

**THE PASSOVER MOON OVER THE HALLS OF INJUSTICE**

*Passover moon now shed your silver glow  
Upon the City----its Savior soon to know.*

**The Arrest and the First Trial (John 18:1-25)**

Jesus and his disciples left the Upper Room, walked down Mount Zion----on which Jerusalem stood----and crossed the Kidron brook. They climbed up the Mount of Olives to the Garden of Gethsemane. The mountainside was filled with enclosed gardens owned by families in Jerusalem. This quiet retreat belonged to a friend of Christ's, and he often went there for meetings with his disciples (verse 2). Judas guessed that Jesus would be there and came with soldiers and guards carrying torches and weapons.

John's gospel does not have the account of the Agony of Jesus in the Garden, but he does report that a "troubled" Jesus surrendered to the Father's will in 12:27-32.

Jesus went out to meet Judas and the arrest party. He was not laid back or fearful. He was a commanding presence bent on defeating the forces of evil and sin in the world. His passion was not a passive capitulation to social forces, but rather an act of will, a show of moral and spiritual strength. He did not just let things happen to him. As a person of character he made events serve his purposes. He was the "Lord of battles," as the psalms would put it. At the very outset of the passion, John emphasizes this truth about Jesus. He is always the Lord.

Hence we see that it was Jesus who confronted the troops, not the arrest party crashing in on him. He went out to meet them and asked them, "Whom are you looking for?" They replied, "Jesus the Nazarean." He said to them, "I AM" (see verses 4-5).

Ever since God had revealed his name as I AM to Moses at the burning bush, there was always an experience of awe in the listeners. Constantly, throughout John's gospel, Jesus applied this name to himself, identifying himself with God. The traitor and the troops had come to arrest Jesus. They found themselves encountering a mysterious force----the Lord. All of them fell back in awe before the Lord.

But Jesus had no intention of paralyzing them with the eternal might of God. He gave them an experience of awe, not to show off divine muscle, but as always to invite them to faith in his total person. Awe can be and should be the beginning of faith wisdom. He gave them a chance to freely accept the real Jesus. They failed.

He told them not to touch his disciples. The shepherd protected his flock. But Peter took a sword and cut off the right ear of Malchus, a servant of the high priest. Jesus moved swiftly to stop this violence. He immediately healed Malchus (Luke 22:51) and ordered Peter to put away the sword. "Shall I not drink the cup that the Father has given me?" (verse 11). Peter chose violence----the sword. Jesus sided with non-violence----the cup of vulnerability.

Remember that Christ's vulnerability was not that of a soft man, a wimp letting people push him around. His was the vulnerability of a man ethical character allowing suffering to happen to him in pursuit of a higher goal, the triumph of love and forgiveness over hatred and evil. Pain was not an end in itself. That would be masochism. It was a means to a goal. That is salvation. Jesus used soul power against the world's swords and clubs to achieve his purposes. He was showing all of them how to change the love of power into the power of love.

The soldiers took Jesus to the house of Annas. Accompanied by "the other disciple," Peter followed the marching men. The text says this "other disciple" was an acquaintance of Annas and used his contact and influence to gain entrance for him and Peter into the courtyard of the house where the two of them could await the outcome of the trial. This "other disciple" was John the apostle.

The spring night was cold. Peter and John joined the servants and guards around the fire to keep warm. A maid asked Peter if he were a follower of Jesus. Peter denied it. The courageous warrior of Gethsemane had suddenly collapsed. Even John's presence could not sustain his moral strength. He did not yet have the inner ethical discipline to stand up for Jesus.

Inside the house Annas questioned Jesus about his doctrine. Jesus told them that his teachings were public and well known. He had no secret teachings. He spoke openly in the synagogues and temple. Let them ask his listeners what he said. At this a temple guard slapped Jesus and accused him of being insolent. Jesus asked the guard why he hit him. If he had spoken the truth honestly there was no reason to strike him. But the truth often offends and hurts those who hear it. They retaliate by hurting the one who speaks it. Annas closed the hearing by having Jesus tied up and sent to Caiphas.

Peter stayed close to the fire to keep warm. Someone else asked him if he were a disciple of Jesus. He said, "I am not." Finally, a relative of Malchus, the man whose ear he had cut off, said that he saw Peter in the garden with Jesus.

Peter denied his Lord for the third time. And the cock crowed. Thus Peter proved that Jesus knew him better than he knew himself. He had thought of himself as a brave man. In a sense he was, if it meant physical battle. But when it came to the deeper struggle, the inner moral war he was expected to fight, he failed. He did not yet have the interior moral discipline to win such encounters with himself.

To be strong on the outside is not a guarantee one will be strong on the inside. Ultimately, a person with true inner power, will be strong outwardly, not only in a physical way, but also in a moral and spiritual manner. Soul power on the inside will become a soul power on the outside. Peter's tears will bring about the start of his inner conversion. That conversion will be completed when he is saved by the cross of Jesus and the coming of the Holy Spirit into his soul.

