CLASS 5: Jesus Conversation with Pilate John 18-19

There are a number of great conversations in John that Jesus has with others. Jesus and the woman at the well; with Nicodemus; with Nathaniel. Jesus' conversation with Pilate is remarkable for a number of reasons. First, it demonstrates the importance of the identity of Jesus. Second, it relates the significance of truth. Finally, we get to see a man change his perspective of Jesus.

After two trials before the Jews, John 19 tells us that the Jews bring jesus to Pilate. This is one of two times He comes before Pilate, with a trial before Herod in Luke. The scene begins with Pilate making a mockery out of Jesus' identity as King of the Jews. This derision is seen in physical abuse, a robe of purple, and a crown of thorns. When Pilate then brings out Jesus, he points to Him (whom he has found not fault) and proclaims "here is the man". Pilate likely seeks to satisfy the growing crowd's blood-lust by humiliating Jesus in manner that makes Jesus seem ridiculous; perhaps Pilate thinks that by mocking Jesus as a king, and telling everyone He is clearly only a man, they will themselves be satisfied and Jesus is no longer a threat. However, now the entire crowd, as worked by the Jewish Elders, will accept only one outcome: crucifixion.

Here too we see Pilate give the authority to the Jews to crucify Christ. It was not unheard of for Jews to crucify others; one record suggests a number of Pharisees were crucified by the ruling Sadducees and Hellenistic Jews during the Hasmonean period . This offer is rejected by the Jews, who claim Jesus must die for the crime of being the Son of God. Any claim that they had no right to kill Jesus is ridiculous, and seen later with Stephen in Acts 7.

Pilate has lost control of this situation. He returns and asks Jesus where He is from, and pleads with Jesus to respond, attempting to gain control over Jesus by asserting his authority of life and death in this matter. Jesus tells Pilate a most frightening truth: the authority over life and death was given to him by the Father. This terrifying revelation is followed with a statement of guilt: these who turned Him over to Pilate were guilty of the greater sin. This is not an absolution of Pilate, who stands guilty of many things.

Pilate and Jesus then begin a dialogue, one of the most remarkable in the entire Gospel. Pilate the Tyrant and the Man accused of being the King of the Jews begin to discuss the authority of kings, and the meaning of Truth. This title, "King of the Jews" was a specific title that, as mentioned before, had once belonged to Herod the Great. In Herod's case, it had been bestowed on him by the Roman Senate in 37BC. Jesus would be born to this title, and after birth His life was in jeopardy because of this title, and ultimately would die for the crime of holding this title.

Pilate is perplexed that the Jews do not wish to elevate this Man as "King of the Jews", but wish to execute Him. Jesus had a genealogical right to identify Himself as heir

to the throne of David , but instead makes clear that His Kingdom was not one in competition with Rome, but instead was a spiritual authority.

Pilate tries repeatedly to release Jesus. We are told that he perceives that the issue here is not legal, but was envy . Too, we might wish to understand that the penalty of crucifixion was one not to be engaged in lightly; Roman rulers had been removed (and one even crucified himself) for invoking the extreme penalty without merit. Finally, let us not miss that some of this is consideration that Pilate may be believing that Jesus is something more than a mere man, as evidenced by his fear in John 19:8, or the message he received from his wife in Matthew 27:19. Likely, all of the above were on his mind, and we see Pilate attempting with several different ploys to release Jesus and still appease the Jews. Let us consider them as follows:

1. He sends Jesus to Herod for trial (Luke 23:6)
2. He demands the Jews try Jesus by their own laws
3. He offers to release Jesus according to custom
4. He makes the counter-offer to release Barabbas instead
5. He abuses Jesus as “King of the Jews”, and tells them He is only a man
6. He orders the Jews to crucify Jesus
7. He made other unrecorded attempts to release Jesus (John 19:12)

Pilate then attempts to release Jesus by means of politics. He intends to release a prisoner, and chooses Barabbas, a notorious criminal. We cannot help but to think that this is an attempt to scare the crowds to release Jesus; after all, who would you want on the streets, a dangerous thief and killer or a man whose only crime is being good? Yet the crowds, worked up by the leaders of the Jews, seek Barabbas.

When Pilate presents himself again, the Jews make the most dramatic argument in their case: if Pilate supports Jesus, he necessarily opposes Caesar. Pilate, despite the reputation of viciousness, is subjugated by his fear. He comes to the seat of judgment (it is here that Matthew records Pilate receiving word from his wife to avoid dealing with “that just Man”). The exact location of “Gabbatha” is unknown, but we presume it was the location that official edicts of judgment were given, perhaps similar in nature to the judgment seat of Acts 18:12. With one last attempt to identify Jesus as someone they should revere, Pilate is placed in the predicament of being the less loyal of Romans to these Jews. They shout that they have no king but Caesar; a remarkable act of blasphemy . Pilate now turns Jesus over to his own soldiers to be taken for crucifixion.

One final act of defiance on the part of Pilate is to signify the crime for which Jesus would die. This posting was called the Titulus; we presume that on either side of Jesus the tituli would read “thievery”. The cross on which Jesus would be hung bore the crime in three languages (Latin, Greek and Hebrew), so that no one would mis-understand, regardless of their nationality. The Jews are offended, as this is an official recognition of Jesus’ authority, and seek to have it changed. Pilate, in contrast with the rest of his decisions, stands firm.