

# Lenten Luncheon Reflections

Tuesday, March 18, 2008

## Jesus is put on Trial before Pontius Pilate, is Crucified, Dies and in Buried

Opening Hymn No. 25 “The Old Rugged Cross” Stanzas 1 and 2 and refrains

Prayer:

Gracious God, on this Holy Week as we draw closer to the death of your Son upon that old rugged cross we would thank you for all that that cross means to us and for the privilege of claiming in our own lives the great love that you have shown for us and for the whole world in the death of Jesus Christ your Son upon that cross. Accept our gratitude again we pray as we thank you also for all of your loving care for us that we have experienced again this day around these tables. Hear our praise and our thanks for we offer them to you in the name of Jesus.

Amen.

During Lent this year we have been reflecting together at these luncheons on the events of this week of which we are now a part. Holy Week contains some of the central events of our faith as Christian men and women. Today we come to center our attention on the events of what we have come to know as Good Friday. If we were to do a comparative study we would find that each of the four Gospels while reporting the same central event of the death of Jesus on the cross do so in slightly different ways. As we have been looking this year at the events of Holy Week as recorded by Mark we will continue to focus our main attention today on his account of what we know as Good Friday as it is found in chapter 15 of his Gospel.

Last week we found that after his arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane where Jesus and his disciples had gone after celebrating the last supper together Jesus is put on trial before the Jewish authorities and condemned to death on the charge of blasphemy. We are now prepared for the scene which Mark describes as taking place between 6 a.m. and 9 a.m. on the Friday morning. (Mark 15:1) *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.*

Mark we note sees no need even to identify Pilate as the Roman Governor. Clearly he would have been well-known by his readers. Yet he was by no means an important figure in Roman history. Nothing is known about him apart from his stint as prefect of Judea. He is depicted as a harsh and insensitive administrator by two Jewish authors of the time, Philo and Josephus, but his tenure of ten years or more was not especially tumultuous and was longer than many of his predecessors or successors. It is this role that he plays as the judge of Jesus of Nazareth that has gained him lasting fame. The Roman historian Tacitus reports nothing about Pilate's career except for the single fact that "Christus, from whom their (the Christians') name is derived, was executed at the hands of the procurator Pontius Pilate in the reign of Tiberius."

What is clear is that the authorities have spoken with Pilate before he meets with Jesus and have brought the charge against him that would prompt Pilate to see him as a threat to power and authority of Rome, so we read, (Mark 15:2) ***Pilate asked him, "Are you the King of the Jews?"*** We can imagine something of the disdain and mockery in Pilate's voice, "You, a Jewish peasant, already beaten, bloodied and bound, standing powerless before me you claim to be a king?" We should probably hear in Jesus' response a mocking emphasis on the same word as he answered him, "You say so."

Pilate hears this as Jesus being non-responsive, so we read, [3] ***Then the chief priests accused him of many things. [4] Pilate asked him again, "Have you no answer? See how many charges they bring against you." [5] But Jesus made no further reply, so that Pilate was amazed.*** According to Mark, unlike some of the other Gospels, Jesus does not speak again until his final cry from the cross.

The scene before Pilate continues though as we read, (Mark 15:6- 15) [6] ***Now at the festival he used to release a prisoner for them, anyone for whom they asked. [7] Now a man called Barabbas was in prison with the rebels who had committed murder during the insurrection. [8] So the crowd came and began to ask Pilate to do for them according to his custom. [9] Then he answered them, "Do you want me to release for you the King of the Jews?" [10] For he realized that it was out of jealousy that the chief priests had handed him over. [11] But the chief priests stirred up the crowd to have him release Barabbas for them instead. [12] Pilate spoke to them again, "Then what do you wish me to do with the man you call the King of the Jews?" [13] They shouted back, "Crucify him!" [14] Pilate asked them, "Why, what evil has he done?" But they shouted all the more, "Crucify him!" [15] So Pilate, wishing to satisfy the crowd, released Barabbas for them; and after flogging Jesus, he handed him over to be crucified.***

It appears that it is the crowd who remind Pilate of a custom of trying possibly to placate the restless Jewish population by releasing one prisoner at the time of the national feast of Passover. Were they trying to get Jesus freed or were they wanting Barabbas, this political revolutionary all of the time? It is not clear. What is clear is that Pilate while affirming the innocence of Jesus gives in to the wishes of the crowd as they were stirred up by the chief priests. Almost certainly this is not the crowd that had heard Jesus with delight during the week who had now turned against him. Since this crowd would have had to be let into Pilate's palace it is most likely that they had been brought by the chief priests and the authorities.

