

MUST sing Trisagion!

We come this evening to the cross of our Savior,
and we hear of what the King of Glory endured for us and for our salvation.

As you listen to this once again,
remember that he suffered this *for you*.

The cross is the centerpiece of history –
the place and time to which all places and times must bow.

Everything finds its meaning here.

Including you.

If you have been baptized into Christ,
then you have been baptized into *this* death.

If you rebel against Christ,
then you crucify Christ again for yourself.

When man dared to proclaim judgment against the Judge of all the earth,
then all men were made subject to judgment.

The guilt of the cross does not just fall upon Pilate, or the chief priests, or the “Jews”!
The guilt of the cross falls upon all humanity,
because all humanity has joined together in rebellion against its King.

As we saw last time, the hearing before the Sanhedrin was not a formal trial
(they had no authority to execute anyone).

Rather it was a hearing to formulate the charges that they would bring before Pilate.
After hearing Jesus’ “blasphemy” claiming to be the Christ, the Son of God,
they promptly translate this into a political charge for Pilate.

After all, the *Mesiah* was a political figure – the king who would restore the kingdom –
and as such Jesus would be seen as a potential revolutionary in the eyes of Rome.

1. “Are You the King of the Jews?” Jesus before Pilate (15:1-5)

And as soon as it was morning,

the chief priests held a consultation with the elders and scribes and the whole Council.

And they bound Jesus and led him away and delivered him over to Pilate.

We are not entirely certain where Pilate’s residence in Jerusalem was.

He normally resided in Caesarea, but during the feasts he would usually come to Jerusalem
in order to be personally present if trouble erupted.

Philo of Alexandria describes Pilate as

“naturally inflexible, a blend of self-will and restlessness” (France, 625-626).

Brutal repression was his style –

and he was not particularly fond of the Jewish leadership.

Therefore the consultation among the members of the Sanhedrin was necessary
in order to devise a strategy that could accomplish their purpose.

2 And Pilate asked him, “Are you the King of the Jews?”

And he answered him, “You have said so.”

In front of the Sanhedrin Jesus had openly affirmed that he was the Christ.

But here before Pilate, he takes a more cautious route.

In one sense by admitting that he is the Christ

he has already claimed to be King of the Jews.

But to Pilate he provides an equivocal answer:

after all, he is *not* claiming to be a political rival to Rome.

When Pilate says “King of the Jews” he is thinking of a political insurrection.

But Jesus does not encourage that interpretation of his kingship.

3 And the chief priests accused him of many things.

4 And Pilate again asked him, “Have you no answer to make?”

See how many charges they bring against you.”

5 But Jesus made no further answer, so that Pilate was amazed.

Isaiah 52:14-15 had said that many would be astonished at him –

the same word from the LXX is used here of Pilate –

as Pilate is amazed by his silence.

Cyprian comments on this,

“What great patience this is that he who is adored in heaven is not yet avenged on earth!

Let us think of his patience, beloved brothers and sisters,

in our persecutions and sufferings.

Let us show forth the full obedience that is inspired by our expectation of his coming.

Let us not hasten with the impious and shameless haste of a servant

to defend ourselves before the Lord.

Let us rather persevere and let us labor,

and be watchful with all our heart and steadfast even to total resignation.”

Jesus is not interested in being acquitted – so he will not try to answer their claims.

But what could he have said?

While he is not the sort of king that Pilate fears,

the truth does not make him less dangerous!

After all, if he goes to the cross he will overthrow all that Rome stands for!

But given that Pilate is already suspicious of the motives of the priests,
Jesus refrains from saying anything in his own defense.
If he gives Pilate any excuse for releasing him,
Pilate is likely to do so.

As we see in the second part of our narrative....

2. “What Shall I Do with...the King of the Jews?” Pilate before the Crowd (15:6-15)

6 Now at the feast he used to release for them one prisoner for whom they asked.

Outside the gospels there is no reference to Pilate doing this,
but amnesty for prisoners was a common practice in the ancient world.
Pilate would have the final say as to who would be released,
but the crowd was given a voice
(as in the gladiatorial decision as to whether a combatant would live or die).

