

Prayer

Lord God, Your gifts to us are beyond compare, for how can we measure the immense value of all You have done for us in sending Jesus to be our Saviour? We thank You and we praise You for the great gift of salvation found in Jesus Christ, and we offer our lives to You so that Your will may be done on earth. May we continue to be worthy of the name 'Christian', and may we always be ready to declare His name. We praise You, Lord God ALLELUIA!

Prayer Suggestions

Prayer ideas

Write down a list of problems in your life from the past and present. Bring them to God one by one, and pray. Wait on Him for His guidance.

On-going prayers

- **Pray for the higher education** *Pray for politicians and those who are responsible for governing universities in your country*
- *Give thanks for electricity and all it does to enhance life today*
- *Pray children who are abused, in whatever circumstances*

Meditation

Give thanks for days of happiness;

when the Lord gives us blessings despite all our problems:

Give thanks for the joy of love;

when those who are close give us happiness by what they do:

Give thanks for the peace of security;

when our bodies, souls and spirits have rest, and fear nothing:

Give thanks for moments of satisfaction;

when the work we have done is successful and bears fruit:

Give thanks for the stability of true faith;

when by trusting the Lord we stand firm, whilst all else fails:

Give thanks for the salvation we have in Christ;

for without this we have nothing; but in Him we have all!

Bible passage – Matthew 27:11-19

¹¹ Now Jesus stood before the governor; and he asked him, 'Are you the King of the Jews?' Jesus said, 'So you say.'¹² However, when he was accused by the chief priests and elders, he gave no answer. ¹³ Then Pilate said to him, 'Do you not hear how many charges they have made against you?' ¹⁴ But Jesus gave no answer, not even to one thing, to the amazement of the governor.

¹⁵ Now it was the governor's custom to release a prisoner for the crowd at the Festival; anyone they wanted. ¹⁶ At that time they had a notorious prisoner, called (Jesus) Barabbas. ¹⁷ So when the crowd gathered, Pilate said to them, 'Which one do you want me to release for you, (Jesus) Barabbas or Jesus who is called "Messiah"?' ¹⁸ For he realized that they had handed him over to him out of jealousy.

¹⁹ While he was sitting on the judge's bench, his wife sent word to him, 'Have nothing to do with that honest man, for I have been greatly troubled because of a dream about him.'

Bible Study

Review

In this reading, we hear about the tragic events that led to Jesus crucifixion by Roman soldiers. Having been arrested by the Jews and condemned by them on a trumped up charge of blasphemy, Jesus was hauled in front of the only man in all Israel capable of enacting the death penalty, the Roman procurator, Pontius Pilate (describe by Matthew as the 'governor' – 27:11). This passage also sets the tragic scene for the climactic events of Jesus' trial and sentence to death by public acclamation, which we will read tomorrow (27:20-26). In general, our reading shows us that Jesus had no more of a trial in front of Pilate than He had in front of Caiaphas; it was an interrogation rather than a trial, as befits the authority of rulers who wielded absolute personal power over life and death.

There are many similarities between Jesus' appearance before Pilate and His previous arraignment before Caiaphas. Jesus answered '*you have said so*' (26:63,64) to Caiaphas' question '*are you the Messiah?*' and He said something similar ('*so you say*') to Pilate when asked '*are you the King of the Jews*' (27:11). In each case, Jesus was not vague because he would not accept these titles, but He spoke cautiously because of what it meant for these two to use them. Caiaphas was the high priest of God, and yet he spoke about the Messiah with disrespect; Pilate was a Roman governor, and he was politically devious as he spoke about the 'King of the Jews', for he would truck no talk of power other than his own. In both appearances, Jesus remained silent before all charges, leaving everyone angry and confused; Caiaphas, the chief priests, and now Pilate (27:12-14).

Jesus appears to have remained silent after his brief reply to Pilate (27:12f.), and instead of being frustrated, Pilate sought to regain control of the situation. It is doubtful that he would have wanted to do what the religious leaders wanted of him, yet he was no fool, and anyone who presented a threat to the authority of Rome, on whatever grounds, would normally be shown no mercy.

