

From the opening verse of our passage today we have read about subversion at work, and it continued until Jesus was condemned. Once the chief priests and scribes had stirred up the crowds, there was little Pilate or anyone else could do to save Jesus. Some complain that surely these crowds were the same who had welcomed Jesus into Jerusalem a few days earlier; why did they change their minds? This is a little too far-fetched, however, because the city of Jerusalem was filled with pilgrims for the Passover, some say to nearly half a million people. It is quite unreasonable to suggest that the same people who welcomed Jesus were the same as those who condemned Him, except in the most generalised sense that they represented Jewish people generally.

Everyone present knew what the stakes were for the options Pilate gave the crowd. The one would be set free and the other slaughtered by crucifixion. Although Mark does not say so explicitly, the crowds decision to prefer Barabbas was conveyed to Pilate (15:11), who in astonishment called out to the people, as if to check their decision; 'what shall I do with the man you call "the King of the Jews"?' (15:12). And at that moment, a Jewish crowd who would never usually refer to crucifixion because the practice was regarded as incurring a curse (see Deuteronomy 21:23) shouted out those words which still send a chill down the spine of everyone who hears them; 'crucify him!' and Mark says they did it repeatedly (15:13).

This is a stunningly cruel moment, and Pilate had no option but to follow through and complete all he had done and see to the consequences of what he had set in place (15:15). He was one of the 'triumvirate' of people involved in Jesus' death, together with the chief priest and scribes, and the crowd (not including Judas). At the end of our passage, we read that Jesus was led out and 'scourged' (15:15), which was done with leather whips studded with nails and stones, and designed to inflict mortal wounds. It hardly bears imagining. Jesus was not far from crucifixion.

### Application

There is something deeply impressive about Jesus' ability in the midst of the most enormous pressure to be focussed upon God's purposes. All the things He had said and done lay in the past, and some were the subject of the many allegations to which He did not respond. 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 Messiah?' and 'are you the King of the Jews?'. But He answered no others. God's purpose for Him was to complete His supreme task of facing death and evil in order to bring about the salvation of humanity, as both 'Messiah' and 'King'.

In this part of the story of the Passion, Jesus' stance against the self interested Pilate is an inspiration. His single minded adherence to truth is easy to see, but profoundly hard to do, although all Christians know that Jesus had earlier said 'take up your cross and follow me' (8:34). Today, we aim to be like our Lord and follow Him; to 'die with Christ' so that we may 'live with Him' (Romans 6:8), and the question remains for all who hear Christ's call, are we really prepared to walk this path? But we should not be too ready to answer, and be like Peter who did so before he had the full picture of Christ's resurrection and the coming of the Holy Spirit. As we read the Passion of our Lord, we can only follow the story until we have the full picture. The pathos of these hours before Jesus died is heavy, and we need to feel this because it conveys to us the real price Jesus paid for our salvation.

### Questions (for use in groups)

1. Discuss the reasons why Jesus stayed quiet when asked further questions by Pilate.
2. What did God mean us to understand by the strange story of the release of one man Barabbas, at Jesus' expense?
3. Is it helpful to try and apportion blame for the sentence of death passed on Jesus?

### Discipleship

*Those who are following the series of discipleship suggestions in Lent are writing a series of reflections on what Jesus felt as He came closer to Easter.* The range of feelings which Jesus must have felt at what happened in this part of His story must be unfathomable. If necessary, focus on only a small part of the story so that you can try and gain a sense of what Jesus might have felt, as Pilate offered up Himself or Barabbas, for example, or on hearing the shout; 'Crucify!'

### Final Prayer

Almighty Lord and God, I place the strains and stresses of this day into Your hands. Use my work, my recreation, my words and my deeds, to further the work of Your Kingdom; and reassure me by giving me a glimpse of how the things I have done fit into Your greater plans, I pray. AMEN

### Prayer

Save us, O Lord, from the many temptations placed before us by the world in which we live. We are surrounded by pressures which invite everyone to enjoy or take part in greed and avarice, sexual license and all manner of deviant human behaviour. Fix our eyes on You, O Lord, instead; and help us see everything in its true light, so that we might live in a manner worthy of our calling. Thank You Lord, AMEN

### Other Prayer Suggestions

#### Weekly Theme: Universities

Pray today for the many students who attend your nearest University. There may be student accommodation and facilities near you of which you are unaware, but they are essential to the students. Pray for how these facilities are run and pray against the drugs which are frequently available there. Pray for students to be able to enjoy their time of study at University.

### Meditation

Am I ready, Lord God, for what will happen in my life,  
If I am prepared to submit to Your wisdom and to Your will?

Am I ready to accept the changes  
You feel it right to make to my life?

Am I ready to agree You have the right  
to use me in whatever way you will?

Am I ready to handle the problems  
You said would come to all who follow You?

Am I ready to leave all to help a stranger,  
because You have told me it is right so to do?

Am I ready to deal with the effects of evil  
By the power of the Spirit and the strength of the Word?