*7 And among the rebels in prison, who had committed murder in the insurrection,
there was a man called Barabbas.*

8 And the crowd came up and began to ask Pilate to do as he usually did for them.

You need to understand that there is *nothing* spontaneous about Mark 15.

Just as Jesus “planned” the triumphal entry
and the crowds that gathered were stirred up by Jesus’ disciples –
so also the crowds that suddenly “appear” at Pilate’s residence
are there with a mission.

There is no uncertainty about what they will say.

Commentators often talk about the “fickle” crowds that turn against Jesus during his passion.

It is certainly possible that there was some overlap in personnel in the two crowds –
I can easily imagine how a participant in the hubbub a few days before
might have become disillusioned and concluded that Jesus was no Messiah.

But it was a Galilean crowd that had proclaimed Jesus king in the triumphal entry –
while this crowd definitely appears to be more of a local mob,
so it is unlikely that there was much overlap.

*9 And he answered them, saying, “Do you want me to release for you the King of the Jews?”
10 For he perceived that it was out of envy that the chief priests had delivered him up.*

Pilate at first seems to think that Jesus is a popular figure.

The explanation may be found in verse 11:

11 But the chief priests stirred up the crowd to have him release for them Barabbas instead.

Barabbas, we are told, had participated in “the insurrection.”

There were many insurrections in the first century,
so we cannot be certain which one he joined.

His name is intriguing:

“son of the father” –

Matthew even tells us that his given name was “Jesus.”

In other words, while Jesus of Nazareth is preaching the gospel of the kingdom in Galilee
and calling himself the “son of man” (bar-enosh),

Jesus of Judea is participating in an insurrection
and calling himself “son of God” (bar-abbas).

Who do you want released to you?

The son of God?

Or the King of the Jews?

If this is a local crowd – it also helps explain why they are so willing to choose Barabbas:

he is one of their own –

a local hero!

And while many might deplore the violent tactics of the revolutionaries,

he is still “their own” – while Jesus is a Galilean.

But why would the chief priests wish to have Barabbas loose again?

Why do they prefer an insurrectionist to Jesus of Nazareth?

Plainly they perceive that Jesus has challenged the entire standing order.

Barabbas would shuffle the cards and redistribute power somewhat.

Jesus would overthrow all that the priests stand for.

His cleansing of the temple and his suggestion that he would destroy the temple
are of an epoch-changing magnitude.

A little home-grown rebellion is okay compared to that!

12 And Pilate again said to them,

“Then what shall I do with the man you call the King of the Jews?”

Pilate seems perplexed.

Isn't anyone going to speak up for Jesus?

(All we like sheep have gone astray;

we have turned –every one – to his own way;

and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.)

Note that the *charge* of treason and sedition was not sufficient to convince Pilate.

Pilate seems to recognize that Jesus does not pose a threat to Roman security.

It is not clear whether Pilate has any sympathy for Jesus.

(He is not known to history as being all that concerned with justice!)

It may just be that Pilate does not like being railroaded by the Jewish leaders. Anything he can do to tweak their noses, he will do!

(Hence his use of the title, “King of the Jews” which so plainly annoys them!)

He even emphasizes that *you* call him the King of the Jews!

*13 And they cried out again,
“Crucify him.”*

*14 And Pilate said to them,
“Why, what evil has he done?”*

*But they shouted all the more,
“Crucify him.”*

*15 So Pilate, wishing to satisfy the crowd, released for them Barabbas,
and having scourged Jesus, he delivered him to be crucified.*

Here Pilate is portrayed as giving in to the crowd.

It costs him nothing!

Son of man or son of God – it is all one to him!

While “process” is followed all throughout –

Mark goes out of his way to show that Pilate was never convinced of Jesus’ guilt.

No one is able to answer Pilate’s question:

“what evil has he done?”

By oppression and judgment he was taken away...

although he had done no violence,

and there was no deceit in his mouth.

