

Tried and Convicted

Mark 14:53-64; 15:1-5; 6-15

Preached March 22, 2009 by Dr. Dwight Kilbourne

They took Jesus to the high priest; and all the chief priests, the elders, and the scribes were assembled. Peter had followed him at a distance, right into the courtyard of the high priest; and he was sitting with the guards, warming himself at the fire. Now the chief priests and the whole council were looking for testimony against Jesus to put him to death; but they found none. For many gave false testimony against him, and their testimony did not agree. Some stood up and gave false testimony against him, saying, "We heard him say, 'I will destroy this temple that is made with hands, and in three days I will build another, not made with hands.'" But even on this point their testimony did not agree. Then the high priest stood up before them and asked Jesus, "Have you no answer? What is it that they testify against you?" But he was silent and did not answer. Again the high priest asked him, "Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?" Jesus said, "I am; and 'you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of the Power,' and 'coming with the clouds of heaven.'" Then the high priest tore his clothes and said, "Why do we still need witnesses? You have heard his blasphemy! What is your decision?" All of them condemned him as deserving death. (Mark 14:53-64)

As soon as it was morning, the chief priests held a consultation with the elders and scribes and the whole council. They bound Jesus, led him away, and handed him over to Pilate. Pilate asked him, "Are you the King of the Jews?" He answered him, "You say so." Then the chief priests accused him of many things. Pilate asked him again, "Have you no answer? See how many charges they bring against you." But Jesus made no further reply, so that Pilate was amazed. (Mark 15:1-5)

Now at the festival he used to release a prisoner for them, anyone for whom they asked. Now a man called Barabbas was in prison with the rebels who had committed murder during the insurrection. So the crowd came and began to ask Pilate to do for them according to his custom. Then he answered them, "Do you want me to release for you the King of the Jews?" For he realized that it was out of jealousy that the chief priests had

handed him over. But the chief priests stirred up the crowd to have him release Barabbas for them instead. Pilate spoke to them again, "Then what do you wish me to do with the man you call the King of the Jews?" They shouted back, "Crucify him!" Pilate asked them, "Why, what evil has he done?" But they shouted all the more, "Crucify him!" So Pilate, wishing to satisfy the crowd, released Barabbas for them; and after flogging Jesus, he handed him over to be crucified. (Mark 15:6-15)

Scene 1 – Tried by Religious Leaders

Throughout history, there have been trials that have riveted people. In recent history, the most notorious was the OJ Simpson trial regarding the murder of his ex-wife, Nicole and her friend, Ronald Goldman. It was a media spectacle that captured the attention of millions and became the longest trial in California history.

The most significant trial in history took place nearly 2000 years ago in Jerusalem. Compared to the Simpson case it was quick and speedy. What took place in that trial led to Jesus' execution and had a resounding impact on human history. The story of the trial is shared in all four Gospels. Each looked through different lenses to tell the story by giving different angles on the events and participants. These differences do not invalidate the story but strengthen the overall narrative and lead us into the passion felt by the writers and theological emphases they desired to convey.

In Mark's Gospel, there are three trial scenes. The first is the trial before the religious leaders.

While Jerusalem and the surrounding Jewish territory were ruled by Rome, the local communities had a measure of autonomy. In most of the towns, there was a council who made decisions related to local matters, particularly in regards to religious issues. In Jerusalem, that council was called the Sanhedrin. Ideally, it was comprised of 70 members and laid claim to tracing its origin back to Moses when he chose judges to oversee groups of the Exodus. In reality, this council only existed sporadically prior to the Exile to Babylon. After the Exile, it became more prominent

(*Sanhedrin*, Eerdmans Bible Dictionary, 912).

When Jesus appeared on the scene, the Sanhedrin was comprised of representatives from among the Pharisees and Sadducees as well as scholars and teachers of the Law and those of the priestly cast. It was led by a High Priest. That position had become a political appointment by one of the Roman leaders of the area. So there was a strange and unique dynamic that existed between the civil government and the religious community.

In the case of Jesus, some of the leadership of the Sanhedrin initiated the arrest of Jesus. According to John's account of Jesus' ministry, ill-will toward Jesus had been brewing for some time. On an earlier occasion when Jesus had visited Jerusalem, the people were talking about Jesus' being the one whom the council was trying to kill (John 7:25). At that point, the chief priests and others had sent the temple police to arrest Jesus but they were not able (John 7:32).

As you hear, there was a long standing contention between the council and Jesus. So when he came to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover, the Sanhedrin leadership began to plot how to arrest and kill him. The High Priest, Caiaphas said it was better for one man to die for the people than the whole nation destroyed (John 11:50).

Now that Jesus had been arrested, these who felt such extreme enmity toward Jesus could finally carry out their desires. In the story in Mark, we hear how determined they were by bringing "false" witnesses to testify against Jesus.

Finally, when their testimonies had failed, the High Priest asked a pointed question: "*Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?*" The Messiah was the one the Jews believed would usher in God's rule and deliver the nation from their oppressors. Here is the accusation of the court – "Messiah, no way!"

Jesus' response to the question was straight forward in Mark: "I am." Those words are powerful but Jesus goes farther: "*You will see the Son of Man* (this was a Messianic title and one Jesus often used for himself) *seated at the right hand of authority and coming in the clouds of heaven*. For the

ears that were tuned to it, Jesus was saying that he would be given the authority to judge and would at some point return to judge humanity. Jesus was letting his judges know that some day he would be judging them.

