

HOLY WEEK WEDNESDAY - A MEDITATION

We have been thinking about the people involved in the Passion of Our Lord. Tomorrow we shall be with the Disciples as the Lord gives us the command to take bread and wine and to remember him, and we shall follow to Gethsemane. The people I want to think about this evening are those whom Jesus meets after his arrest. Caiaphas, Annas, and Pilate.

Sometimes in life, we become trapped by the roles that we have to play. Circumstances seem to gang up on us, and we seem to lose control. These thoughts have been much in my mind as I have followed up some leads on the people who were instrumental in having Jesus murdered. Were they acting on their own initiative? Did they really MEAN it to happen, or were they too, trapped by their circumstances?

First Century Palestine. It had a long history of occupation by different foreign powers. The exile prompted the Jews to sort out their understanding of the primacy of the Law of God in their lives. Then came Egyptian, Greek and Roman rule. How difficult it was to maintain a separate identity, to hang on to the thought that they really **were** the chosen people, even though God was punishing them for past sins. Still - they could always hope for a messiah to set us free.

The Romans set up puppet kings but left things alone - well that is until the civil war of 63 BC. The Romans got totally fed up and Pompey ordered the invasion of Jerusalem and the establishment of a real vassal state. A Roman civil servant, the Procurator, governed Palestine and the Jews were allowed some limited freedom of religion. Julius Caesar made a man called Herod into the first Procurator of the region. He was Palestinian but not a proper Jew. His son was Herod the Great - loathed by the Jews. He was appointed king by the Emperor, but he was not secure on his throne.

I am going into all this, to give the background to the obsessive way the Chief Priests ran the Temple and policed the Jewish faith. They had to hang on to religious freedom at all costs. At all costs. We ARE the chosen people of God - aren't we? Aren't we?

One third of the kingdom, the East Bank of the Jordan, was passed Herod's son Antipas. When Jesus was about 10, there was a fierce revolt by the Zealots, which was jointly put down by Herod and the Romans. Revolutionaries were crucified along the main road at mile intervals, like so many telegraph poles. Life for Herod Antipas was really quite precarious. His job was to pacify the Jews for the Emperor. But the boy Jesus would have become so familiar with casual Roman brutality.

Pilate - we need to think about him, as he is a key player. One of Pilate's first acts was to erect images of the Emperor Tiberius all over Jerusalem. The Jews were furious and actually forced him to back down 6 days later. This didn't bode well for his period in office. So he cracked down hard, and viciously suppressed a Galilean riot - killing some of Herod's subjects. That upset Herod. Relations became difficult. Roman historians categorised Pilate as 'rigid and harsh' and 'spiteful and wrathful'. He would do anything to keep his job and to keep the lid on the tense situation. Like Herod, he too was sitting on a powder keg.

As a postscript, we know that he eventually committed suicide sometime soon after AD 37.

One of Pilate's duties was to appoint the Chief Priest of the day. Pilate also had custody of temple funds, and kept all the high priestly vestments, only letting them go out at festivals. If you have them by the wallet, the rest tends to follow - to change an old saying. So yes, there was religious freedom for some of the people, but Pilate had immense leverage with the council of elders that had a number of delegated powers in Judea. He had them in a strong headlock. They could do nothing significant without him.

Pilate had the funds and Herod Antipas had a hand in the appointments - for a fee of course. Pilate held the official funds, but the Chief Priests creamed a huge amount off on the side. There were 'fees' for the granting of licenses to temple traders, a percentage taken from the money made on the exchange rate by the money changers. The Priests owned all the pigeon lofts and all the fields where the lambs for sacrifice were bred - and some 20,000 were slaughtered each Passover. They were millionaires, in today's terms.

Past and present High Priests were members of the Sanhedrin ex officio, and one figure stands out from the rest. Annas, himself having been High Priest, had 5 sons, all of whom had been high priest in their turn, and now he was the father in Law of the present high priest Joseph Caiaphas. Talk about nepotism.

But every chief priest knew in his heart that he was breaking the law of God - the law said that once you were high priest you held the job for life. It was the Romans who invented the rotation of the top post, just to keep the Jews on their toes. To make sure they knew who was boss. Those in the promotion zone did their utmost to keep on Herod and Pilate's good side. But there was always that nagging fear of what God would say - but they managed to shut it out. That's why they were so zealous about blasphemy - it was a sort of displacement activity.

The Sanhedrin functioned partly as the Old Bailey and tried civil and criminal cases. Capital crimes needed to have the sentence confirmed by the Procurator. See how it all begins to hang together? It is quite clear that the trial of Jesus involved, to put the best light on it we can, a miscarriage of justice. They got him on charges of blasphemy. But how can it be blasphemy to claim you are God's son when in fact you are? It was Caiaphas, the president of the Sanhedrin, who made that prophetic remark: 'It is expedient that one man should die for the people'. Mind you, he was being nothing more than a politician of his day. Priestliness be blowed, the whole business was nothing more than power politics. Pilate wants us to keep the place quiet over Passover - when the city contained ten times the normal population. All of them hyped up.

So here we have all the players, Herod Antipas, Pilate (and his wife), Annas the God-father figure, Caiaphas the present high priest and president of the Sanhedrin, and all the rival factions. Oh yes, and a couple of hundred thousand pilgrims coming into the city each day. Zealot thuggery in dark alleys, plotting by Pharisees against Sadducees, Essenes coming along to upset everyone else with their long hair and their hippy community in Qumran. And Rome, always brutal, brooding and threatening in the background.

And then there's this Jesus. We tend to see him as a lovely person, attractive, charismatic. A man who cared for everyone, who healed people. Who was moved by human frailty and pain. A man who WAS love. A man people flocked to. **We** think of him as a man who meant no harm at all. So why did he have to die? What was it about him that upset the powers that be in first century Jerusalem? Well let

me give you another perspective. How about this imaginary wanted poster.

