

SUNDAY SCHOOL LESSONS
Commentary by Michael Sigler
April 1, 2012

Jesus Before Pilate

Read John 18:28-37

Key verse: “Jesus answered, ‘My kingdom is not from this world....’” (John 18:36a)

“Then they took Jesus from Caiaphas to Pilate’s headquarters. It was early in the morning. They themselves did not enter the headquarters, so as to avoid ritual defilement and to be able to eat the Passover” (v. 28). The religious leaders had ordered the temple guards to arrest Jesus by night. Under the cover of darkness, they conducted a sham trial. Then, “early in the morning,” they brought Jesus to Pilate, the Roman governor. John notes that they didn’t enter Pilate’s headquarters “so as to avoid ritual defilement.” Scribal law said, “The dwelling places of Gentiles are unclean.”

“So Pilate went out to them and said, ‘What accusation do you bring against this man?’” (v. 29). To accommodate the religious sensibilities of the religious leaders, Pilate stepped outside of his headquarters to hear their accusations against Jesus.

“They answered, ‘If this man were not a criminal, we would not have handed him over to you.’ Pilate said to them, ‘Take him yourselves and judge him according to your law.’ The Jews replied, ‘We are not permitted to put anyone to death’” (vv. 30-31). From the beginning, Pilate seemed to doubt that Jesus was guilty of any crimes that merited execution. He preferred that the Jewish religious leaders handle the matter themselves. But Pilate was also under pressure to keep the peace in Jerusalem, especially during this season of Passover, when so many people were in the city.

The religious leaders, on the other hand, were intent on having Jesus executed. They reminded Pilate that the Jews were not permitted, under Roman law, to put anyone to death. This law had been ignored on other occasions, and would be again, for example when Stephen, the first Christian martyr, is stoned to death (Acts 7).

“(This was to fulfill what Jesus had said when he indicated the kind of death he was to die)” (v. 32). Jesus had earlier prophesied that he would die by crucifixion (Matthew 20:17-19). On those occasions when the Jews did carry out executions, they did so by stoning. But *crucifixion* was the Roman way. John saw God’s providential hand involved in the way Jesus’ prophecy of crucifixion was fulfilled.

“Then Pilate entered the headquarters again, summoned Jesus, and asked him, ‘Are you the King of the Jews?’ Jesus answered, ‘Do you ask on your own, or did others tell you about me?’”(vv. 33-34). Jesus’ answer may suggest that he realized Pilate’s question had the following implications: To the religious leaders, a claim by Jesus to be King of the

Jews would imply a claim to be the promised Messiah. To the Romans, any claim to kingship would imply political and military rebellion against the Roman Empire.

“Pilate replied, ‘I am not a Jew, am I? Your own nation and the chief priests have handed you over to me. What have you done?’ Jesus answered, ‘My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here’” (vv. 35-36). Jesus does not deny that he is a king, but his kingdom is not of this world. His kingdom is not political or military, but its power is far greater than the power of ancient Rome. The French military conqueror, Napoleon Bonaparte, said: “Jesus Christ alone founded his empire upon love, and at this hour millions of men would die for him.”

“Pilate asked him, ‘So you are a king?’ Jesus answered, ‘You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice’” (v. 37). Ironically, Pilate stood in the presence of truth personified. Yet, cynical, sinful, and world-weary, Pilate would deny the truth of Jesus’ innocence and sentence him to be crucified. It is always sad when we do not recognize the truth. It is even more tragic to recognize truth and turn away from it.

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