

The End and the Beginning According to John

The Priests and Pilate

John 18.12-14, 19-24, 28-40

March 21, 2021

So the Roman cohort and the commander and the officers of the Jews, arrested Jesus and bound Him, ¹³ and led Him to Annas first; for he was father-in-law of Caiaphas, who was high priest that year. ¹⁴ Now Caiaphas was the one who had advised the Jews that it was expedient for one man to die on behalf of the people.

¹⁹ *The high priest then questioned Jesus about His disciples, and about His teaching. ²⁰ Jesus answered him, "I have spoken openly to the world; I always taught in synagogues and in the temple, where all the Jews come together; and I spoke nothing in secret. ²¹ "Why do you question Me? Question those who have heard what I spoke to them; they know what I said." ²² When He had said this, one of the officers standing nearby struck Jesus, saying, "Is that the way You answer the high priest?" ²³ Jesus answered him, "If I have spoken wrongly, testify of the wrong; but if rightly, why do you strike Me?" ²⁴ So Annas sent Him bound to Caiaphas the high priest.*

²⁸ *Then they led Jesus from Caiaphas into the Praetorium, and it was early; and they themselves did not enter into the Praetorium so that they would not be defiled, but might eat the Passover. ²⁹ Therefore Pilate went out to them and said, "What accusation do you bring against this Man?" ³⁰ They answered and said to him, "If this Man were not an evildoer, we would not have delivered Him to you." ³¹ So Pilate said to them, "Take Him yourselves, and judge Him according to your law." The Jews said to him, "We are not permitted to put anyone to death," ³² to fulfill the word of Jesus which He spoke, signifying by what kind of death He was about to die.*

³³ *Therefore Pilate entered again into the Praetorium, and summoned Jesus and said to Him, "Are You the King of the Jews?" ³⁴ Jesus answered, "Are you saying this on your own initiative, or did others tell you about Me?" ³⁵ Pilate answered, "I am not a Jew, am I? Your own nation and the chief priests delivered You to me; what have You done?" ³⁶ Jesus answered, "My kingdom is not of this world. If My kingdom were of this world, then My servants would be fighting so that I would not be handed over to the Jews; but as it is, My kingdom is not of this realm." ³⁷ Therefore Pilate said to Him, "So You are a king?" Jesus answered, "You say correctly that I am a king. For this I have been born, and for this I have come into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth hears My voice." ³⁸ Pilate said to Him, "What is truth?"*

And when he had said this, he went out again to the Jews and said to them, "I find no guilt in Him. ³⁹ "But you have a custom that I release someone for you at the Passover; do you wish then that I release for you the King of the Jews?" ⁴⁰ So they cried out again, saying, "Not this Man, but Barabbas." Now Barabbas was a rebel.

We're looking at the disciple John and how he saw and recorded the sufferings of Jesus (John 18-19). He's the embedded witness.

Here, John shows us how the Church and the State worked together to "do what they gotta do" – to take care of business, to keep the "peace" (Jer 6.14, 8.11) to preserve order and to maintain the status quo.

The OT prophets often warned the Israelites' against making alliances with the nations and governments around them. That temptation exists to this day. A perennial impulse facing the State AND the Church is to keep things as they are regardless of cost. Sadly both institutions gravitate to that impulse.

And, here, even though the Jewish priests were usually NO FRIENDS of Rome (they wouldn't even enter their government buildings lest they be defiled!) BUT... when these clergymen needed to get things done... they became strange bedfellows with the Roman government – an unholy alliance is formed.

IS there a right relationship between the Church and the State? That's one inescapable theme in today's passage. This is not a lecture on the question and to cover it adequately would take a whole course of lectures. But certainly this has something to say to that issue – what should we expect from our leaders in the Church and in Government?

When is cooperation permissible and when does it become – not cooperation but collusion and conspiring and a betrayal of the Church's basic stance, basic message and basic methodology?

Let's look at :

- 1) The Awkward Dance of Church and State**
- 2) The Choreographer of a New Dance**
- 3) How to Do the Dance of Hope**

John is the embedded witness but NOT the only witness. If you add up what ALL FOUR Writers had to say about the trials and interrogations, you'll see there were actually SIX PHASES – three religious and three civil or secular phases.

The Jewish temple-police partnering with the Roman soldiers handcuffed Jesus and took Him to the High Priest emeritus, Annas. Then, He's taken to the home of Caiaphas (son-in-law of Annas and current high priest) and finally (a third religious phase) the whole religious council (Sanhedrin) convenes for a trial.