3. “Hail, King of the Jews!” Jesus before the Soldiers (15:16-20)

*16 And the soldiers led him away inside the palace (that is, the governor's headquarters),
and they called together the whole battalion.*

17 And they clothed him in a purple cloak,

Especially after this morning, you must an echo of Joseph’s brothers here!

Jesus is clothed in a royal robe – a purple cloak –

demonstrating his royal claim.

(Matthew tells us that it was a red military cloak –

which Mark calls a “purple cloak” to point to the royal theme)

and twisting together a crown of thorns, they put it on him.

Cyril of Jerusalem says well,

“When they clothed him in purple, it was in mockery,
yet ironically it was a fulfillment of prophecy, for he indeed was a king,
so even their parody indirectly served divine revelation.
Even though they did it in a spirit of derision, still they did it,
and his regal dignity was by that symbolically heralded.
So, likewise, though it was with thorns they crowned him,
it was still a crown!”

Remember Joseph.

It is through his brothers’ persecution and mockery –
it is through their stripping him and sending him into death –
that he will bring life to his people.
It is through his descent into hell
that he will be raised up to the right hand of the Majesty,
and become the King, not only of the Jews,
but of all nations – even as Joseph did.

18 And they began to salute him, “Hail, King of the Jews!”

*19 And they were striking his head with a reed and spitting on him
and kneeling down in homage to him.*

Now the soldiers take up the title that the chief priests had given him –
the mocking title that Pilate had echoed.

But he was wounded for our transgressions;
he was crushed for our iniquities;
upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace,
and with his stripes we are healed.

20 And when they had mocked him,

*they stripped him of the purple cloak and put his own clothes on him.
And they led him out to crucify him.*

Please, brothers and sisters,

hear from Cyprian how the world is turned upside down!

“He who has given the food of heaven was fed with gall;

he who has offered us the cup of salvation was given vinegar to drink.

He the innocent, he the just,

nay rather, innocence itself and justice itself!

is counted among criminals,

and truth is concealed by false testimonies.

He who is to judge is judged and the Word of God, silent, is led to the cross.” (226)

The one through whom the heavens and the earth were created

is now led to the cross.

He was despised and rejected by men;
a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief;
and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised,
and we esteemed him not.

4. “The King of the Jews” on the Cross (15:21-32)

The account of the crucifixion is the most concise in all the gospels.
It focuses especially on the mockery of the bystanders.

While Matthew uses numerous Psalm references,
Mark focuses on Psalm 22, with just an echo of Psalm 69 as well.

*21 And they compelled a passerby, Simon of Cyrene,
who was coming in from the country, the father of Alexander and Rufus,
to carry his cross.*

The mention of his sons indicates that Simon and his family
were later prominent Christians.

No doubt Mark’s hearers would have said –
“ah, of course! Alexander and Rufus’ father!”

It also should not be considered accidental that Mark uses the same verb “take up”
that Jesus had used to speak of his disciples “taking up” their crosses
to follow him.

Simon would be one of the few for whom discipleship literally meant
taking up his cross!

But all of us need to remember that it is costly to follow a suffering Messiah!
If this is what they did to Jesus –
what do you suppose they will do to you?

22 And they brought him to the place called Golgotha (which means Place of a Skull).

23 And they offered him wine mixed with myrrh, but he did not take it.

It is not clear who “they” are (probably not the soldiers),
but wine mixed with myrrh would probably have a sedative effect,
and Jesus wants no such dulling of his senses.

*24 And they crucified him and divided his garments among them,
casting lots for them, to decide what each should take.*

25 And it was the third hour when they crucified him.

Mark structures his narrative of the cross around various time references:
verse 1 – daybreak – he is delivered to Pilate

verse 25 – third hour – crucifixion
verse 33 – sixth hour – darkness begins
verse 34 – ninth hour – cry and death of Jesus
verse 42 – evening had come – burial

Remember that the ancient day is divided into 12 hours.
Every day has 12 hours of daylight and 12 hours of darkness.
An hour (by definition) is 1/12 of daylight.

