

## **A Good Friday meditation.**

On carefully reading John's account of the events of Good Friday I am surprised to find that a great deal of it is devoted to Jesus' trial before Pilate, the Roman governor of Judaea. The other gospel writers skip through this pretty smartly and concentrate on Jesus' suffering and death, yet John never gives an account without it containing a purpose and meaning, so this lengthy passage must contain something significant.

Gradually we see that this is about sovereignty and power.

The hearing before the Sanhedrin is perfunctory in this account, and Jesus is taken to Pilate at the Roman headquarters, because only he, as the representative of Roman rule, can condemn Jesus to death. However, Jesus' enemies are unable to bring a specific charge against him that would deserve the death penalty under Roman law. So Pilate attempts to discover who Jesus is and what he has done to incur the wrath and hatred of the leaders of his own people. Pilate is cynical and contemptuous of the Jewish leaders and realizes that Jesus is not guilty of sedition, and that he is in fact an innocent man. Does that mean he will acquit Jesus? No, it doesn't, for although Pilate has worldly power, he also has human weakness.

Pilate is seen to be vacillating. He tries various stratagems to have Jesus released. He has Jesus flogged – will that satisfy his opponents? He offers to release him in accordance with a custom at Passover – that fails. Pilate goes out to the chief priests and temple police several times and even declares "I find no case against him". But Pilate cannot appease Jesus' enemies. He has to make a decision.

Pilate is fearful. He is afraid when the Jews tell him that Jesus claims to be the Son of God. Pagan religion had innumerable gods, Pilate didn't want to offend any of them by putting Jesus to death. On the other hand, the Jews have also said that Jesus claims to be a king, and certainly Tiberias Caesar would not look kindly on anyone who tolerated a rival. But Pilate has to make a decision. He can no longer prevaricate.

He takes his seat at the place of judgement, but does not exercise justice. He abandons an innocent man to the fury of his adversaries and condemns Jesus to death. Pilate's fear for his own well-being under the power of the world's ruler has overcome all other considerations. From this moment onwards, Pilate will be the one under judgement for all ages to come..

Jesus, in complete contrast to Pilate, is calm and resolute. He is fearless. In this narrative, Jesus is not a victim; it is he who is in control of the proceedings – Pilate only has authority because God has allowed it. Jesus has kingship but his kingdom is not of this world. Jesus is the way, the truth and the life, he is the presence of the pure God, he is the witness to the truth. The worldly Pilate is baffled "What is truth? "

he says, for him this is an abstract notion which he cannot grasp.

What would we make of such a character as Pilate today? We tend to be equivocal about leadership – we like our leaders to be decisive and in control of the situation, unless, of course, it inconveniences us or we disagree - some people have failed to be persuaded to obey the instructions of Lockdown. But we would see one such as Pilate as weak and unjust, cruel and self-centred. However, Pilate is not just a flawed character, he is the embodiment of flawed worldly power as exercised through human failings, whereas Jesus is the embodiment of God's power as exercised in and through love. When Pilate hands Jesus over to be crucified it seems that the powers of this world have won. But Truth will not be overcome by any human agency, either force or weakness, fear or hatred. Good Friday is not normally associated with the Hallelujah Chorus, but in these words we hear again that the victory belongs to the omnipotent God - "The kingdom of this world is become the kingdom of our God and of his Christ."