The Jewish council decides to send the Prisoner to the Roman Governor, Pilate ...because PILATE has power (POWER!) to impose the death penalty and there's only two options here: either we believe in this Rabbi from Nazareth or He has to die... and our believing in Him would change everything (we'd lose our POWER!) – and "we're NOT going to change... so, DIE He must!"

At an earlier council meeting one clergyman had said about this Jesus, "If we let Him go on like this, all men will believe in Him, and the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation." (11.48)

So Pilate is forced to take the case but finds Jesus not guilty...BUT when the religious leaders are

angry with that verdict (very, VERY ANGRY!) and they mention how much damage this Jesus has done in Galilee...then Pilate finds a reason to “pass the buck” (happy day!) and he sends the Prisoner to the Ruler (Tetrarch) of Galilee who happens to be IN Jerusalem i.e. Herod Antipas (Herod who beheaded John the Baptist).

Herod is delighted to have Jesus; he mocks Jesus and then sends Him back to Pilate... And now Pilate has to make a decision. Matthew adds that Pilate’s wife had a bad dream about Jesus and begs her husband to let the Prisoner go... So, Pilate washes his hands...but the religious leaders are too angry to let it go (they’d rather have Barabbas, the rebel). Next week, God willing, we’ll see the conclusion of Pilate’s dealings with Jesus.

Pilate’s just doing his job. He’s there to keep the peace. He’s hostile to the Jewish people. He lives on the coast (because he hates it in Jerusalem!)...but Passover in Jerusalem can get wild and if there IS trouble Pilate’d better be there...because it’s his JOB.

It’s not always a pleasant job...but SOMEONE has to do it and Pilate likes THE POWER. You get the sense that he even respects Jesus and that he wants to let him go free...that he agrees with his wife...that he’s genuinely torn up over it...but...he has to do his job.

And here we’re reminded of how many atrocities in world history are carried out by people who are simply following orders. AND I am reminded of how I quite often...just do what has to be done...just minding our own business... “Stay calm and carry on”.

We don’t have time to stop and ask questions...to reflect... to ponder...to be “pro-active”. It’s not that we’re monsters... but just ...doing what we get paid to do. Doing the dance. All around, there are needs and little injustices and a world of pain crying out for relief...and I’m just trying to do what I have to do.

When we continue to do what we have to do, little by little we become “focused”... We learn to tune out the sounds of need around us...successfully stop thinking of pie-in-the-sky...and just get it done...

WHEN WE LEARN THE DANCE...and stay focused on the next step...and we become good at what we do ...focus becomes tunnel-vision... becomes cynicism (a form of despair). And isn’t that what we hear in the words of the clergy and the bureaucrat?

The clergy (the High Priest, Caiaphas) had said, “Look, I hate to see anyone have to die... but... If I had to choose, I’d say it’s better that ONE die not the whole nation. So let’s use our influence with the government to get this Rabbi executed on behalf of the nation! Just being practical” Talk about CYNICISM!

I thought religion was about peace, love, truth shalom, human flourishing ... I thought it was about GOD. But all they can think about is holding on to their power/position: "We got a good thing here!"

And with the Government man: Jesus Christ speaks about "TRUTH" and Pilate utters his infamous expression of despair and cynicism, "TRUTH? What IS truth?"(38)

And while we DON'T know his facial expression or posture or even the real meaning of that question, we DO know that he didn't stick around for an answer!

The Church pressures the State and the State wields power for the Church to keep everyone sedated. Maybe religion (and politics) IS the opiate of the people. It's the status quo dance!

Cynicism is giving up...it's losing hope...it's a retreat in to the cave of "Ah! What's the use?"

"I don't have TIME to think about bigger issues like 'TRUTH' – too abstract... It doesn't pay the bills. I don't get paid to philosophize ... I live in the real world where things have to get done! And they don't get done by themselves!"

WHAT IS TRUTH?

"I KNOW how things work in this world...got no time for T-R-U-T-H" The priests and Pontius Pilate (Church and State) know the dance. Power is how things get done.

There, standing before the priests and Pilate, a King...the embodiment of TRUTH. Truth, it turns out, is not an impractical, pie-in-the-sky theory or concept ...TRUTH is a Person, a King. In the end of history HE (not Pilate/priests) is the Judge. Pilate sees Truth.