JESUS CHRIST Wanted - for sedition, Criminal Anarchy, Vagrancy, conspiring to Overthrow the Established Government. Then the description:

Dresses poorly, said to be a carpenter. Ill nourished. Has visionary ideas. Associates with common working people, unemployed and bums. Alien - believed to be a Jew. Aliases: Prince of Peace, Son of Man, Light of the World, etc etc. Professional Agitator."

See it from the Caiaphas' point of view? Jesus had been making a gradually increasing impression on the leaders of the synagogues and the temple authorities over the past few years. He had **something** to offer the crowds who flocked to hear him and to see his mighty acts. But why hadn't come to get my permission? Why, I would have loved to have him head a religious revival within the temple movement - under my direction, even though he was not properly trained. He would have been a great feather in my cap. But he chose peasants and collaborators as his team. And he always seemed to be mocking, to make light of our position. Don't forget, we've had to work over many, many years to get where we are - stability and some freedom of religion in exchange for docility and obedience to Rome. All those compromises with our consciences. And even now there were those who wanted to upset everything. Those zealots.

And then, only a few weeks ago this Jesus is said to have raised this man Lazarus from the dead. We sent some of our own reliable Pharisees to keep tabs on him. Even they said that they had seen it - had SEEN Lazarus hopping out of the tomb with his legs all tied up in the shroud.

And then this week he had come up to Jerusalem for the Passover and all the crowds had called him 'the Messiah'. Singing the Hallel psalms too. Well, you know what the Messiah would do, don't you. He was going to chuck out the foreign rulers and bring a reign of peace. And he would cleanse the religion - take over the temple for himself. We would all be thrown out. We'll be ruined - Annas, me, all of us. But could it really be him? That scruffian? With his weird ideas and his dirty Galilean gang. It mustn't happen. The crowd must be wrong. He must be dealt with.

And on the next day he had come in and caused a scene in the temple - throwing his weight about and upsetting all our concessionaires - the ones we licensed. They'll want their money back and the lost profit. It's no good he's got to go. Thank God that Judas came over to our side - cost a bit though - as much as a good slave. Jesus came to be a servant and that was the price of his betrayal - the story is full of so many ironies.

Judas led our men to him a little way outside the city, in the evening, and brought him in - with quite a crowd as well as the temple guards. Take him to Annas first - the old man will have to see him, he will see if a deal can be done, and anyway, I daren't do anything without Annas' say so. Then to the Sanhedrin - but it was night time. I know the decisions of the Sanhedrin were only legally binding in daylight, so we had to do it all again in the morning. Ok, we have got him for blasphemy. But we can't kill him without Pilate's permission. But he won't give a damn about blasphemy. He doesn't believe in Jehovah at all anyway. We'll tell him that this Jesus wants to make himself King. That'll swing it. But we've got to get a move on because of the Passover - must get it all out of the way.

Pilate saw it all differently. He didn't really care about the Sanhedrin. He was more worried about Rome, and keeping the peace. Jerusalem was the nearest thing to a punishment posting. He needed promotion. The city was seething. Initially he felt that it could cause more trouble if he confirmed the sentence of death. A better plan would be to have Herod sentence him, then it could stay a totally Jewish affair. But Herod wouldn't touch it with a barge pole - not me sunshine. My life is complicated enough. The Jews don't like me that much. If this guy is so popular, then I'm not going to risk upsetting them all even more.

Back to Pilate, who has another go at Jesus. Jesus points out that Pilate has no power of his own - he is merely Rome's servant. Pilate cannot see any way out of it. Even his wife gets in on the act and says to let him go. But just when he is trying to escape without a major row, those greasy priests put the tin lid on it. "If you really **are** Caesar's friend, how can you even think of setting this man free? He is an enemy of Rome. You'll get it the neck from Rome."

And so, Jesus is sent out on the Via Dolorosa to the cross. And we shall follow it with him in spirit on Friday.

But where were you this week? Where was I? It was sin that sent Jesus down this path. Jesus the sinless abandoned himself into the hands of sinners. There was the greed, the pride and political calculation of the Sanhedrin. A religious body which had no love in it, and no faith. It was all rules with no love and no worship. Were we there? Is our faith just liturgy and no more? Has it *really* touched our hearts - does it change our life?

Were we a Judas, so despairing of any hope of political action that he threw over his friend. Was it for gain or was it to kick Jesus into action? Do we try to use Jesus for our own ends - this too is a form of betrayal.

Or were we a Herod or a Pilate? Important not to be out of step with one's masters. Frightened to lose one's job? Unwilling to take the bold decision, to do the right thing. Much better to take the easy way out - and go with the crowd. Are we prepared to be counted, even here locally, when justice and right are being ignored?

Were we sitting in the temple, raking in the money, selling pigeon's for sacrifice, charging high rates for changing the money for the temple tax. Is money the main thing in our lives?

Perhaps we were one of the crowd on Palm Sunday. Full of the enthusiasm of the moment, and the joy of the occasion. But when the going got hard, we turned and ran? The seed that shot up - but without any depth.

Or are we like Peter? We really, really love Jesus, but we are afraid to say so, and we actually deny him, even though it breaks us up to do so.

Or did we just take no notice? Did we go on our way without comment?

As we follow our Lord through his passion, just let us pause and think about ourselves. Would we have stood by him? Or would we have helped in his crucifixion. Our sin was part of the cause of those stark events. Let us pray that as we come up against situations now, today, we may be faithful soldiers and servants, even to our live's end. Let us pray for strength to follow in his path, and to try to be like him in all things.