Yet something about Jesus had intrigued Pilate, for there seems no other reason for him to do what he did next. He turned the matter over for a decision of the people (27:15f.), using the excuse of the governor's benevolent right to release a Jewish prisoner at the festival of the Passover! Any number of theories could be advanced as to why Pilate did not just condemn Jesus on the spot. He could have perceived something about Jesus that made him fearful of the 'gods' (as Pilate would have thought of them), he could have been playing with the Jewish leaders and the crowds, or he could have been frustrated by the incident and wanted to leave. All we know from this passage is that amongst the many possible motives his actions, Pilate wanted to expose the jealousy of the Jewish leaders (27:18). But this can hardly have been the sum total of Pilate's thoughts on the matter, and Matthew adds that his wife sent him a message suggesting that he should be cautious (27:19).

Altogether, this dramatic moment in history is complicated by a myriad of unexplained and uncertain human motives. It is certainly unwise to try and suggest that Pilate did what he did for one simple reason alone. Matthew's story carefully shows us that Pilate, a man feared by all Jews of the day, began his few moments of glory on the world stage in full control of events. By the time he left the stage he had lost all semblance of authority. Tomorrow, we will read about his attempt to '*wash his hands*' (27:24ff) of all responsibility for Jesus' death.

The story we have read today shows the authorities as fundamentally corrupt and conniving, and by comparison, Jesus remained upright and true, in word and deed. At the time, there was no-one to stand by Jesus to defend Him or fight for justice; and it is our privilege to read about what happened and realise that he did this for us, and He did it by Himself.

Going Deeper

The Bible study goes deeper to look at these issues:

- Jesus before Pilate for the accusation (27:11)
- Further accusations (27:12-14)
- Jesus (Barabbas) and Jesus (the Son of God) (27:15,16)
- The presenting of a deadly choice (27:17,18)
- The intervention of Pilate's wife (27:19)

Going Deeper

Jesus before Pilate for the accusation (27:11)

At last, Jesus stood before Pilate. It isn't certain where this 'trial' took place, but it was most likely held outside the official governor's residence, with Pilate seated on an official judicial bench (see 27:19). We are not told how Pilate was briefed, but the first question he asked was probably a result of the chief priests' and elders' charge of Jesus claiming to be 'King of Israel'. Pilate changed this to the more vulgar Gentile expression 'King of the Jews'.

The chief priests attempted to politicise the charge against Jesus by describing the Messiah as a 'King', simply in order to get the death penalty imposed by Pilate. The idea of a 'King' brought with it a potential political threat to the Roman Empire, and Pilate's first concern would be to decide whether the Kingly authority apparently claimed by Jesus was a serious challenge to the authority of the Empire and the Emperor.

As Pilate questioned Jesus, he probably wanted to know quite simply whether he was another insurrectionist, or whether the chief priests were bringing him a case based on their own religious intrigues. In the first instance he would pass the death penalty without further thought, yet if he suspected the second, the case should really be dismissed. He put the charge to Jesus in his own way, and very directly 'are you the King of the Jews?' He received the vague but positive answer 'so you say' from Jesus. This reply must have intrigued Pilate, who wanted to know more.

Further accusations (27:12-14)

At this point, one can almost imagine the accusations coming thick and fast from the chief priests and elders gathered nearby, needing to make more of their own case which, from first indications, was not going their way. They probably voiced the accusations previously mentioned by the 'false witnesses' before Caiaphas (26:60); 'he said ... I am able to destroy the Temple of God and to build it in two days' (26:61). This was all received by Jesus with silence, and Pilate would have observed Jesus' contempt of this, making him more interested in Jesus than in the accusations made about Him.

Pilate then asked Jesus not about the accusations themselves, but, curiously, about the number of charges brought against him. He wanted to hear more from Jesus, as it was against the principles of Roman justice for him to condemn someone to death, which he knew he was being asked to do, without giving them a proper chance to defend themselves.