### **The Trial Before Pilate Begins (John 18:26-40)**

On Good Friday morning they brought Jesus to Pilate's house, the Fortress Antonia, also called the Praetorium. Pilate normally lived in a palace at Jericho, but at Passover he used his town house in Jerusalem to keep an eye on the crowds so he could quickly supervise and control any political troubles or rebellions. The street in front of his house was a typically narrow thoroughfare to be found in ancient cities, with the exception of an assembly area, the size of a tennis court, just in front of his residence. It was called the *lithostrotos* or stone pavement.

Today the Sisters of Zion have a convent at this site and their building covers the lithostrotos. Christian art has influenced movie representations of this scene causing us to imagine it as an area the size of a football field where thousands of demonstrators gathered in front of a marble columned stage. The reality was much simpler and downscaled to a relatively small situation. Pilate's house was far closer to 10 Downing Street than to Buckingham Palace. Or in American terms, to Blair House as contrasted with the White House.

Moreover, the crowd was probably not more than a few hundred people at most. Not only was there not room for a cast of thousands, but it was also just dawn and the speed of events precluded the organizing of any kind of huge turnout. Of course the size of the crowd and the expanse of the assembly area is not the real point of the account. A gathering of a few hundred people was just as capable of influencing the tragic outcome as would a mob of one hundred thousand. Pilate wanted no public disturbances big or small. In that volatile period a spark was as dangerous as a torch.

In John's narrative, the trial before Pilate occurs in seven scenes, four of them outside the Antonia and four inside the residence. The rhythm of the scene changes matching the mounting tension and the inexorable progress toward the final condemnation of Jesus.

The Jews on the outside and the Romans on the inside finally collude in the death sentence for Jesus. But we should remember they are but surrogates for us. It was the sins of the whole human race that motivated Jesus to undergo the brutality of the Passion. We all share in the responsibility for the passion, not by being physically present there, but because of our sinfulness that participates in the evil that caused Christ's Passion in the first place.

At the same time the search for blame is an unfitting attitude in our contemplation of the passion. Jesus himself set the tone with his first word from the cross. "Father, forgive them, they know not what they do" (Luke 24:34). We come not to judge those involved in the process of the passion, but to tell the story and see how it speaks to our own hearts of the need for personal conversion.

***Scene One: Execute Jesus! (Outside).*** The Jews came to the Antonia but would not enter Pilate's residence because that would cause them ceremonial defilement to go inside the house of a gentile. They would not be able to eat at the Passover table in such a state. So Pilate came out to meet them. He was the sixth Roman governor of Judea since the conquest and was now in his tenth year of office. Jews hated him automatically because he was the head of the Roman occupation.

They also despised him because he had sacrilegiously defiled their temple by hanging a portrait of the emperor there. Their religion forbade the making of pictures of people or carved statues of people or animals similar to pagan idols (graven images). The most serious of sins would be to try to make an image of God, hence to put a picture of a pagan in their most holy place was an exceedingly inflammatory act.

So reverent were they about even saying the name of God----let alone picturing him----that they used synonyms instead. Only the high priest could publicly utter God's name once a year at the Feast of Atonement.

Adding insult to injury, Pilate also raided the temple treasury----took God's funds----to finance the building of an aqueduct to serve the city. Let him take taxes (they grudgingly paid), but let him not touch the funds for God's house. His ruthless and insensitive act caused a series of unstoppable violent demonstrations where the people bared their necks and welcomed the sword rather than have such an abomination in their temple. During this uprising some Galileans were killed. Rome concluded that Pilate had created too great a problem over a religious issue where the government tended to be tolerant of provincial wishes, so he was ordered to back down.

Unpalatable as it may have been to deal with Pilate, the religious leaders and their followers had no other choice if they wanted to eliminate Jesus. He possessed the "jus gladii" (the right of the sword) meaning that only he could order an execution. Their hostility to Jesus overcame their negative feelings about Pilate.

Why were they so against Jesus? The priests were profoundly offended by what they considered his blasphemous identification with divinity---even to the point of presuming to forgive sins. The Pharisees intensely disliked his criticism of their religious externalism and his defiance of sabbath laws to heal people. The scribes were wounded by his exposure of their simple minded literalism in explaining the Scriptures. The sophisticated Sadducees were still fuming about his authoritative defense of the resurrection of the body, a teaching they denied.

The priests should have been more intent on making God's presence felt among the people. When the glory-presence of the Word made flesh came among them, he was an indictment of their own failure. The Pharisees should have advocated a covenant lifestyle similar to that of the prophets whose heirs they were. Jesus, the ultimate prophet, was a reproach to them. The scribes should have interpreted the Scriptures with the wisdom of the sages, freeing Scripture to speak of God's life among their people. Christ's exuberant opening of the vitality of the Word of God exposed the pitiable explanations they were presenting.