The challenge is that whereas Mark says that Jesus is crucified at the third hour,
John says that the trial before Pilate was concluded at the sixth hour,
and then they crucified him.

It is not easy to reconcile these statements,
but if we take both Mark and John as providing general times,
it could make sense.

The “sixth hour” is not necessarily any more precise than our “middle of the day.”
And the “third hour” does not necessarily require anything more than “middle of the morning.”
If Pilate handed Jesus over to be crucified at 10:30 a.m.
that would be close enough to the third hour to fit Mark’s statement
crucified at the “third hour”
and close enough to noon to fit John’s account of the trial
concluded at the “sixth hour,”
and still get Jesus on to the cross in time for the three hours of darkness

(though again, we should not assume that someone stood there with a stopwatch
timing the darkness –
from the sixth hour to the ninth hour means
from noonish to the middle of the afternoon).

Both Mark and John are providing time references that communicate something specific.
Noon on the Passover was the time when the Passover lambs were sacrificed.
So John is emphasizing that Jesus is the Passover Lamb.
But Mark, by dividing the events of the day into equal parts
provides a literary structure that should not be pressed unduly.

26 And the inscription of the charge against him read, “The King of the Jews.”

Placards with the charges were often placed around the neck of the condemned.
France comments, “It does not directly describe Jesus as a rebel or insurrectionist,
but a claim to be a king under the Roman empire...was treasonable.
Placed over a man dying in agony and disgrace
it was both a cruel joke and a powerful deterrent.” (p646)

27 And with him they crucified two robbers, one on his right and one on his left.

These appear to be the comrades of Barabbas.
The term for “robber” or “bandit”
was becoming the common term for a “freedom fighter.”

There is, of course, another irony here.
James and John had asked to be seated at Jesus’ right and left in glory.
Now, as Jesus is lifted up on the cross in glory,
where are James and John?

All have left him – and the men at his right and left are bandits.

*29 And those who passed by derided him, wagging their heads and saying,
“Aha! You who would destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days,
30 save yourself, and come down from the cross!”*

Ah, the irony!
If he saved himself and came down from the cross,
he would be impotent to destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days!
In the same way that Joseph will only see his brothers bow before him
if he goes down into Egypt in chains,
so also Jesus will only raise up the heavenly temple
if he first descends into hell.

*31 So also the chief priests with the scribes mocked him to one another, saying,
“He saved others; he cannot save himself.
32 Let the Christ, the King of Israel,
come down now from the cross that we may see and believe.”*

Here the chief priests and scribes ratchet up the rhetoric.
He is not only the King of the Jews –
he is the King of Israel.
If Jesus is the Christ –
if he is the heir of David who will restore Judah *and* Israel –
then he should come down from the cross so that they might believe.

The temptation in the wilderness comes back again!

Jesus has already told us in 8:35 that one must lose one’s life in order to save it.
Now he must put his own teaching into practice!
But Jesus is the Christ – he is the King of Israel –
and the only way for him to restore the kingdom to Israel
is for him to receive first the curse that Israel deserved.

Deuteronomy had spoken of the curses that would fall on Israel
for their failure to love and obey the LORD their God.

If Jesus would restore Israel,
then Jesus must first take upon himself all the curses that Israel deserved.

He must pass through death and judgment –
he must pass through the wrath and curse of God –
so that those who believe in him might have eternal life.

And yet for a final insult:

Those who were crucified with him also reviled him.

They are going to their death – justly!
And yet they mock the only one who did not deserve death!

Brothers and sisters,
Behold the Lamb of God!
For

Out of the anguish of his soul he shall see and be satisfied;
by his knowledge shall the righteous one, my servant,
make many to be accounted righteous,
and he shall bear their iniquities.

Therefore I will divide him a portion with the many,
and he shall divide the spoil with the strong,
because he poured out his soul to death
and was numbered with the transgressors;
yet he bore the sin of many and makes intercession for the transgressors.