Am I ready to speak the truth of the Gospel  
by word or by deed, through everything I do?

Am I ready to call a halt to all I am doing  
in order to hear Your word when You are speaking to me?

As I ask these questions, prepare me, Lord God,  
For a life which is faithful and worthy of Your Name.

### Bible Study - Mark 15:1-15

<sup>1</sup> And as soon as it was morning, the chief priests had a formal meeting with the elders and scribes and the whole Council. They bound Jesus, led Him away and handed Him over to Pilate. <sup>2</sup> 'Are you the King of the Jews?' Pilate asked Him, 'It is you who say so,' He replied. <sup>3</sup> The chief priests accused him of many things, <sup>4</sup> so Pilate asked him once more, 'Do you not have anything to say? Look how many things they accuse you of.' <sup>5</sup> But Jesus gave him no further answer, and Pilate was amazed.

<sup>6</sup> Now at the Feast it was the custom for Pilate to release for them a prisoner, one for whom they asked; <sup>7</sup> and there was a man named Barabbas who was in prison along with rebels who had committed murder in the insurrection. <sup>8</sup> So the crowd came up and began to ask Pilate to do what he usually did for them. <sup>9</sup> Pilate replied, 'Do you want me to release for you the King of the Jews?' <sup>10</sup> For he knew that it was out of envy that the chief priests had handed Him over. <sup>11</sup> But the chief priests stirred up the crowd to have him release Barabbas for them instead. <sup>12</sup> Pilate said to them again, 'What shall I do, then, with the man you call the King of the Jews?' <sup>13</sup> They shouted, 'Crucify him,' repeatedly. <sup>14</sup> Pilate said to them, 'Why, what evil has he done?' But they only shouted, 'Crucify him,' even louder; <sup>15</sup> so Pilate, wanting to keep the crowd happy, released Barabbas for them, and having scourged Jesus, he handed Him over to be crucified.

### Review

What a travesty of justice. Jesus had no more of a trial before Pilate than He had before Caiaphas (14:53-65), and what we have read today is the story of an interrogation rather than a trial, and with a sentence passed for no other reason than political expediency. The picture presented by Mark leads us to no other conclusion; it is scandalous that a man who healed people and preached a message about the love of God could be treated in this way, whatever His criticisms of the authorities.

The hasty preliminary trial of Jesus at Caiaphas' house the night before could hardly be described as legal, but Caiaphas regarded it as sufficient evidence of Jesus' blasphemy to hand Him over to the Romans. He therefore consulted with other elders and scribes (15:1), probably to add a veneer of legality to the proceeding the night before, and sent Jesus to the Roman governor, Pilate, who would have no time for those who might pose a threat to the stability of the region.

What happened next is interesting, and there are similarities between Jesus' appearance before Pilate, and before Caiaphas the night before. Then, Jesus had admitted that He was the Messiah and claimed His seat at the right hand of God (14:62); Caiaphas asked a religious question and Jesus gave a religious answer. Now Pilate asked Jesus about who He was, but Pilate's interest was political (15:2) and he asked, 'Are you the King of the Jews?' If Jesus had answered 'Yes' it would have sounded like a claim to a higher authority than the Emperor, and Pilate would have pronounced the death penalty on the spot and without question. However, Jesus gave Pilate a political reply to a political question; He made Pilate hesitate by placing the matter back in his hands and saying, 'it is you who say so' (see full Bible study). Jesus then remained silent before all other charges.

The public spectacle that followed is now regarded as a classic example of injustice brought about by the combination of fickle crowds and weak leadership. The story line hints that Pilate thought the charge against Jesus was ridiculous and he therefore looked for a way of getting Him released, but his somewhat ignorant plan backfired. Pilate overestimated his ability to judge a crowd, and having offered to use a traditional right to free someone at the festival of Passover, the chief priests manipulated the situation to make sure that Jesus was condemned (15:10,11). Pilate could only watch as the shout of 'Crucify' rose from the crowds (15:12), and Pilate was bemused. His attempts to placate the situation failed (15:14), so he abdicated his responsibilities and was forced to accept the judgement of the crowd, handing Jesus over to be crucified (15:15).

Who was really to blame for Jesus' death? Was it the Pharisees, who had always wanted to see Jesus die and had done everything in their power to bring this about (11:18)? Was it the disciples, who failed in their duty of vigilance (14:32-42)? Was it Judas, who betrayed Jesus (14:43-50)? Or was it the chief priests and elders, who had decided that Jesus should be taken killed for blasphemy from the first time they heard of Him? They had encountered Him in the Temple (11:18f.), they arranged his arrest and they tried Him themselves before bringing Him to Pilate (14:53-62).

People have always tried to apportion blame for the death of Jesus, but is this necessary? Jesus did not blame Peter and the disciples, and He later forgave them, and Judas took his life (Acts 1:18) before he could seek forgiveness. So the culprits we are left with are the religious authorities, Pilate, and the crowds (15:11f.) now complicit in Jesus' death by calling for His crucifixion. However, there are no clear arguments to apportion blame. Is it best, therefore, to say that all bear some responsibility? Surely, Jesus' death was the result of multiple human failure, and God's merciful response to the death of His son has never been limited to those who caused it. Jesus dies at the hands of all, and for all; His salvation is therefore available for all.

