

## **THE TRIAL OF JESUS, THE TRIAL OF THE WORLD (John 18:1-19:16)**

John's account of Jesus' arrest and trial unfolds in several stages: First, Jewish and Roman forces meet Jesus in the garden, yet Jesus subdues them by uttering the "I Am," which recalls the name of God. His opponents appear to have tremendous power, but in reality prove powerless. They also seem to wield high authority, yet Jesus is the only one who gives an order, securing the release of his disciples. Second, Peter appears to be a loyal disciple of Jesus, yet he reveals that he is not a true disciple at this point in the story by denying Jesus three times. Third, the Jewish authorities try to have Jesus convicted as a rebel against God and a rebel against Rome. Yet they prove to be guilty of these charges, since they support rebellion against Rome by requesting the release of Barabbas, an insurrectionist, and by later saying that they actually have no king except the emperor—and the emperor was a man who was elevated to the status of a god. Fourth, Pilate the Roman governor recognized that Jesus was innocent of the charges brought against him, yet he had Jesus executed anyway. Although Pilate seemed to wield tremendous power, he proved powerless to act according to what he knew to be true. Each of these people and groups—Jewish, Gentile, and Christian—have their sin exposed. Jesus may appear to be on trial, but in the end the world is judged.

1. Some accounts of Jesus' arrest give the impression that only Jewish forces were involved, but John says that both Jewish and Roman soldiers were present in the garden. How does this affect the way you understand the scene?

2. Peter was a loyal disciple throughout Jesus' ministry, but in this episode repeatedly denied his relationship with Jesus even though he did not seem to be in grave danger.

What are some reasons that people today might find themselves seeking to conceal their relationship with Christ?

3. The Jewish authorities declare that they have no king except the emperor, even though Roman emperors were frequently revered as gods. Therefore, their statement seems to be contrary to their own deeply held beliefs. Why would they have made such a statement?

4. Pontius Pilate is a complex figure. Some readers think of him as weak and bumbling, others see him as strong and controlling. How do you see Pilate, given what we know about him from John 18-19? What moments in the story seem to reveal most about Pilate's character?

5. Pilate knew that Jesus was innocent, yet he had Jesus executed in order to make sure that nothing damaged his friendship with the emperor. In what situations today might someone suppress the truth in order to maintain valuable social connections?

6. Jesus tells Pilate that his kingdom is not from this world (18:36). How would you explain the nature of Jesus' kingdom to someone?

## THE CRUCIFIXION OF JESUS (John 19:17-42)

John's account of Jesus' crucifixion recognizes that Jesus suffered a brutal form of execution. The question addressed by the gospel is what Jesus' death means. The sign above the cross proclaims Jesus as a king, which is true because Jesus uses his royal power to lay down his life for others. The soldiers gamble for Jesus' clothing, as they might do when executing any criminal, but the quotation from Ps 22:18 shows that they gamble for the clothing of a righteous sufferer. By entrusting his mother to the care of his beloved disciple, Jesus forms the nucleus of a community of faith, a community that traces its identity to the foot of the cross. At the beginning of his ministry, Jesus turned water into excellent wine, yet at the end he says, "I thirst" and drinks the sour wine. His gifts are costly gifts; he gives to others, yet suffers thirst himself. Late on Good Friday, the soldiers break the legs of the two criminals, but not the legs of Jesus. A quotation from Exod 12:46 helps to show that this makes Jesus a perfect Passover sacrifice, since the bones of Passover lambs were not to be broken. The soldiers did pierce Jesus' side, and blood and water flowed out. The flow of water shows that the crucified Jesus is a source of cleansing and life. Finally, Jesus was given a royal burial by Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus, who were drawn out of the shadows to claim the body of Jesus.

1. Death can seem like the gracious completion of life. An example might be an elderly person passing away during sleep. Can you think of such examples? Death can also seem like a tragic interruption of life. Examples of this might be the death of a child or a young

parent. Can you think of examples from your own experience? For early Christians, Jesus' death seemed tragic. Therefore, the gospel must show that despite the horror, the crucifixion brings Jesus' work on earth to its culmination.

2. The cross is where Jesus' kingship is rightly proclaimed, because there he uses his power to lay down his life for others. How does the cross affect the way we understand what power is?

3. Jesus forms a new household of faith by entrusting his mother to the beloved disciple. Would it be appropriate to call Good Friday the birthday of the church? Why or why not?

4. At times most of us receive gifts from other people. How would you regard a gift that cost the giver nothing? How about a gift that cost the giver a great deal? Can you think of an example from your own experience? During his ministry Jesus gave miraculous gifts of wine and restoration to life and health. In the end, however, he suffers thirst and death. How does the crucifixion affect the way you see the gifts Jesus gives?

5. The crucifixion is a disturbing part of the Christian message. Some find it inappropriate to focus too much on it, since it seems to glorify death. Others insist that the cross should have a central place in Christian witness. What do you think?

6. Nicodemus gave Jesus a royal burial, which seems positive. At the same time, he was evidently not expecting Jesus to rise from the dead any time soon. Coming to Jesus does

not mean that people fully understand him. How have your own perceptions of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection developed over the years? How did you understand Jesus early in life? How has that changed?

## **THE DEATH OF JESUS AND THE HUMAN CONDITION**

**Synopsis:** John's gospel includes at least four different perspectives on the meaning of the crucifixion. First, Jesus shows love in a way that people can understand (John 15:13). If we show love by giving gifts to others, the greatest gift that can be given is one's own life. Second, Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world (1:29). The sin of the world is rooted in its unbelief or alienation from God. The message of Jesus' death takes away sin by revealing the love of God that evokes faith. When faith is evoked, sin is removed. Third, the death of Jesus means victory over evil. The evil one works through deception, hatred, and death. Therefore, the crucifixion overcomes evil by revealing the truth and love of God that bring life. Fourth, the crucifixion reveals the glory of God. Through the miracles he performed during his ministry, Jesus revealed God's glory by revealing the scope of divine power. Through his crucifixion, Jesus revealed God's glory by revealing the depth of divine love.

1. One of the highest forms of human love is to lay down one's life for a friend (John 15:13). Actual friendships usually fall far short of this ideal. What are some of the games that young people must play in order to make or keep friends? What are some of the ways

in which friends of any age hurt each other? What would it mean to have a friend who was willing to give up everything for you?

2. Jesus' death is often described as a sacrifice for sin. What are some of the ways in which you have heard people try to explain how this sacrifice works? What explanations have you found most helpful? Why? What explanations have you found unhelpful? Why?

3. John's gospel refers to Jesus' conflict with the Satan, who is also called the devil, the evil one, and the ruler of this world (John 12:31; 13:2, 27; 17:15). How is Satan most commonly pictured by people today? What about this common portrait of the devil do you find most convincing? Least convincing? John's gospel says that Satan's work is manifested in the power of deception, hatred, and the desire for death. Do you find this to be a helpful way to think about evil in the world? Why or why not?

4. John's gospel speaks of Jesus' crucifixion as a revelation of divine glory because it reveals the depth of divine love. Do you find it helpful to speak of the crucifixion in this way? Why or why not?

5. The question "Why did Jesus die?" is both simple and challenging. It invites us to think about the heart of the Christian message. If someone asked you that question, how would you respond? What passages of Scripture might you use? What images or ideas might you draw from as you formulate your answer?