

Lent Compline Talks 2015

29 March Prof John Morris

Conflict with Sanhedrin and with Pilate

As we heard a few weeks back, Jesus had conflicts with the religious authorities of his day almost from the start of his ministry. However, they came to a head when he went into the temple and overthrew the traditional selling and money changing that had become such a part of the religious practice of that time.

After Judas' betrayal, Jesus was hauled off for trial. We are all familiar with the gospel readings of Jesus' trials, but we usually hear them one at a time, making us unaware of differences. In fact, there is considerable controversy among scholars about what actually happened.

Geza Vermes – that great scholar - puts it like this “The traditional version of the Passion of Jesus as preached from the pulpit is coherent and straightforward, even simple. .. But the same story has also an historical (or I would say pseudo historical dimension). It emanates from a selective reading of the Gospels without any interpretation”. Mark and Matthew are almost identical; Luke is similar but has some important differences; John differs so markedly in timing that there are clearly two different traditions. Let's get the actual sequence of event out of the way first. Historians agree that the timetable in the Matthew, Mark & Luke (the synoptics) is nearly impossible; only that in John (despite being written later) avoid the many pitfalls in the synoptics, not least idea of a capital trial before the Sanhedrin convened at night during the feast of the Passover in which the testimony of all the witnesses is thrown out yet Jesus is condemned to death (and which is absent from both John and Luke).

Vermes and others argue that the 'last supper' was on Thursday evening when the EVE of the Passover STARTS (days being from sundown to sundown); so was not a Passover supper. Jesus was arrested by the Jewish temple police, taken to Annas for interrogation, then sent to the house of the high priest Caiaphas where he was kept overnight. On the Friday morning (still the eve of the Passover) the Sanhedrin met (but no trial) and sent Jesus to Pilate charged with sedition. Pilate tried to handle the case with a Passover amnesty, but the Jewish crowd voted for Barabbas and Jesus was condemned to crucifixion (like so many others before and after him), was crucified at about mid-day and died on the cross at 3pm in the afternoon.

The legal system at that time was that Roman governors could choose and dismiss high priests and only Annas and Caiaphas held that post for long. The high priest and his senate (the Sanhedrin) played a big part in the government of Judea and Jerusalem (but not Galilee which was ruled by Herod Antipas). The Sanhedrin did have the power to pronounce the death penalty for certain offences but had a rule that it could NOT be pronounced on the day of the court hearing, but only on the following day, and capital trials could therefore NOT be allowed on the eve of a feast day such as the Passover. Pilate had to be in Jerusalem for the Passover feast so keeping order was essential; so was Herod.

After that brief look at historical context, we return to Jesus 'cleansing of the temple' – the real start of the conflict that ended in crucifixion. This provincial Galilean upstart could clearly provoke a riot and cost Caiaphas and others their positions if not their lives (Caiaphas worries that the Romans would 'destroy the Temple and our nation'), but they feared to act because of the attention that the common people paid him ('not during the Feast lest there be a tumult'). So they have the Temple police pick Jesus up by night, aided by Judas, and take him to the house of the Caiaphas (or in John, of Annas, his father-in law).

It seems unlikely the extreme that the Sanhedrin of 71 members, with witnesses could be assembled in the middle of the night prior to Passover, so perhaps what the Synoptic gospels who include this trial are doing is not recording history but rather asking questions of the belief of new Christians and, by extension our own beliefs. So what Mark puts in the mouth first of the lying witnesses who could not even agree, is that Jesus said "I will pull down this temple and in three days build another not made with hands" Surely this asks us if we believe that Jesus was crucified and was resurrected on the third day? Then Mark has the high priest ask "Are you the Messiah, the son of the Blessed one" to which Jesus answers in the affirmative. Again, this challenges us – is Jesus for us the Messiah (perhaps not in the first century Jewish concept, but for our own time)?

In John, Jesus is taken first to Annas who is interested in Jesus' teaching which Jesus says has been done entirely openly, then overnight to Caiaphas. [Caiaphas has already said that it would in

the interest of the Jewish nation if “one man died for the whole people”] John has no mention of a meeting of the Sanhedrin, and we learn little more other than Caiaphas sent Jesus to Pilate the Governor on a charge of sedition, remaining outside to avoid defilement so that the Passover meal could be eaten later THAT day).

Pilate tells Caiaphas to take Jesus and try him by their religious law, but they say “We are not allowed to put any man to death” Deuteronomy tells us that the punishment for blasphemy (in which Pilate would not have been interested) was death by stoning. So it seems likely they were looking for a sedition charge. This fits with Pilate’s question “Are you the king of the Jews” to which Jesus answers “Is that your idea or have others suggested it?” Pilate explodes “What, am I a Jew, your own people and priests have brought you before me.” To which Jesus replies with words that are really important for us “My kingdom does not belong to this world, if it did my followers would be fighting to save me” – essentially the same answer as when presented with the coin and asked about the hated tribute “Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s and to God the things that are God’s”. A really important message – so often we get tied up with worrying about the everyday things of this world.

Luke has Jesus sent to Herod (governor of Galilee), who is pleased to have a chance to talk to Jesus, but Jesus does not reply, so Herod gets fed up, mocks him and sends him back to Pilate. Next comes the tradition of the Passover release – but the Jewish authorities are more worried about their own position than letting free a common bandit – Barabbas. Pilate finds no case against Jesus but crucifixion was a Roman not a Jewish punishment. The Jewish authorities play on Pilate’s fears of a riot and dismissal by his superiors. So, in the end, out of weakness and a desire for a quiet life Pilate hands Jesus over to be crucified by the Roman soldiers, rather indicating what he thinks of the charge by insisting that the phrase “Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews” is placed on the cross. The Gospel writers, seeking to separate the newly formed Jesus movement from its Jewish origin, seem to do all that they can to exonerate the reluctant Pilate and to place the blame and acceptance of blame on the Jews. “His blood be on us and on our children”

What can we learn for our own lives this Lent? Nearly 2000 years after the event we cannot be certain of the history or of what was actually said. However, one thing seems to be to be certain – that we shall, at the end of our own lives, be effectively on trial – not before some earthly religious or temporal leader, but before our God. So the trial questions are important to us.

Is our faith grounded on the death and resurrection of our Lord?

Do we believe that he is the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed?

Shall we be able to say that we have spoken openly about our faith so that others may receive the good news?

Have we given more consideration to things of our everyday world, or to the things that are God’s?

All conflicts in ourselves to ponder on as we enter Holy Week.