

Daniel 7:9-10, 13-14

Psalm 93

Revelation 1:4b-8

John 18:33-37

Christ and Pontius Pilate

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TO BEAR WITNESS TO THE TRUTH

Today's gospel is a sad and powerful story with plenty of relevance for our lives and times. We begin by reviewing the events leading to Pilate's interview with Jesus. The feast of Passover was about to begin. Jesus had entered Jerusalem and was being heralded as King. Tempers were rising. The Jewish authorities were scheming to rid themselves of Jesus. Pilate was getting ready for trouble. It would not be the first time there was trouble in Palestine at Passover, nor the last.

Led by Judas, a band of soldiers came upon Jesus and his disciples at night in the garden of Gethsemane. The disciples all fled. The soldiers bound Jesus and led him away. John 18:13-14 says, *"First they led him to Annas; for he was the father-in-law of Caiaphas, who was high priest that year. It was Caiaphas who had given counsel to the Jews that it was expedient that one man should die for the people."*¹

They asked him about his teaching. He said to them, *"I have spoken openly to the world; I have always taught in synagogues and in the temple, where all Jews come together; I have said nothing secretly. Why do you ask me? Ask those who have heard me, what I said to them; they know what I said"* (John 18:20-21). In other words, if you are really after the truth, find some witnesses. Once a man was asked whether he had accepted Christ as his personal Lord and Savior. The man replied, "Why ask me? I could tell you anything. If you want a reliable answer, ask my friends and my family – ask people who know me!"

Review Mark 14:55-65, which describes how Jesus was "examined" by the high priest and the chief priests, elders, scribes. The real aim of Annas and Caiaphas and most of the council was to get Jesus on a charge of blasphemy. Jesus never had a fair trial. This "court" was reaching a foregone conclusion. They were not meeting to decide what to do with Jesus. They had already decided. All they needed was to get Jesus to repeat one of his many public claims about having come from God, or being the Son of God, and this they did. Then, as the passage in Mark 14 concludes, they all "condemned him as deserving death" (v.64). They had, in their hating minds, successfully convicted Jesus of blasphemy.

The problem now was how to execute the sentence. Under Jewish law, blasphemy called for death by stoning. *"He who blasphemes the name of the Lord shall be put to death; all the congregation shall stone him; the sojourner as well as the native, when he blasphemes the Name, shall be put to death"* (Lev 24:16). But there were two problems: (1) Jerusalem was full of people who truly believed in Jesus, and (2) In Judea, only Roman executions were allowed. Thus, to play it safe and get the job done, they had to convince Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor, that Jesus must be crucified by the Romans. So they led Jesus from the house of Caiaphas to the praetorium. It was early.

John 18:28 says, *"They themselves did not enter the praetorium, so that they might not be defiled, but might eat the passover."* The Jewish authorities were very religious. They had used their law to condemn Jesus. Now they would not enter the praetorium and be made unclean. Discuss two points concerning this:

(1) Things done by Christians to others in the name of "righteousness," but really out of fear and selfishness, are simply not consistent with knowing and following Christ. People who practice religion in this way, and do not repent, are skating on thin ice. How do we avoid this, and seek the will of Christ?

(2) Not all Jews are like these authorities. Sometimes Jews are called "Christ-killers" for no good reason. Many Jews, like many Christians, are good people who practice the spirit of the law and do not use religion as the Pharisees did. God has promised to protect and reward these people, who are his. Anti-Semites who say they are Christians are not, and are liable to suffer the wrath of God.

¹ Caiaphas gave this counsel in John 11:47-51. This and other Bible quotations are from the RSV.