He, Jesus Christ is the Choreographer of the whole dance ("the music of the spheres"). And He is not using power to maintain the status quo. He's giving UP power in order to make all things new.

His Kingship...His authority...the power of Jesus Christ is not dependent on Rome ...or the polls ...or the interest rates...or the market...or the ratings... His authority IS from outside the system...He IS the TRUTH...and He IS the hand of God reaching into our cynicism...crashing into the closed system of this fallen world. "My Kingdom is NOT of this realm!"

And He will...now let go of power and will be engulfed in COSMIC DESPAIR. He will experience the complete absence of hope... be depleted, be wrung out, be abandoned, be disconnected from earth and Heaven...suspended and unattached. THAT'S what DESPAIR IS...it's loss and separation...it's COSMIC ALONE-NESS.

You see it in Pilate...but you see it supremely in the Choreographer from outside this power-system (the system often, institutionalized in religion and in government). But this King, will soon be condemned to die ALONE under the weight of our cynicism and under the Father's justice for what others deserve...

He'll utter those despairing words, "My God, My God...why have You forsaken Me?" He expresses OUR despair. And if we SEE that...and RECEIVE it as a gift...WE CAN'T BE CYNICAL.

HELP AND HOPE have come from outside... outside our spheres of influence...AND we are NO LONGER alone without hope; our King has come to face our despair. We find our security in HIM – not in our ability to stay in control – we're not in control and... it's wonderful!

We have Him and we have one another. Despair and loneliness no longer make sense. Truth is a Person who conquered NOT by the power dance but by love (giving UP power for the ones He loved). He's come to win us NOT by power but by love.

So how do we dance with this Choreographer/King and how will His dance of hope inform the way we think of the Church and State?

Well, first, I urge you to think through more carefully the relationship between Church and State. There are three institutions God has established – the Family, the Church and the State. Each of these has an indispensable role to play – but relating them to one another is often tricky.

Believers in Jesus Christ have every reason to look at these three institutions differently but we will have to commit ourselves to think, to ponder, to NOT so love the status quo (the Church as being influential over government etc.) that we have no place for TRUTH, Beauty and Goodness and think only in terms of control and influence and the status quo of the 1950s. We don't do the power-dance – the Kingdom of Jesus is NOT of this realm.

Second, we are all conditioned by our own fallen-ness and the fallen world to hold on to power – our place in the line, our rights, the world as we remember it, the status quo. But the Gospel makes us see that giving up our place in line, our power and control in the name of love will WIN OUT in the end.

So, if you're a believer in Jesus Christ, be on your guard against every form of greed and the desire to power people into submission. The Kingdom Paradox of loving those who hate and forgiving those who wrong us – that will WIN OUT IN THE END.

Third, we're not called to be "nice people" but NEW PEOPLE. When Jesus called the High Priest to get witnesses, He was saying, "You are contorting the Truth – trying to trap Me and ignoring Scripture and the Church shouldn't DO that!" It wasn't a nice thing to say but it was the kind,

good and true thing!

And Jesus was truth to the secular government too (vv.36-37). We should follow that – and that means we have to be lovers of the Light – lovers of the True Jesus who was the Incarnation of Truth. TRUTH IS EVERYTHING!

Fourth, The Church ought to always examine its methods. We have to use methods that are dependent on God, His Truth, His Grace, His Power.

We have to resist using leverage and control to pressure the government or pressure people around us to shape up. “The weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh, but divinely powerful for the destruction of fortresses”. (2Co 10.4) We live in constant hope because we’re relying on the One who really has ALL the power. And we serve... Because He served us, we serve others. Those acts of service will turn out to be more influential than acts of legislation.

Maybe we should pray a lot more than we do... what do you think?

Maybe we should fall out of love with the status quo... not fear losing our place in line; we know the Choreographer who will take the institutions of this world and convert them.

Caiaphas, doing the power dance, said (11.50) “it’s better ... that one man die for the people, and that the whole nation not perish.” More than ironic!

Jesus Christ did die – the One for the many (but NOT as Caiaphas, the false High Priest) thought.

Truth is...I am cynical about the Church and State... as these two institutions do the power dance, it always ends in cynicism...

BUT I’m not cynical about the True High Priest, the Choreographer of Grace and Hope.

He will incorporate the dumb words of Caiaphas into His great dance (and the dumb things going on in the Church and State in OUR day) – what we mean for evil HE WILL TURN TO GOOD.

So let’s trust Him and learn the dance of hope!