

Awaiting the Verdict: Good Friday

Isaiah 52:13-53:12, Psalm 22, John 18:1-19:42

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We are, on this night, at the pivot point of the Jesus story. And it turns out that on this night we are at the pivot point of the story of the world. Everything depends on the outcome of the trial of Jesus before Pilate.

It is a trial we get to remember tonight.

It is a trial we get to observe as it is performed.

It is a trial in which we get to participate.

It turns out that this trial, like every serious trial, is a contest to determine who is telling the truth and who is offering fake truth.

I.

On the one side is Pontius Pilate, the one we mention in the creed. He is the Roman governor who presides over the occupied territory of Galilee. He is a stand-in for Caesar and for Roman power. He appears at “headquarters” in all the pageantry of the empire; likely he wore a sash of Roman authority; maybe he entered the courtroom with drums and bugles and imperial flags flying. It is impressive drama. He is a perfect icon of great power.

He is, moreover, a stand-in for the gods of the Roman Empire. These are the gods of force who did not mind violence when it is necessary. More than that,

He stands in for raw male power;

He stands in for money power and the legitimacy of greed;

He stands in, among us, for white power in its supremacy.

He assumes, with all this “god-backing,” that everyone can see and accept his authority. So he says to Jesus: “Do you not know that I have power to release you, and power to crucify you?” (John 19:10). There is no doubt who is in charge in the courtroom. There is no doubt who is in charge in the world!

II.

On the other side is Jesus; just Jesus! He has no credentials. He has no pedigree. He has neither a phalanx of lawyers nor any visible support. He is all alone in the courtroom, arraigned because his dangerous teaching was seen as subversive of imperial authority. Jesus, however, is not intimidated by the Roman governor. He says to the governor: “My kingdom is not from this world....My kingdom is not from here” (John 18:36).

This does not mean that Jesus’ “kingdom” is in the never-never land of the after-life. Nor does it mean that his “kingdom” is simply an internal, psychological matter of being right with God. He means, rather, that his authority is not derived from Rome. He does not depend on the governor’s validation because his authority is not “from here.” He owes Rome nothing. He did not depend on the imperial power of greed and violence, the imperial force of money, or the imperial claim of male power or white power.

That is because he is a stand-in for the God of the covenant:
This is the God who showed up as the emancipator in the slave camps of Egypt.
This is the God who came to the displaced exiles in Babylon.
This is the God of widows who have no other advocate.
This is the God of orphans who have no family.
This is the God of immigrants who have no homeland.
This is what they saw in this rabbi from Galilee:
He carried no purse and had no money.
He paid attention to women and valued them;
He welcomed those of every tribe, tongue, and nation;
He was like an advocate for widows,
like a guard for orphans,
like an attorney for immigrants.

When they looked at him, they saw the God of Israel who specializes in justice, righteousness, mercy, faithfulness, and steadfast love.

Jesus stands in the courtroom before the imperial governor. In every way he contradicts the claims of the governor. There he stands in the court of public opinion:

Wounded for our transgressions,
Bruised for our iniquities.

Jesus confused the governor. Finally the governor must ask, “What is truth?” (John 18:38). The governor had lived so long with fake news that he did not know what to make of Jesus who did not fit any of his categories. He has the sense that Jesus is the truth right in front of him, but he lacks the courage to recognize that truth lies outside the claims of empire in the drama of mercy, compassion, and restorative justice. So the issue is joined at the trial!

III.

There are two other parts in the drama. A third player is the crowd that is eagerly waiting outside the courtroom. The crowd is like a mob...boisterous, blood-thirsty, and thoughtless. The mob uncritically supports imperial authority. They did not wait for evidence, but shouted, “Crucify him, crucify him.” I suppose for us the like mantra, for either party, is “Lock him up, lock him up.” Because he does not fit the impressive world of imperial Rome.

We do not need to linger long over the crowd. The crowd is predictable. It is impressed by money, power, greed, and it readily trusts in promises that cannot be kept. Pilate has tentatively labeled Jesus “King of the Jews.” The crowd rejects that: “He is not the king of the Jews!” Pilate wants to allow, in a grudging way, that this may be the Jewish Messiah. But he has no courage, so he gives in to the mob that shouts, “Crucify him, crucify him!”

IV.

The fourth part is played by his disciples represented by the fearful Simon Peter who refused to acknowledge him because it was too dangerous. You can imagine that the several disciples were scattered in the crowd watching the execution. It was not safe to be seen together.

But they watched. And they wondered: Is this what he meant when he said that “the last shall be first”?

Did he mean that this odd teacher from Galilee would be first and the Roman governor would be last?

Did he mean that the generous would be first and the greedy would be last?

Did he mean that the vulnerable would be first and the violent would be last?

Did he mean that women would be first and men would be last?

Did he mean that Blacks would be first and whites would be last?

Did he mean that immigrants would be first and that home grown citizens would be last?

His statements are enigmatic and we have to decide.

He said, "All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted" (Matthew 23:12). He said, "Everyone who wants to save one's life must lose it" (Mark 8:36). No wonder we have this poem that witnesses to him:

He had no form or majesty that should look at him,
nothing in his appearance that we should desire him.
He was despised and rejected by others,
a man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity
as one from whom others hide their faces
he was despised and we held him of no account. (Isaiah 53:2-3)

So his disciples watched and wondered. Not until now, on Friday, did they understand who he was or what he was doing. Late in the day, I imagine, one of them said, "Even in our sadness we have to eat something." Then they remembered that they had some leftovers from his final meal with them on Thursday night. Do you know what they ate that night? They ate *broken bread* and they drank *poured out wine*. It was food unlike that of Pilate. The Roman governor never wanted broken bread, but would eat the whole loaf in one bite. He never wanted poured out wine, but swallowed the whole cup in one gulp. That, however, is what the disciples had late on Friday night, and it tasted to them like new life.

We know how the trial ended then.

But the trial is being reenacted again in our midst, a context for truth.

We wait for a verdict this time.

Or if you like, we get to decide the verdict.

There is nothing easy about Friday. It is the pivot point of the history of the world. We are left, like the old governor, with the haunting question, "What is truth?" And there he stands, like he did before the governor, before us. The verdict will not be long in coming.