The Sadducees should have sensed God's care for the whole human person, body as well as spirit, hence God's promise of the body's resurrection. Their upscale lifestyle (pampering the body) blinded them to the body's real future potential. Jesus was unsparing with them. When he raised Lazarus from the dead, he offered them the first witness of the greater reality of a permanent resurrection. To make sure no one could miss the point, he said, "**I AM** the resurrection and the life" (John 11:25).

So Pilate obtained his first glimpse of Jesus surrounded by the religious establishment whom he had alienated in a variety of ways. Not only had he been a living reproach to their shortcomings, he threatened to upset the social order over which they enjoyed control. In their eyes he was a political threat as well as a religious one. They saw him as a loose cannon who must be killed.

***Scene Two: Kingdom and Truth (Inside).*** Pilate went back into his house and summoned Jesus for a private conference. It was immediately clear to the governor that Jesus was not a typical prisoner. Jesus had a disarming presence, not obviously threatening. This was no wild-eyed rebel leader like Judas the Galilean who mounted the ill-fated tax revolt. This was the man who compelled his own chief lieutenant, Peter, to give up using swords. This was a man whose face was full of bruises and cuts from the beating at the house of Annas. This quiet dignified man cared nothing for armed force and talked of his kingdom in spiritual terms.

Normally Pilate wasted little time on court cases and he was never known to have actually become a defender of an accused person. But Jesus was different. He did not stand before Pilate passively---nor yet defiantly. He treated Pilate like every other human being, one capable of redemption, one worthy of his effort to convert him to faith.

Pilate knew he had to clear up this kingdom matter. “Are you the king of the Jews?” (verse 33). Jesus replied that his kingdom was spiritual, not a worldly political one. Trained in the uses of power and institutional thinking, Pilate continued to press Jesus on the king issue. So Christ’s kingdom is spiritual. Does that mean he is king of such a realm? Jesus explained that he is a king of truth. His role as king was to witness to truth.

We should recall again here Christ’s discussion of truth with his apostles at the Last Supper the night before. When he spoke of truth he included both the truth of his teachings as well as his personal fidelity to God, self and others as the way he lived and personalized the truth. Truth is attainable and can be taught and learned. Truth is arrived at both from revelation and from thinking with one’s mind. Revealed truth and reasoned truth do not contradict each other. Truth is truth regardless of the source.

A spiritual kingdom is based on truth, which when it is witnessed and lived, is a form of love. Truth in the mind is an idea. Truth in the heart is love. A spiritual life is possible for us because it flows from truth. That is why the church has always stressed the importance of doctrine----the truth of Christ’s teaching----as well as the importance of a philosophy which affirms that truth can be known. Relativism in modern culture claims that there is no truth, only opinions more or less credible. This affects church people when they are persuaded to ignore or downplay doctrinal teaching, Christ’s truth, as unimportant or simply one opinion among many in the so-called marketplace of ideas. If the reality of truth can be undermined, then the reality of the spiritual life can be rejected. Deny the possibility of knowing truth and we will fail to enter the kingdom of Jesus, a spiritual kingdom.

As Jesus gazed on Pilate, he saw a man deeply trapped in pure pragmatism. He encountered a ruler whose philosophy was, “To be personal was to be political.” Compromise, power plays, strategies, fearful watchfulness, ruthless action, pretense, vanity, show, survival, these elements of political life were his daily bread. He had politicized his thinking to the point where his brain was virtually dead when confronted with the possibility that there was such a reality as truth, and that some people actually lived by the truth they believed. He would become one of history’s best remembered relativists. Jesus reached out to him and offered him the hope of change. But all that Pilate could do was to revert to form and speak his cynical question, starkly recorded in John’s gospel. “What is truth?” (verse 38).

***Scene Three: Barabbas Chosen (Outside).*** The wily mind of this provincial governor was not open to Christ’s appeal to truth. But Jesus did touch some mysterious part of Pilate’s heart. For once in his life Pilate felt a touch of sympathy for someone brought to his court. Some dim feeling inside him told him the man was innocent, a kind of harmless dreamer. Actually it was Christ’s talk about truth that hit a positive cord in Pilate, for every human being has been created to know truth, live by it and thrive in it.

Pilate decided to use the Privilegium Paschale, the custom of the Passover amnesty as a move to free Jesus. A well known revolutionary named Barabbas was presently in custody. Since both Jesus and Barabbas were being detained for the same alleged crime----though the accusation was clearly true in the case of Barabbas----Pilate judged that the two of them would be presented to the people. He hoped they would pick Jesus and let him go free. He even spoke up on behalf of Jesus. “I find no guilt in him” (verse 38).

But the people had been politicized by the religious leaders. Propaganda replaced truth. Emotion prevailed over reason. Hostility blocked compassion. “The chief priests and the elders persuaded the crowds to ask for Barabbas but to destroy Jesus” (Matthew 27:20). Pilate took a poll and was given the impressionistic outcome of this way of doing justice. Pilate relied on a vote to arrive at truth and justice. Poll taking and voting, given the circumstances, were poor substitutes for honesty and truth. At Passover a lamb was slain for sinful people. Barabbas the sinner went free. Jesus the innocent lamb went to his death.