Read John 18:29-32. Since the Jews would not enter the praetorium, Pilate came out to the priests. He asked them about Jesus and then said to them, *“Take him yourselves and judge him by your own law.”* The Jews said to him, *“It is not lawful for us to put any man to death.”* Verse 32 then says, *“This was to fulfill the word which Jesus had spoken to show by what death he was to die.”* Discuss the following points:

(1) Jesus had suffered a hellish night – abandoned by his friends, falsely accused, and beaten by the authorities. There may be times in your life when suffering and loneliness make God seem far away. Jesus knows about these times. *“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”* (Isa 53:3).

(2) From the first, Pilate wanted to avoid judging Christ, but he could not. Neither can you. Each of us must decide for himself and herself what to do with Jesus of Nazareth.

(3) The Jews said, *“It is not lawful for us to put any man to death”* (v.31). Why did they say this? Were they zealous for the laws of Rome? If so, why were they ready to stone the adulteress in John 8? Why did they stone Stephen to death in Acts 7? No, the priests cared nothing for Rome. Hatred for Jesus had driven them to disobey their law. Jesus had said, *“Thus you will know them by their fruits”* (Matt 7:20), and the priests who brought Jesus to Pilate were proving themselves to be hypocrites.

(4) All this was part of God’s eternal plan to conquer sin and death and draw all mankind to his Son. Jesus had said, *“Now is the judgment of this world, now shall the ruler of this world be cast out; and I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself”* (John 12:31-32). He was speaking of his judgment by men, his crucifixion, and beyond.

All this brings us now to today’s gospel lesson.

John 18:33-38. *Pilate entered the praetorium again and called Jesus, and said to him, “Are you the King of the Jews?”* ³⁴*Jesus answered, “Do you say this of your own accord, or did others say it to you about me?”* ³⁵*Pilate answered, “Am I a Jew? Your own nation and the chief priests have handed you over to me; what have you done?”* ³⁶*Jesus answered, “My kingship is not of this world; if my kingship were of this world, my servants would fight, that I might not be handed over to the Jews; but my kingship is not from the world.”* ³⁷*Pilate said to him, “So you are a king?”* *Jesus answered, “You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I have come into the world, to bear witness to the truth. Every one who is of the truth hears my voice.”* ³⁸*Pilate said to him, “What is truth?”*

• *“So you are a king?”* (v.37). The strategy of the priests is clear. “Blasphemy” would not bother the Procurator, so they now charged him with claiming to be king of the Jews. Pilate would have to act on this one. If he did not, they could petition the emperor in Rome to remove him. Pilate was running out of options. His attempt to have nothing to do with Jesus failed, as it will with anyone else. He had to decide.

• *“For this I have come into the world, to bear witness to the truth”* (v.37). In this interview as well as the “trial” before Annas and Caiaphas, we cannot help noticing the irony. It is not Jesus who is on trial, but his examiners. How will they respond to the *truth*? We can sense the hatred of the Jews and the fear of Pilate, compared with the love and courage of Jesus. We are seeing the *truth* here, not just a news report.

In their hearts, his examiners never gave Jesus an opening. There is a lesson here for everyone. We must give Jesus an opening. We must see ourselves as unrighteous, captives of our own selfish desires. For each of us, a time comes when we must decide whether to believe Christ’s claims about himself and why he came into the world. For Pontius Pilate, that time had come. Perhaps it has come for you as well.

• *“What is truth?”* (v.38). There are moments of clarity in the thoughts of everyone. This was one of those times for Pontius Pilate. *“What is truth?”* he asked. Into his life had come Jesus, saying, *“My kingship is not of this world,”* and Pilate was given a glimpse of a road different from the road he had been on. If only he had courage to take his stand with Jesus Christ in spite of what it might mean, a glorious future would lie ahead. He would have found all he had been missing, and would have satisfied at last the longings of his soul. Instead he only asked, *“What is truth?”* and did not see the answer standing before him.

This was a tragic moment for Pilate. It is a tragic moment for anyone who has seen and not been willing to believe. Let us pray that all who read these Bible passages may respond to Jesus, who said, *“For this I was born, and for this I have come into the world, to bear witness to the truth.”*