

## Good Friday Sermon

I speak not just as a former lawyer, but I think we all love a good trial.

I think of the trials of OJ Simpson, Oscar Pistorius or more recently Cardinal Pell. We are variously transfixed, or appalled, as these trials unfold. In each of these famous trials, we are invited into the process of the giving of the evidence, the questions, the consideration of the jury, the judgement. We want to know what actually happened? What is the truth? We are not on trial, we are spectators – but interested and challenged spectators all the same.

This Good Friday, when we recall the passion of Christ, his death, it is useful for us to remember that in John's gospel – in his account of the suffering of Christ - most of the story is actually about Jesus being "on trial". There is some reference, but very little really, about the actual brutality of the crucifixion. We just hear the taunts and then his death – and that is about it. However, as we have heard read, of Christ's various trials, there is much written. He is before Annas, then the High Priest, before the Roman Governor, Pilate indeed on several occasions; and even the mob. In other accounts, he also is taken before Herod, the puppet ruler in the Galilee region. However, unlike in our modern court room dramas, this is not just provocative or challenging entertainment. Rather these long trial passages are there because we hear our own voices, and our own attitudes being expressed. These voices are not just ancient long ago uttered words which condemned Jesus to death; in a real sense they are our voices too condemning this man. Those who judged that day, are themselves being judged. . . and we along with them. For the Gospel writer - we are the one's in the dock; and in the process starkly reminded of the significance of Christ's death and our part in it.

So here are some of the snippets of what happened as Jesus was shuffled between this trial and that.

1. There was Caiaphas - the High Priest. Remember Caiaphas' attitude. 'It was better to have one person die so that the nation could be saved.' The greatest good for the people (or perhaps Caiaphas' authority with the people) is that Jesus should be eliminated, for the sake of the whole. Better one man die, then the nation be destroyed.  
Is that us? Is that how we rationalise the difficult questions about our principles, or discipleship in the face of threats to the institution of the church, or our career, or our financial security, or our friends and family? It is not about any matter of principle really; life is about the greatest good for the greatest number.
2. There was then the question of Pilate to the Jewish leaders. 'Why do you come to me?' Pilate says to them: why do you not deal with this person yourself? A classic ploy, really. Have the awkward decision made by someone else – and so you can blame them. "Look it wasn't me – it was that person over there who did it," No, no, no the boss, my brother, my child, anyone else but me, made that decision? How often do we deny personal responsibility - it was them? Personal responsibility (usually to do with our shortcomings) is not for us. And so even with the deep and spiritual issues, do we make the decision or pass the buck?
3. The religious leaders insisted this trial wasn't for them. Pilate probably shrugged his shoulders; OK, I will deal with it. And we as a result have a subtle, but ultimately unsatisfactory, journey, through his handling of Jesus. Pilate would have been personally curious about this cult figure, Jesus of Nazareth. And so he cuts to the chase with the critical question. "Are you the King of the Jews?" And Jesus bristles – and seems reluctant to answer directly.

But Pilate, unknowing as to who Jesus really was – had in fact asked **the** question. The Messiah question. The big picture – what is the point of it all - question. The question beyond Jesus being just the good bloke; the wise though provocative teacher; or Jesus the stirrer. For his troubles, Pilate gets a sermon about spiritual and earthly things. And ends up, I think dismissively, saying effectively: bah humbug, “what is truth”? Fake news.

Of course, Pilate was wanting to know an answer to his question about Christ’s kingship from a self-serving, political perspective. Did he have an uprising on his hands? Did Jesus threaten the Roman Empire? The question however, was not political in that sense. It was spiritual; it was about the reign of God; it was about a new way of life Jesus had come to proclaim – to the Jews and others. It was about the kingdom of heaven. Pilate did not understand that dimension. Like so many others in John’s gospel – the disciples included – Pilate just does not understand. So again – the question is: do we understand?

4. Finally, after Pilate had been taunted by the Jewish leaders that Jesus should be crucified because apparently he had blasphemed by claiming to be the Son of God – Pilate still persisted with his political questions: “where are you from?” he asked. And for his part, Jesus also doggedly avoids that dimension of his current circumstance. Jesus knows: that is not why he is standing before Pilate. Jesus is contemplating wider, deeper matters; like how all of us have failed to understand the implication of his teaching. Because isn’t it true that at a personal level we are more interested in the tangible, the practical: will I be rich (or have enough money in my super); will I avoid health issues, have a great career, have strong personal relationships; lead a good life? Significant questions – but the wrong questions when one is confronted with the Messiah, the Christ. . . especially the Christ about to be killed, because of ignorance, avoidance, blame shifting and insincerity.

The irony was – Pilate caught an inkling of this bigger picture of what Jesus was on about – and wanted him to be released. But in the face of the mob (or is it the populism of his day a la Trump, Brexit and One Nation etc) he succumbed; and just wanted to have the quiet life. And his weakness at this point is why he is always remembered. Pilate meekly hands him over to be crucified, washing his hands of him – although his last flourish was his insistence Jesus should be known as “the King of the Jews”, and that be inscribed on the cross and not some wishy washy “He said, he was king of the Jews.” Too little, too late; the horse has bolted - another human failing?

These experiences through the various trials and encounters of Jesus with Roman and religious authorities, highlight who we are in relation to the life and death of Jesus. We may not be baying for Christ’s death like the mob was that day: our failing can be more subtle. Christ’s passion, his suffering, all these trials, were intensified because so few really understood; or if they did understand, or half understood, none had the courage to stand by that knowledge.

Yes we are actually the ones on trial; and yet Christ, unwavering, shows the depth of his love – he would go to his death on the cross because of us. But is that all? Is there no hope? Is there more to this story? Yes – of course; but let us not too quickly by pass the cross.