who is of the truth hears my voice."

Pilate would not face the challenge of the truth. He didn't believe Jesus deserved to die. But he wouldn't face it. He tried to persuade the Jews to accept a solution that would make it unnecessary for Jesus to die. So Pilate, trying to be neutral, lost complete control, not only of the situation but of his own self and his destiny. He failed to listen to the truth and decide in its favor. He then had no choice but to do what the world always wants to do with the truth—abandon it or seek to destroy it.

Indecision, compromise and yielding to pressure were Pilate's mistakes, his weaknesses. What is interesting is that John starts out the story with Jesus on trial but by the time he gets to the end Jesus is asking Pilate all the questions, and he is on trial and Jesus is sitting in the judgment seat. Pilate's answer, "What is truth?" is a true copout. His question is a lie, a hypocrisy. He knows what the truth is about Jesus, that he deserves not to die. Because he has given into the lies the Jews have told about Jesus, Pilate's question, "What is truth?" is really a cynical one.

When the truth calls for us to be courageous, to make a decision that may be unpopular, to leap out of our comfort of neutrality, we would all like to pretend ignorance of what is involved. But you cannot do that. The one thing the truth will never allow is neutrality. If you try to kill the truth, you will find that truth will not die.

The Jews and Pilate wanted to kill the truth. If we just kill Him then the whole problem will go away—and all of His claims, all of the feelings He has aroused—and everybody will be satisfied. But in the end, he who would kill the truth is killed by the truth because a lie has no reality.

There are people who defend what Pilate did with Jesus. They argue this way, Pilate was a politician, his responsibility was to keep peace. What was the wisest, most prudent political decision to make given the circumstances? What was the politically expedient thing to do? If peace is the first essential, the most important thing, then what he did with Jesus was absolutely justifiable.

Sir James Fitzjames Stephen in his book, *Liberty, Equality, Fraternity* (New York. Henry Holt & Co., 1882), p. 87, passionately defends Pilate in these words:

Was Pilate right in crucifying Christ? I reply, Pilate's paramount duty was to preserve the peace in Palestine, to form the best judgment he could as to the means required for that purpose, and to act upon it when it was formed. Therefore if and in so far as he believed in good faith and on reasonable grounds that what he did was necessary for the preservation of the peace of Palestine, he was right.

In other words the same argument was used when Jesus was before the Jewish leaders—it would be better to let one man die, even if He is innocent, than to have a riot in which thousands of people are killed. It's the very kind of argument that we use today for national security purposes, illegal assassinations, etc.

The problem is that when a decision is based on what we call utilitarian grounds, that is what will do

YOU CANNOT KILL THE TRUTH

the most good for the greatest number of people, then you have sacrificed doing something merely because it is right, good, and true. You have refused to pay the consequences for doing the right thing.

I submit to you that every time you make a decision on that basis you are trying to kill the truth. Nothing justifies doing that, not the need for a grade, money, or what would be the best for the church. Every time you try to kill the truth, the truth rises up with vengeance and destroys you. That is what Pilate seems to represent in this chapter. He who seeks to kill the truth may find that the truth will kill him.