The story of Barabbas in and of itself is difficult but when we remember what was happening when Mark wrote his Gospel it makes more sense. Both Barabbas and Jesus are revolutionaries. Both are seeking to overthrow the dominating power of Rome, Barabbas by violent means, Jesus by the non-violent way of sacrificial love. By the year 66 when Mark would have been writing the people of Jerusalem had again chosen the way of Barabbas not the way of Jesus as they engaged in violent revolt against Rome. This revolt in turn was not to lead to freedom from Rome but to crushing defeat by the Romans of the city of Jerusalem and its temple and to loss of the Jewish homeland until very recent history.

The first three hours of the day continue to unfold as we read, (Mark 15:16-20) ***Then the soldiers led him into the courtyard of the palace (that is, the governor's headquarters); and they called together the whole cohort. [17] And they clothed him in a purple cloak; and after twisting some thorns into a crown, they put it on him. [18] And they began saluting him, "Hail, King of the Jews!" [19] They struck his head with a reed, spat upon him, and knelt down in homage to him. [20] After mocking him, they stripped him of the purple cloak and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him out to crucify him.***

It was the custom for prisoners condemned to death by crucifixion to carry the horizontal bar of the cross to the place of execution, where the vertical bar was a post permanently positioned in the ground. Mark tells us, (Mark 15:21) ***The soldiers compelled a passer-by, who was coming in from the country, to carry his cross; it was Simon of Cyrene, the father of Alexander and Rufus.*** No motive is given. Presumably this was not an act of kindness toward Jesus, but a sign of weakness on the part of Jesus. We have to wonder whether Mark goes to all of the trouble to identify Simon and his sons, Alexander and Rufus, because they would have been known in the Christian community to which he writes.

We move now to the next three hours of Friday morning, from 9 a.m. until noon, as we read, (Mark 15:22) ***Then they brought Jesus to the place called Golgotha (which means the***

*place of a skull*) -- Golgotha is the Aramaic word which means skull. The more popular name, Calvary, comes from the Latin in the Vulgate, calvaria. **(Mark 15:23) And they offered him wine mixed with myrrh; but he did not take it.** -- This was probably some form of drug to try to ease the pain – but Jesus chooses not to take advantage of it. **(Mark 15:24-25) And they crucified him, and divided his clothes among them, casting lots to decide what each should take. [25] It was nine o'clock in the morning when they crucified him.**

As curious as we may be about how Jesus was crucified Mark sees no reason to go into details because crucifixion would have been a familiar sight to his readers as the form of Roman imperial terrorism, which the Romans reserved for special victims who were seen as those who threatened the Pax Romana. (the Roman peace) As a form of punishment it was as public as possible as a way of warning and threatening others who may challenge the authority of Rome. Indeed the uprights of the crosses were usually permanently in place just outside a city gate on a high or prominent place. Also unlike the movie *The Passion of the Christ* which spends a huge amount of time on the torture of Jesus, Mark and the other Gospels show little interest in stating the obvious, and showing humanity's seemingly unlimited variety of ways to inflict pain and humiliation. The Gospels are more interested in who Jesus is and in what his death says to us about what God is doing on our behalf.

We continue to read (Mark 15:26-27) ***The inscription of the charge against him read, "The King of the Jews." [27] And with him they crucified two bandits, one on his right and one on his left.***

On the cross is the inscription, "The King of the Jews." From Mark's point of view the inscription is ironic. Pilate no doubt intended it as derision and most likely saw it as a mocking not just of Jesus but of his accusers, as if to say, "This person whom Rome has the power to execute is your king – some king." Yet from the vantage point of Mark and the early Christians, the inscription, despite its derisory intention, is accurate, Jesus is the true king.

Jesus is crucified between two bandits. The Greek word translated as "bandits" is commonly used for guerilla fighters against Rome. Ordinary criminals were not executed. Jesus is crucified as a rebel against Rome between two other rebels against Rome.

While Jesus hangs on the cross we read, (Mark 15:29-32): ***[29] Those who passed by derided him, shaking their heads and saying, "Aha! You who would destroy the temple and build it in three days, [30] save yourself, and come down from the cross!" [31] In the same way the chief priests, along with the scribes, were also mocking him among themselves and saying, "He saved others; he cannot save himself. [32] Let the Messiah, the King of Israel,***

***come down from the cross now, so that we may see and believe." Those who were crucified with him also taunted him.***

The taunts are similar to those accusations and false testimony made against Jesus just a few hours earlier before the High Priest. The chief priest and the scribes seem to be challenging him to prove to be the one he had claimed to be – the Messiah , the King of Israel. This was the charge on which they had condemned him for blasphemy just a few hours earlier.

The next three hours from noon and until 3 p.m. are described in one verse when Mark says, (Mark 15:33) ***When it was noon, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon.***

Various attempts that have been made to describe what happened including an eclipse of the sun which would have lasted only for a few minutes and not three hours, and would have been unlikely at Passover which was celebrated when the moon was full. There are no records in other historical accounts of widespread darkness at this time. Possibly this is seen as God protecting Jesus from the taunts of those around the cross who could not now see him or even as divine judgment against them. It may reflect the way in which in the ancient Near East such signs were thought to accompany the death of great persons. The sun is said to have grown dark at the death of Julius Caesar.

