

This year we enter into the third act of our Lord's Passion, having first followed from the preparations for the Passover to the Upper Room to Gethsemane. Last year, we journeyed with the Lord through His agony in the Garden, His arrest, the trial before the religious leaders of Israel, culminating in their cry for His death, Peter's denial, and Judas' despair and end by his own hand.

The religious trial is complete. The priests of Israel have made their formal rejection of their Messiah, He must die. For that to happen He is taken to the jurisdiction of Rome. The chief priests and scribes have already murdered the Lord in their hearts, but it must be Romans who carry out the execution. Sometimes people ask why the priests say it is not lawful for them to put Jesus to death, and yet Stephen is stoned to death by a Jewish crowd, with no record either of Roman involvement, or their disapproval for usurping the capital penalty.

It is likely that the Sanhedrin had some leeway to execute on purely religious matters. There have already been attempts to kill Jesus, the leaders have long desired to. But we are told that they fear the crowds; they don't want the people to turn against them. On a purely human level, because of politics and crowd control, they desire Jesus to be executed by the Romans. Roman authority will shield accusations of jealousy, and temper heated reactions.

But besides the human machinations, the Scriptures must be fulfilled. Stoning is the biblical penalty for blasphemy, what we would expect to occur after the Lord's religious trial if we didn't already know the story. But for the Lord to bear the curse, as prophesied by Deuteronomy, He must hang on a tree. It must be that means of execution perfected and administered by Rome. Jesus Himself has already prophesied being handed over to Gentiles and crucified. As with all the details of the Passion, His suffering and death in general, it must be so.

To merit Roman execution, however, required guilt by Roman law. Thus the charge: misleading the people by forbidding taxes and by claiming to be the Messiah King. For followers of the Jesus, those who hear His teaching, especially in Luke's Gospel, the first basis is ridiculous. The beautiful parables of Luke chapter 15 are told because Jesus is accused of receiving tax collectors and sinners, eating with them. If Jesus were an opponent of paying Roman taxes, He is going to hang out with tax collectors as little as a pacifist vegetarian is going to frequent the gun counter at sporting goods stores. The very phrase used in the charge, "**give tribute to Caesar,**" is an exact repeat from three chapters earlier, where the Lord makes it masterfully obvious: give Caesar what has Caesar's likeness and inscription on it.

The real focus, as we shall consider more in depth next week, is Jesus' claim to be King. What better way to play on the fears of Roman authority than an attempted restoration of a kingdom Rome had supplanted? This gets Pilate's attention, and so in all four Gospels we have this exchange. Pilate asks, "**Are You the King of the Jews?**" and the brief reply by Jesus, "**You have said so.**" Here is one of those remarkable moments comparing the Gospels, where it's not just similar language across the four, but word-for-word, Pilate's question and Jesus' answer.

Where our Lord clearly answered the affirmative to the question of the High Priest, "**Are You the Christ, the Son of God?**" saying, "**I am,**" here, the Lord will not operate by man's ideas. Again, next week we will hear our Lord's explanation of what His kingdom is. Why He will give the answer here that He does.

Today, we simply recognize that as far as Pilate is concerned, from very early on, Jesus is no threat to Roman rule, He does not speak as a rebel fomenting revolt. As he will state a number of times, Pilate finds “**no guilt in Him.**” Jesus is repeatedly shown to be blameless, without guilt, and yet He is put to death. Because He is the final sacrifice, the unblemished Lamb of God, given to die in the place of sinners.

It is here that Luke gives us a unique detail of the proceedings. Hearing of Jesus’ Galilean origins, Pilate sends Jesus to Herod Antipas, the local ruler of Galilee. It’s often understood as Pilate trying to pass the problem on to Herod, but that actually does not seem to be the case, trying to shove the matter off to Herod, Rather it is similar to what we see in Acts 25 and 26. There Paul is in prison in Caesarea, and Festus, the new governor, unfamiliar with Jewish beliefs and customs, asks the counsel of Herod Agrippa in the matter. He’s local, been on the scene for a while, and understands the populace. Pilate figures Herod would know best if there was any validity to the charge that Jesus was an instigator of rebellion in Galilee since Jesus is from that region where Herod rules.

So, the Lord Jesus goes before Herod Antipas, son of Herod the Great, who had tried to kill Christ as a young Child. Herod Antipas, who in a mind devoured by lust, imprisoned John the Baptist for preaching against his fornication and adultery. Herod Antipas, who foolishly pledged to do whatever to please a dancing girl, and was caught in his own words, forced to behead St. John. Herod Antipas, who at least at one time in Jesus’ earlier ministry sought to kill Jesus.

Now the king, dressed in splendid robes, has lowly Jesus before him. Jesus as He appears, tired, up all night with the trials, already beaten and spat upon, does not seem all that impressive. As the frivolous, unbelieving world so often does, Herod wants to be entertained, wants it shown before his eyes, that all that he has heard about this Jesus is true, asks for some sign, a miracle.

Herod is a perfect example of a true worldling, someone who thinks little to nothing of God, is entirely happy and at home here. The things of God may arouse curiosity, bring delight if there’s a chance of some entertainment, but they do not seek the peace and salvation of their souls. It is why they are so often disappointed in the Church, for the world has more splendor for the eyes, more impressive initiations and rituals. Worldlings will at times willingly hear a sermon, open their ears to pious talks of godly things, how God helps and delivers those in trouble. They will ask all sorts of questions, “What did God do before the creation?” “How can a donkey talk?” They might even make an effort at drawing lessons from the Bible about nature, the history of nations, ethics, and the like. But when it comes to the real content of the Bible, the one thing needful, the question of salvation, they want nothing. When the church says what only she can say, they are not impressed.

Let us examine ourselves. For such an attitude can soon arise in the Christian. The easy mind with which the Christian so often hears and receives Christ and His Word that it becomes old and tired, easy to go without for longer and longer, is the most common sin of believers. Do you come to church, do you hear the Word, asking, “What can I learn today about Jesus for my soul’s salvation?” Recognize and reprimand the laxity within you! Flee with hungry hearts and open ears that yearn for the gentle voice of the Lord, to teach and lead us in the only way of hope!

So also, be reminded of how the world always is. Learn from your Lord what attitude to take to scoffing unbelief that seeks only some kind of entertainment, talk about religion and eternal things as though they were sports stats or trivia. Jesus “**made no answer.**” Even with His life on the line, when He could spare Himself the agony and death by doing just some little sign, guarantee a royal benefactor, Jesus will not do

it. He has already denied the Devil's temptation to gather for Himself worldly power and glory. He is not going to give way before some lesser force.

No, He will be mocked as a simpleton and fool, like so many of His Christians after Him over the centuries, down to this day. He will bear far more, all the sin, all the lust, levity, and carnal security, so that all those who will hear Him when He does speak, who tremble over their slander, their lax attitude to the things of God, who once gave themselves over to foolishness, might hear from His lips the sweet and kindly words from their King, the King who is the sort who receives tax collectors and sinners into His kingdom, to eat with them.