### Going Deeper

In the end, the real question is not 'who is to blame?' but 'how does Jesus overcome this wrong done to Him?' and although it is natural for us to seek to blame someone, God's will is not achieved in this way. We must know the details of the story of what happened to Jesus because it exposes the sordid nature of human sin and the desperate need for salvation. We may not get anywhere by seeking to lay blame, but we can all taste salvation!

#### **The handing over of Jesus to Pilate**

In the opening verses (1&2), the chief priests, elders and scribes held a full Council meeting to discuss tactics given all that had happened the night before. Clearly, they no longer wished to hear from Jesus; Caiaphas had already judged that Jesus was guilty of blasphemy (14:64), and we have no evidence of dissent from that decision. All they had to do was to decide how to get the Roman authorities to proceed with the death penalty. If the chief priests could have had Jesus killed there and then, they would, but it was part of their agreement with their Roman

overlords that they would not take the law into their own hands. Pilate, the Roman Governor, was known to be a man who was deeply impatient with Jewish religious demands and prejudices, so the chief priests had to be careful. It is not stated directly in Mark, but it is likely that the Jews decided to present Jesus to Pilate as a trouble maker and political threat to the rule of Rome, and as one claiming to be the 'King of the Jews'. Certainly, this is what Pilate questioned Him on as soon as Jesus came before him (15:2).

Pilate is the last great character to be introduced in the Gospel. He was the fifth governor (strictly, the 'praefectus' in Latin) over Judea and Jerusalem, and lived most of the year in Caesarea Maritima, but came to Jerusalem at major festivals in order to make sure, personally, that law and order was kept. He was a cruel man, and well known in other documents of the day for his vicious character (Luke records Jesus as talking of the time when Pilate cruelly 'mixed the blood of Galileans with their sacrifices' – Luke 13:1ff).

#### **Jesus before Pilate**

It isn't certain where Jesus' 'trial' took place, but it was most likely held outside the official governor's residence. 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, saying 'are you the King of the Jews?' (15:2), but the vague answer he received from Jesus; 'it is you who say so' was intriguing.

At this point, one can imagine the accusations coming thick and fast from those chief priests and elders who were present (15:3), because they needed to press their case which, from first indications, was not going their way. They may well have voiced the accusations previously mentioned by the 'false witnesses' (14:56-59); 'he said ... I will destroy the Temple of God ... I will build another' (14:58); and Jesus kept His silence. Pilate would have observed Jesus' contempt of such charges and this would have made Jesus more interesting to him. He asked Jesus about the number and nature of charges brought against him. He clearly wanted to hear more from Jesus, because it was against the principles of Roman justice for him to condemn someone to death without giving them a proper chance to defend themselves.

Jesus' silence reads to us like a fulfilment of Isaiah's famous prophecy about the death of the Messiah; 'He did not open His mouth ...' (Is 53:7). This passage also fulfils the earlier verses of the same prophecy; '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.' (Is 52:15). This closely resembles Pilate's reactions to Jesus!

#### **Jesus (Barabbas) and Jesus (Son of God)**

Little is known about the custom mentioned here for the Roman governor of Jerusalem and Judea to offer a selective amnesty to a prisoner of the people's choice (15:6f.). We do know, however, that Pilate could not offer an amnesty for someone who had already been tried and condemned. Only the Emperor (Tiberius) could offer such a pardon. Pilate had the power to offer for amnesty those who were un-convicted and awaiting trial, people such as Jesus, and also Barabbas. Mark tells us little about Barabbas, only that he was 'in prison along with rebels who had committed murder in the insurrection', (15:7). Insurrection was a very serious charge, and was quite specific in Jesus' day, meaning rebellion against the Roman Empire; but through this charge, Mark presents us with a strange paradox. Barabbas had worked for the overthrow of Rome's rule, and was clearly closer to some people's notion of a 'Messiah' than was Jesus!

It may well be that the crowds had gathered outside Pilate's residence for the annual magnanimous gift from their largely hated ruler, and Pilate gave them a choice between 'Messiahs'; Barabbas the fighter and Jesus 'the King of the Jews' (15:9). The comment made by Mark that Pilate 'knew that it was out of envy that the chief priests had handed Him over' (15:10) indicates fairly conclusively that Pilate was indeed attempting to save Jesus; but he had not accounted for the power of the chief priests to manipulate the crowds, who 'stirred up the crowd to have him release Barabbas ...' (15:11). If you read the other Gospels, such as Matthew which is very similar to Mark, Pilate's motives are very unclear and influenced by his wife (Matthew 27:19) and other circumstances. But here in Mark, his motives appear to be very clear. He was interested in Jesus and attempted to use him to try and embarrass the Jewish authorities, but he clearly failed in his intent!

#### **'Crucify!'**