

# WAS JESUS SANE ENOUGH TO BE EXECUTED?

by Thomas L. Mowbray

## Abstract

*In order to become authors of sanity, pastoral counselors must first be people of faith, who through their words and actions strive to be inventive as they deal with the madness of the world around them.*

### SCENARIO I. [Theological Reflections On A Biblical Narrative]

Text: John 18:33-38 (RSV)

Narrator: Pilate entered the Praetorium again and called Jesus, and said to him,

Pilate: "Are you the King of the Jews?"

N: Jesus answered,

Jesus: "Do you say this of your own accord, or did others say it to you about me?"

N: Pilate answered,

P: "Am I a Jew? Your own nation and the chief priests have handed you over to me; what have you done?"

N: Jesus answered,

J: "My kingship is not of this world; if my kingship were of this world, my servants would fight, that I might not be handed over to the Jews; but my kingship is not from the world."

N: Pilate said to him,

P: "So you are a king?"

N: Jesus answered,

J: "You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I have come into the world, to bear witness to the truth. Every one who is of the truth hears my voice."

N: Pilate said to him,

P: "What is truth?"

Pilate asked Jesus seven questions. In this passage he first asks, "Are you the King of the Jews?"

Instead of answering Pilate's question, Jesus asks, "Do you say this of your own accord, or did others say it to you about me?"

Here, we must ask ourselves, who is questioning whom?

Pilate employs the same rhetorical device. He, too, avoids answering a question by asking Jesus, "Am I a Jew?" Pilate then interrupts the questioning cycle in order to clarify his intent. He says, "Your own nation and the chief priests have handed you over to me...." Then he continues his investigation with yet another question: "What have you done?"

Answering a question with another question was, and still is, a formal rhetorical device. It is still used in courts of law. Although it is not used much today in everyday American conversation, it is still common in the Middle East and in certain cultural settings here in America. Perhaps its most common form in our culture is in the realm of humor.

The popular comedian, Jay Leno, will often address a question to his audience, and follow his question with another, and perhaps another: "Did you see the article in the paper today, that an elephant was FOUND in downtown Los Angeles. What is this? Is this for real? How can you lose an elephant?"

Another form of this kind of argument can be found in New England humor, which usually tends to be rather serious in its nature:

One day a city slicker from down New York City way was vacationing with his family in Vermont. The first weekend they were there, the family decided to go to one of the advertised church suppers in a nearby town. On the way, it became obvious that they had passed the same spot once before. In other words, they were lost. Seeing a farmer in his pasture, the city slicker slammed on the brakes, rolled down the car window, and shouted a question to the farmer: "How do I get to the First Congregational Church of Brandon?"

[Midwesterners seem to be able to hear questions shouted from rolled down car windows, but New Englanders do not.]

Several additional, louder shouts proved to be equally fruitless. So the city man got out of his car, walked over to the farmer, and, not realizing how very rude he had been, yelled at the farmer, once again, "How do I get to the First Congregational Church of Brandon?"

"Who wants to know", replied the farmer?

Calmly, the city slicker explains, "I'm taking my family to the church supper at the First Congregational Church in Brandon. How do I get there?"

The farmer replied, "What makes you think you can get there from here?"

At this point the city man recalled the advice of a friend concerning the fine art of asking directions in New England. In desperation he attempted to engage the farmer in pleasant conversation by changing his tone of voice and by changing the subject to something more conversational. "Well," he asked, "how's your wife?"

The farmer replied, "Compared to what?"

Even in the very serious dialogue we are dealing with, we can find elements of such chiding. The scene is ponderous and heavy for US, because we know the tragic result of this trial. But for just a few moments, let us concentrate on this one scene as if we were NOT already certain of the results.

These are NOT the bitter words of archenemies. Pilate is NOT addressing questions to a person whom Pilate despises. There is most certainly a serious line of questioning going on here, but it is very clear that Pilate remains mystified by the contempt and hatred expressed by the Jews toward this Jew named Jesus. What is their problem? Why are they taking everything out on him?