That response was too much for the High Priest and the council. They felt Jesus had blasphemed God. They decided that Jesus deserved to die for his claim. They were convinced he was not the Messiah.

Today, Jesus is on trial in our hearts and minds. Is he truly the Messiah, the one who is ushering a new reality of God's rule among us? Is he the one who brings personal and social transformation? Or is he merely a nice guy who set a good example? Or was he lying in his claim?

Scene 2 – Tried by the Political Authority.

Because the Jewish court lacked the authority to execute Jesus, they had to turn to the Roman authority with their verdict and desire. That authority would have to review the case and decide what to do. The authority rested in the hands of Pilate.

Who was he? One day during Sunday School, the teacher ask her students to draw pictures of biblical characters. As she passed a little girl, she saw on her paper the picture of an airplane with the crude drawing of a man's face in the window in the front of the plane. Confused by the picture, the teacher asked, "Tell me about who this is." The child responded, "This is Pontius, the Pilot."

Pilate ("ate") served in an appointive role as a type of governor and oversaw the army in Judea, Samaria and Idumea. He served an 11-year term from 26-36 AD. There is not a great deal of information about him found outside of Christian literature. It is interesting that this minor character ended up with a major place in our central creeds – Apostle's Creed – "suffered or crucified under Pontius Pilate."

It is rather clear that Pilate found himself in a situation he did not initiate and probably would have preferred to have ignored. But his role demanded he deal with the Sanhedrin's request. On one level he had to be concerned that Jesus was not committing treason against Rome and he had to maintain order in Jerusalem through a potentially volatile situation. From the story, it seems these concerns outweighed his judgment about Jesus' guilt or innocence. He was placed in a difficult situation. It is one many politicians understand.

After listening to the complaint brought against Jesus, Pilate summarized their case in one question to Jesus. The answer to this simple question could have swayed Pilate to pronounce a capital sentence. He asked Jesus, "Are you king of the Jews?" A positive response could easily be grounds to convict Jesus of treason.

What does being a king mean? Most Western governments have drifted significantly from a monarchy. When a king rules, he is the head of the executive, legislative and judicial branches of government. The king has the highest and final authority. People submit to the king's desire and rule.

Jesus' response to Pilate was critical at this stage of the trial. Jesus said, "I affirm what you say." Jesus did not try to dance around with an evasive response. He did not argue about what Pilate meant by "king." Jesus linked his identity to the long history of the Jewish monarchy.

With Jesus' response, came a cloudburst of accusations on the part of the religious leaders. Jesus refused to respond to any of their charges. So at the end of this scene we see Pilate's reaction: *He was amazed*. He is on the edge of perhaps a great affirmation regarding the nature of Christ. He seems hesitant to condemn Christ. Yet he does not take that step.

Many find themselves at this same place in relationship to Christ. Something within draws them to Jesus yet they are not able to affirm or acknowledge him as their king. They likewise are hesitant to condemn or reject him. They seem to hang in the balance. How about you?

Scene 3 – Tried by public opinion.

When Pilate was unable to make a judgment, he turned to public decision to make his decision. He wanted to see what the polls were telling him.

Mark tells us that Pilate had a custom of pardoning and releasing a prisoner to the Jews during their festival. So Pilate took both a prisoner by the name of Barabbas and Jesus before the crowd of people gathered in the courtyard. He asked the crowd which they wanted him to release – Jesus or Barabbas.

Now the crowd stood as a judge for Jesus. The mentality of the "crowd" is a common thread in the gospels. At times the crowds flocked to Jesus to listen to him and to seek the favors he could deliver. At times

they were amazed at Jesus' teaching and considered him to be a prophet. A few days before the trial, a crowd sang Jesus' praises as he rode into Jerusalem on a donkey. But the crowds could be fickle as well. They could be persuaded by others.

If you want to study "crowd" behavior, go to a football game where the stadium is filled. When the home team is playing well, the cheers are loud and all are behind the team. But what happens when things turn sour? It is common to hear jeers instead of cheers.

Now the crowd was looking on Jesus as a religious and political prisoner. They had not witnessed a miracle or heard some profound teaching. They were left to decide this man's fate. The chief priests began to stir the people to beg for the release of Barabbas.

When Pilate asked what they wanted him to do with Jesus, they cried out, "Crucify him." ("Send him to the electric chair." "Execute him.") Pilate was still hesitant to act so he asked the crowd what crime he had done. The crowd shouted all the louder to crucify him. (Crowds cannot give reasons for their desires and actions. They are swayed by their emotion and feeding off one another.) Pilate listened to their demands and ordered Jesus to be crucified.

When each of us faces Jesus, we too encounter the pressure of the crowd regarding Jesus. Frequently, the opinion of the crowd is not favorably inclined toward Christ. Can we break with the crowd and affirm Jesus? Or will we go with the crowd to send him away from us?

Making our judgment. Each of us stands at a place of judging Jesus. We must decide whether we believe in him and will follow him. Dare we believe that Jesus is the Messiah who has ushered and is ushering a new society where God's reign is supreme and Christ's love and justice flow like a mighty river? Dare we declare Jesus to be king of our lives and submit to his rule in and over us? Will we be swayed by our prejudices, our political interests or the crowds around us? Or will we allow the voice of the Spirit to lead us into a deeper commitment of our life to Jesus?

For the next few moments, I ask you to ponder how you judge Christ today.