

STUDY 6 - MATTHEW 27:11-26

In the previous study we saw Jesus being handed over from the Jewish leadership to Pilate the governor (see 27:1-2). Pontus Pilate served as a governor of Judea from AD 26 to 36, and was well known for being greedy, cruel and oppressive. He was particularly well known for deliberately provoking the Jews so the fact that the Jewish leadership are working with him is remarkable. This shows how hatred of Jesus unites the whole of mankind, Jew and gentile. Pilate was also known for becoming malleable under pressure. Although he was a fierce leader, he could also be seen to be weak.

It is probably not an accident that Matthew sandwiches his account of Judas' death between his account of Jesus before Pilate. As Knox Chamblin points out in his commentary (which is brilliant - I've used/plagiarised it lots for these notes, published by Mentor) there are lots of ways in which you can compare these tragic figures. Both are very responsible for Jesus' death but attempt to distance themselves from it (either by throwing away money or washing their hands). Both see the desperate situation they are in by contributing to Jesus' death, but do not pull back from what they are doing (and let others, the Jewish authorities and the crowds) have the final say. Both have the power to stop things, but don't - they both hand Jesus over to death.

VERSE 11-14

The question Pilate asks Jesus is a serious accusation - Luke 23:2 tells us this question has been fed to him by the Jewish authorities. It was a good way to gain a favourable verdict from a Roman governor to charge Jesus with fomenting rebellion against Caesar and demanding allegiance to him instead.

Just as he was before Caiphas, Jesus is wise and sparing with what he says. He replies affirmatively (verse 11). He is the King of the Jews (remember Matthew 2:2), and he will reign over all the nations (see Matthew 28:18). Yet Pilate does not understand the question he is asking - he does not understand what it means for Jesus to be King, or what it means for someone to follow Jesus as King here and now (it does not mean rebellion against human authorities - remember Romans 13).

The "trial" continues in a similar way to the "trial" before the Sanhedrin (back in 26:57-68). The Jewish leaders were still present, and continued to accuse him, and Jesus is silent. This silence was an embarrassment to Pilate (27:13), as the Romans wanted the accused to make a defence of their actions (see Acts 25:16). It was however not an act of weakness or fear from Jesus. He had nothing to say for he had done nothing. In this the prophecy is fulfilled once more (Isaiah 53:7)

VERSES 15-26

The "trial" is not going anywhere so Pilate moves on to his one chance of saving face in the situation. There is a custom that at times of feasting the authorities released a prisoner. Pilate offered the crowd a choice between Jesus and Barabbus, presumably expecting that the crowd would want Jesus to be released and Barabbus to remain under sentence. The fact that Barabbus was a "notorious" prisoner is emphasised (having participated in insurrection and murder, see Mark 15:7 and Luke 23:19). Pilate puts the decision in the hands of the crowds, due to his own cowardice, and because he knew the Jewish leaders had their minds made up about Jesus (verse 18) - they felt threatened by Jesus' influence.

As Pilate does this we are given an insight into how The Lord has been dealing with him. Just as with Judas, Pilate is not put in the position of condemning Jesus without knowing the seriousness of what he is about to do. His wife had a dream to warn him (verse 19), and had been given a supernatural revelation of his righteousness. It is ironic here that a gentile woman knows more about the truth of who Jesus is than Jewish leaders. Pilate will not positively act on this revelation. Pilate's action of giving the crowds a vote is his attempt to have everything - to save face with the Jews and to release Jesus without actually having to do anything.

The crowds however want Jesus - the one who is the Christ, God's anointed king (verse 22), dead. Given a choice we'd rather have a murderer alive than God as our King. They cry out for his crucifixion, knowing he is innocent (verse 23). Pilate knew Jesus was innocent and symbolically (but pathetically) washed his hands in front of the crowd (verse 24). The crowd willingly and chillingly took on responsibility for Jesus' death. They are confident of the rightness of what they are doing and stress they are willing to take the consequences. Note the corporate solidarity of what they say ("and on our children" - a key part of Jewish/Biblical thought). Pilate does what the crowd want - and Jesus is scourged (tied to a post and whipped with leather straps) and led out to his crucifixion.

This section shows clearly the unity of the human race in our responsibility for the death of Jesus. The Jews, Gentiles, and the crowd are united in one thing - our desire to be rid of Christ.

The substitution of Jesus for Barabbus is a vivid picture of what Jesus was about to achieve at the cross - going there so we don't have to.

There are ironies running through these verses. How is Jesus' righteousness most clearly seen (verse 19)? By his death on the cross where we see how sin is dealt with. How is Jesus' rule as God's king clearly seen (verse 11)? By his rule on the cross, where he triumphs over his enemies.

The words of the crowd in verse 25 are chilling, and show the wrath we bear for our sin - and our collective guilt for Jesus' death. Yet it was to a crowd in Jerusalem (probably containing a lot of the same people) that the gospel was preached after Jesus' resurrection. And note how Peter ended his sermon in Acts 2:38-39

"Repent and be baptised every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For this promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom The Lord our God calls to himself"

POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

What question does Pilate ask Jesus? Why do you think Jesus answers in the way he does? (Vs 11-12)

What does Pilate offer the crowd? What do you think he expects the crowd to choose? Who do they choose?

How is Jesus' innocence emphasised in this passage?

Is Pilate just "caught up in events" here? How does God warn him about what he is about to do?

What similarities are there between the character of Judas and the character of Pilate in these chapters?

Who is responsible for the crucifixion of Jesus?

Compare the crowds answer in 27:25 with Peter's speech to them in Acts 2:38-39. How does that emphasise the wonder of the gospel?