Pilate's questioning of Jesus is patient; it is obviously designed to be helpful. If Pilate is expressing any contempt, it most certainly is a contempt toward the Jews who were shouting, "Crucify him. Crucify him!" Pilate's contempt is obviously NOT a contempt toward this one Jew named Jesus.

Therefore, how do we interpret Pilate's question, "Am I a Jew?" This is a strange and yet enduring question. How would Pilate have asked this question?

We, ourselves, can ask this question in at least three different ways by changing the emphasis on the words. For instance, if I were a Jew, and very proud of my religion and culture, and someone asked me if I were Jewish, I might reply with "AM I a Jew? You bet I am!"

If I were deeply prejudiced against Jews, and someone asked the same question, I could reply, "Am I a JEW?" As if to say, "What, are you crazy?"

The first example is very positive; the latter is very negative and very bitter.

A third possibility would be to emphasize the subject: "Am I a Jew?" (You' re a Jew. They are Jews. But am I a Jew? No! I am not a Jew. How could you possibly think that I am a Jew? Why on earth are you asking me this question?)

I would have to assume that the last example was the inflection Pilate would have had in his voice.

"Am I a Jew? Your own nation and the chief priests have handed you over to me. [JESUS,] WHAT HAVE YOU DONE?"

We know that the Jewish people were a constant pain in the neck to their Roman governor, Pontius Pilate. The Jews of Jesus' day often had as much contempt for each other as they had for the Roman occupation force.

"Am I a Jew?"

We might easily conclude that Pilate's contempt was justified. He had a reason to be scornful of the Jews or at least to be scornful of a good many of them. The Jewish leaders had caused Jesus to be brought before Pilate and, as the gospel of Mark tells us (Mark 15:10), the Roman governor knew that they had acted out of envy. The Jewish leaders envied Jesus. For many, the envy had turned into jealousy and spite, and soon into hatred.

But, consider carefully this dialogue between Jesus and Pilate. Despite Pilate's final failure to free Jesus, it must be admitted that Pilate did try almost every trick at his command to avoid condemning Jesus. It was NOT Pilate, but the Jews who cried, "Crucify him." Thus, the contempt in Pilate's voice "Am I a Jew?"-- was natural and understandable.

And here is the rub.

The contempt is obvious. It is reasonable. It is understandable. But what we DON'T want to see is that in most instances of prejudice there is usually some reason for contempt that extends beyond what we would dismiss as merely an excuse.

The person who insists that black people are lazy and that they steal and that they are dangerous to have around, can undoubtedly point to examples of this very thing. The people who characterize Italians as gangsters, can reel off an impressive list of names. The businessman who says that Japanese businessmen are money-mad and have no business ethics, can generally give examples to prove his points.

Prejudice is not solely dependent upon ignorance, as many people are inclined to think. Often the contempt of the prejudiced person seems natural and understandable.

"Am I a Jew?"

The only thing that such contempt really establishes is that ALL people are sinful. Pilate proved this to himself.

The Jews were envious and vicious. Yes! What Pilate failed to understand was that he too was a person with grave shortcomings that were no more acceptable to God than those of

the Jews. Pilate was weak in the face of pressure, he was cruel in that he allowed an innocent man to be savagely beaten, and he was a murderer, since he allowed Jesus to be crucified although he knew there were NO grounds for such an action. Yet he would say very innocently, "Am I a Jew?"

Pilate's question points out the nature of all prejudice, of all intolerance. Prejudice always, and without exception, involves a denial of the equal guilt of all people before God. It seeks to set up one set of weaknesses as being more acceptable than another. It claims that what one person does is far more obnoxious than what another person does. This is nonsense as far as God is concerned, for it denies the fact that all have fallen short of the grace of God.

Pilate's contempt for the Jews led him to an EASY way of dealing with Jesus and the Jewish leaders. But God does not deal with people that way. God is concerned with the mind of each person, with the heart of each person, with the imagination of each person. God sees each person as an individual. God is not partial.

Therefore, God, who offered his son for all of God's people, must be terribly offended when WE limit God's love by leaving out anyone.