At the end of the three hours of darkness we read (Mark 15:34) ***At three o'clock Jesus cried out with a loud voice, "Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?" which means, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"*** Scholars have argued whether in these words Jesus was quoting from the opening words of Psalm 22 and then quietly going on to pray the whole psalm which ends with words of assurance. For Mark these are the only words of Jesus from the cross. The traditional seven last words of Jesus from the cross come only by combining all of the narratives of the crucifixion in all four Gospels.

Clearly some of the people who heard his words misunderstood them as we read (Mark 15:35-36) ***When some of the bystanders heard it, they said, "Listen, he is calling for Elijah." [36] And someone ran, filled a sponge with sour wine, put it on a stick, and gave it to him to drink, saying, "Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to take him down."*** Whether or not this person looked for Elijah to come with a dramatic deliverance we read, of course, that this did not happen, for Mark says (Mark 15:37) ***Then Jesus gave a loud cry and breathed his last.***

Mark then reports the first of two interesting responses to the death of Jesus. First (Mark 15:38) ***And the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom.***

This torn veil of the temple that separated the holy of holies from the rest of the sanctuary is seen as either identifying the fact that through the death of Jesus all people now have access to God, or that this marks the first stage in the destruction of the temple and all of the religious practices associated with it which were now seen to be no longer needed.

The second response is more directly at the cross (Mark 15:39-40) ***Now when the centurion, who stood facing him, saw that in this way he breathed his last, he said, "Truly this man was God's Son!"***

This was the imperial centurion in command of the soldiers who had crucified Jesus. He is the first person in Mark's Gospel to speak of Jesus as "God's Son." Even the disciples had not made such a claim. What is interesting is that in Roman imperial theology the emperor was the Son of God. But now a representative of Rome affirms that this man, Jesus, executed by the empire, is the Son of God. In his words he is highlighting where the real power lies in the universe – not in the place that was most obvious on that day.

Mark notes (Mark 15:40-41) ***There were also women looking on from a distance; among them were Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James the younger and of Joses, and Salome. [41] These used to follow him and provided for him when he was in Galilee; and there were many other women who had come up with him to Jerusalem.***

Once again the reference to the presence of the women highlights the absence of the disciples. Perhaps it was safer for the women to be there as they were less likely to be suspected by the authorities of being dangerous subversives.

Mark concludes the story by saying, (Mark 15:42-47) ***When evening had come, and since it was the day of Preparation, that is, the day before the sabbath, [43] Joseph of Arimathea, a respected member of the council, who was also himself waiting expectantly for the kingdom of God, went boldly to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. [44] Then Pilate wondered if he were already dead; and summoning the centurion, he asked him whether he had been dead for some time. [45] When he learned from the centurion that he was dead, he granted the body to Joseph. [46] Then Joseph bought a linen cloth, and taking down the body, wrapped it in the linen cloth, and laid it in a tomb that had been hewn out of the rock. He then rolled a stone against the door of the tomb. [47] Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joses saw where the body was laid.***

The burial of the crucified Jesus stands in sharp contrast to the way in which most crucified individuals were treated. They were given no honorable burial, often being burned alive by the scorching heat of the sun, or eaten by beasts. The fact that Jesus is buried in this way

with the women serving as witnesses prepares the way for the rest of the story on Easter day. It is not the case that Jesus was buried in some type of communal burial plot where corpses could be confused; nor was he buried and then reburied so that on Easter morning the women went to the wrong tomb and found it empty.

When we look today at all that happened in a twenty-four hour period it is pretty amazing. I am not sure that even those who call for swifter sentencing in our judicial system would be happy with the speed with which Jesus was tried, sentenced, and executed.

We began our Holy Week reflections by talking about the two processions into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. One of Jesus on his donkey, and the other of Pontius Pilate with all of the military might of Rome. As Jesus is hung on the cross by the soldiers of Pilate it seems obvious which procession was the most powerful one, and, therefore, which one people should follow. But if what looks to be the case really was the case we would have no interest in the events of this week. We would not call them holy, and we would not be interested in singing, “I love to tell the story of Jesus and his love.”

Closing Hymn No. 18            “I Love To Tell the Story” stanzas 1 and 4 and refrains.

Prayer:

Gracious God, we thank you for the privilege that you have given to us during Lent this year of walking with Jesus through the events of this Holy Week. We praise you for his willingness to suffer and to die for us to show us how much you love us. We pray for your continued guidance and courage to us as we seek to continue to be his faithful followers in our own day, for we ask these things in his name. Amen.

*Much of the material for this presentation was drawn from the book, “The Last Week,” by Marcus J. Borg and John Dominic Crossan. HarperCollins, 2006, and Mark for Everyone by Tom Wright. Westminster John Knox Press, 2004.*