Pilate was amazed that Jesus gave no answers either to the charges or to him, and it is possible that this unsettled Pilate. He would have been either annoyed at Jesus' affront, or puzzled by the man who could handle such circumstances with dignity and moral courage. As later readers of this story, we can see in Jesus' silence a fulfilment of Isaiah 53:7 'He did not open His mouth', a passage that was key to Matthew's presentation of Jesus' Passion. It is also worth the earlier verses of Isaiah 52:15 'so he shall startle many nations; Kings shall shut their mouths because of him, for that which they had not been told they shall see, and that which they had not heard they shall contemplate.' Most of this famous text appears to relate very closely to Pilate's reactions, and also the intrigue of the charges being thrown at Him by the chief priests, who were being less than honest about their accusations!

Jesus (Barabbas) and Jesus (Son of God) (27:15,16)

There is some debate as to whether it was indeed a custom for the Roman governor of Jerusalem and Judea to offer a selective amnesty to a popularly chosen prisoner, as is indicated by verse 15. There is not enough information for us to resolve this, but one thing is very clear, Pilate could not offer an amnesty for someone who had already been tried and condemned. Only the Roman Emperor could offer such a pardon; Pilate could only offer for amnesty those who were un-convicted and awaiting trial, such as Jesus, and also Barabbas.

The mention of Barabbas in Matthew's Gospel is not straightforward. Amongst the earliest copies of Matthew's Gospel, some have the name 'Barabbas', and others have 'Jesus Barabbas', which may surprise you. We know that some influential early Christians ran a campaign to remove the name 'Jesus' from before 'Barabbas' in scripture (notably, Origen, 185-254 AD), so it is more likely that the name 'Jesus Barabbas' was indeed original, and this is not surprising as the name 'Jesus' was as popular during Jesus' life as the name 'John' is today. If this was indeed the case, then it is not difficult to imagine the confusion that reigned when the matter was put to the crowd; but we shall read of this tomorrow.

Even the name Barabbas is surprising. The name breaks down in Aramaic to form the word 'Bar-Abbas' meaning 'son of the Father'. The story in Matthew's Gospel now becomes an intrigue between 'Jesus, the son of the father' (Barabbas), and 'Jesus, the Son of God' (called the 'Messiah')! Nothing more is said by Matthew about Barabbas, except that he was 'notorious', which probably meant that he was hated by the authorities and yet enjoyed considerable popular support! Luke describes him as a murderer (23:19) and Mark as an insurrectionist (15:7).

Presenting a deadly choice (27:17,18)

It may well be that the crowds had gathered outside Pilate's residence for the (apparently) annual magnanimous action on the part of their unloved ruler, and Pilate gave them a choice between Jesus Barabbas and Jesus 'called the Messiah' (27:17). It is interesting to try and work out what was really going on in Pilate's mind. Many people interpret what he did as a means of trying to let Jesus off the hook, because he felt that the chief priests were jealous of Him (27:18). If that was the case, it was pure ineptitude on Pilate's part, as no Jewish crowd would accept a candidate for freedom put to them by the Roman governor, as Jesus was!

Alternatively, it is possible that verse 18 describes Pilate's actions due to the chief priests' jealousy not of Jesus, but of Pilate himself, because he had the power to condemn to death and they did not. Therefore, by putting the matter back in the hands of the crowds, Pilate was playing games with the Jewish authorities, something which they would not appreciate, and probably even regard as an insult.

The other possibility, which I prefer, is that Pilate wanted the crowd to make the decision about Jesus because he did not feel he could pronounce on the matter, as Jesus refused to defend himself and speak. There is probably more we do not know about this than we do!

The intervention of Pilate's wife

In the midst of this crisis, as the crowd was being manipulated and Jesus' future was about to be decided, Pilate's wife, traditionally named 'Procla', sent a message of caution to her husband. She had been upset about what was happening because of a dream. This is very interesting, because Matthew had presented God as speaking through dreams at the beginning of his Gospel (1:20; 2:12 etc.)! Are we to see in this incident the same tragic theme of God sending messages by supernatural means?