#### SCENARIO II. [Philosophical Reflections On A Dialogue]

In an abrupt shift of emphasis, let us imagine Jesus lying on a counselor's couch. He has dark skin, long hair, a scruffy beard, and is dressed in tattered clothes. Pilate is sitting in a large chair at the head end of the couch, in a three-piece suit, immaculately groomed, legs crossed, holding a pen and pad:

"Are you the King of the Jews?"

"Do you say this of your own accord, or did others say it to you about me?"

"Am I a Jew? Your own nation and the chief priests have handed you over to me; what have you done?"

"My kingship is not of this world; if my kingship were of this world, my servants would fight, that I might not be handed over to the Jews; but my kingship is not from the world."

"So you are a king?"

"You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I have come into the world, to bear witness to the truth. Every one who is of the truth hears my voice."

"What is truth?"

Theology, biblical exegesis and homiletics aside, we are now confronted with the sanity of Pilate confronting the madness of Jesus. Jesus does not answer Pilate's questions. Nothing Jesus says makes any sense to Pilate. And yet, Pilate does everything he can to avoid condemning Jesus. There is nothing to preach about here. We are quite lost for words until we realize that we are not just dealing with Pilate's sanity or Jesus' "madness" per se, but rather with the whole idea of sanity as a testament to the power of madness. This is a truth that shifts between the characters as the scenes change: first, the aforementioned scenario of the sanity of Pilate versus the "madness" of Jesus; then, the sanity of Jesus versus the madness of those who scourge him; then, the sanity of Jesus versus the madness of the Jewish mob that cries, "Crucify him," until the words of the mob become actions, and the murderous act is done, and the only sign of sanity in a world gone mad is a corpse hanging on a cross.

Considering this dead end, I recall the court ruling in 2003 concerning the death row prisoner named Charles Singleton. In Adam Philips' fascinating book, *Going Sane*, Philips comments on the court's decision to force Singleton to be "treated for psychosis which would make him sane enough to be executed."

"Sane enough to be executed" presumably means, in this context, sentient enough, responsible enough, guilty enough to experience the punishment as punishment rather than as something else... (Philips, Adam. *Going Sane: Maps of Happiness*. Fourth Estate, 2005. p. xi.)

How do we make sense out of this? Was Jesus sane enough to be executed? What a horrible question! I am very sorry that I asked this question, but it certainly addresses the madness of the world around us and points to the critical need for us to find ways of restoring sanity in careful, loving, meaningful and hopeful ways.

How do we make any sense out of this? I, for one, sometimes need to lay my theology and biblical studies aside in order to deal with the realities that are shared by the authors of the gospels. For here there is a literary discovery that is much more enlightening than anything systematic theology has to offer.

As in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, where Polonius is briefly impressed by Hamlet's madness, we find that Pilate is impressed by Jesus' "madness." But this inventive use of madness is clearly due to the sanity of Shakespeare (not Polonius), and, likewise, to the sanity of the gospel authors (not Pilate). It is the sanity of the gospel authors that makes Jesus' madness so inventive.

This is what transforms the chaos of the Passion narratives into order, the hate into love, the meaninglessness into hope.

As pastors and counselors who are frequently obligated to deal personally with the bereaved (in particular those who have lost loved ones as the result of tragic and violent circumstances, and especially in acts of war), we must always be pastors first and counselors second. More precisely, we are first required to be people of faith who

through our words and actions strive to be inventive as we deal with the madness of our world by being authors of sanity.

Only then are we equipped to deal with the world's madness. So equipped, we may find ways to give even the bereaved a chance to have their sanity restored. Through our Christ-like inventiveness we can present ourselves as authors of sanity in a world of madness.

## Biographical Information

Thomas L. Mowbray is a retired ordained minister in the United Church of Christ who has served Congregational churches in New Jersey, Wisconsin and Iowa. He holds a degree in church music/organ performance from Westminster Choir College, a Master of Divinity degree from Princeton Theological Seminary where he concentrated in pastoral care and counseling, and a Doctor of Ministry degree from the University of Dubuque Theological Seminary. Thomas lives with his wife, Mary, in Nashua, Iowa.