It was well known that many wives of Roman officials stationed in Israel often became interested in Jewish affairs. There is no direct evidence in Matthew that Pilate's wife was affected in this way, but it is highly likely. Whatever the truth, Procla told her husband of her dream as if to warn him away from condemning Jesus. Christian tradition of later years certainly lists her as a God-fearer whose actions attempted to thwart the plans of Jesus' evil accusers. Romans were very taken, however, with the meaning of dreams, and a warning such as this from Pilate's wife would not be lightly ignored by her husband, as we shall find out in the next study.

Application

There is something deeply impressive about Jesus' ability to be focussed upon God's purposes in the midst of the most enormous pressure. All the things He had said and done lay in the past; they were the subject of the many allegations to which He did not respond, and Jesus was fixed on fulfilling His Father's will rather than trying to defend Himself. What was important now was 'who' he was; and this is why he answered both Pilate's and Caiaphas' question about his identity; 'are you the King of the Jews?', 'are you the Messiah?' without responding to any other questions. God's purpose for Him was to complete His supremely difficult task of facing all evil and death in order to bring about the salvation of humanity, and He would do this as both 'King' and 'Messiah'.

One thing we can take from this part of the story of the Passion is Jesus' amazing example standing before the self interested Pilate. It is easy to observe and admire Jesus' focus on the purposes of God, but it is profoundly difficult for us to do the same. We might not face the same life and death situation faced by Jesus, but we too often run away from opposition and from the responsibility to stand firm in God's will. Jesus said to His followers, '*take up your cross and follow me*' (Matt 16:24), and this is surely the most profound and most difficult of challenges. We can only do this if we yield to our Lord and live like Him and in His strength. There is no other way to live the Christian life.

It is impossible to follow Christ without following Him on the pathway to the Cross, and part of this means that we must stand as He did before those who oppose us and remain firm in faith. Even more, we must sacrifice our lives if we want to be followers of Jesus, just as Jesus sacrificed His life so that we may follow Him. Of course, this all sounds extreme, and some prefer their faith to be far more amenable. However, the reason why God's people celebrate the season of Easter is to remember the supreme sacrifice Jesus made so that we might be set free from our sins and have access to the Father as His own. Of course, Jesus' death is shrouded in mystery, but it is the key to our faith, and however mysterious a passage of scripture such as this sounds, we must be willing to let it speak to us about where we must walk if indeed we want to follow our Lord.

Discipleship

Questions (for use in groups)

1. Discuss the silence of Jesus. What does his silence mean, and why does He reply only occasionally?
2. Did Pilate make a mistake, or a deliberate mistake in offering the crowd the choice of Jesus or Barabbas?
3. What effect do you think that Jesus had on Pilate, and what effect did his wife make on what he felt about the situation he faced?

Topics covered by this text

- *The pathway to the Cross*
- *Standing before 'authorities'*
- *The example of Jesus before the world*

Personal comments by author

Every disciple of Jesus stands in awe of the story of the Saviour standing upright and facing the accusations and political manoeuvring going on all around Him. He remained focussed upon His calling and His Godly purpose in the midst of the most extreme of circumstances. By the power of the Holy Spirit, we may gain strength to do the same. There is no great merit in observing what Jesus has done for us and not preparing ourselves to follow in our master's footsteps, even though we do not know what trials we will face. Let us be prepared, and ready to follow His example!

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- *You will often have faced difficult choices. How do you go about making up your mind? Do you make choices at random when it is hard to decide, or do you agonise over them? Offer this to the Lord in prayer and see whether you need to change.*
- *Pray for people in positions of power over other people's lives, perhaps not over life and death, but certainly over their jobs, for example.*

Final Prayer

Holy Spirit, come and fill my life again with Your power and love and self control. Power to follow through every aspect of my call; love to do this with compassion, care and purpose; and self control to make sure that I do not take credit for what You are doing. Come, Holy Spirit, come!
