

JESUS ON TRIAL

John 18v12- 40: 19v1-16

Most of us find trials fascinating, whether in the movies, on the small screen or in real life. Sometimes we come across a trial where there is little pretence at seeking justice. Today we are to look at just such a trial. We are looking at the Trial of Jesus. But I have a question.

Who is really on trial?

There is a story of a tourist visiting the Uffizi Gallery in Florence, guide book in hand: around him hung some of the most famous masterpieces by many of the world's greatest masters. He turned to a curator and said: *"Are these your masterpieces? I don't see much in them myself."* The curator replied. *"Sir, these pictures are not on trial; it is the spectators who are on trial."*

I believe we have much the same situation as we look at the trial of Jesus. He is the Master and He is also the masterpiece. It is those who interrogate Jesus who are on trial. And this is still true today.

In the Gospel accounts Jesus had two trials, one Jewish and the other Roman. Both were in two stages. We are able to piece the big picture together by looking at all four Gospels. The Jewish trial was before Annas and then the ruling Council, the Sanhedrin chaired by Caiaphas. The Roman trial was before the Governor Pontius Pilate, with an interlude when Jesus was taken to the Roman's puppet-king, Herod (recorded by Luke).

John 18 begins with Jesus' arrest in Gethsemane, and this is followed by an account of his trial. John does not give us a comprehensive picture of the trial. He concentrates on two of the four interrogations, firstly by Annas (interspersed by Peter's denial v15 -18; 25 -27) and then Pilate.

1. Annas. John 18v12,13; 19-24

This seems to have been an informal examination, possibly while Sanhedrin members were being summoned from their beds in the night.

There is sometimes confusion about who exactly was high priest at this time. Both Annas and Caiaphas are given the title in the Gospels. Annas held the office from AD 6 - 15 but had been deposed by the Romans. Nevertheless he continued to hold great influence because his family dominated the Jewish religious scene. Five of his sons held the office after him, and presently his son-in-law Caiaphas had the top job. But Annas still liked to be known as the high priest. Anyway, like Mr. President in the USA, you were known high priest for life.

Annas was a Godfather figure. He had a Mafia-like hold on the population which focused on the Temple. Jesus had clashed head on with him over this. He represents the corrupt dictator or the crime lord or even the big Corporate Institution that maintains an economic stranglehold on a nation. Annas' God was not the God of Abraham, Isaac & Jacob. Mammon was his god. Mammon was his master. Jesus was a threat to his economic empire, his power base. The turning of the tables in the Temple would have been hugely popular with the people. He decided to take a look at Jesus for himself. This man had stirred up a lot of trouble for Annas.

Annas didn't realise it, but he was examining the Master; he was looking at the masterpiece. And rather than Jesus being on trial it was Annas who was under the microscope. This man

Annas, who was still thought of as High Priest should have been devoted to God. Representing man to God and God to man. But he was corrupt. And before Annas stood Jesus, the Great High Priest.

2. The Sanhedrin. Matthew 26v57-68.

The Sanhedrin was the Jewish ruling Council, and their highest Court, presided over by Caiphas. If Jesus was to be taken, eventually, before the Roman Governor he would first have to go through the current high priest, the one Rome recognised.

Jesus was a threat to their legalistic religion. They had spent three years watching and interrogating him. They couldn't fault Him his adherence to the law of Moses, but for Jesus righteousness was a matter of the heart, not obeying hundreds of extra regulations the experts had devised. He even healed people on the Sabbath day! They were the guardians of law, but they had lost the heart of the law. Jesus had summed it up. Love God with all your heart. And love others as yourself.

And now, in their effort to protect law, they broke their own law to get rid of Him. The illegalities at Jesus trial are well documented. According to the Mishna in a capital case there were to be no night trials, the proceedings had to extend over at least two consecutive days, the prosecution witnesses must be interrogated first, witnesses for the defence were to be heard before any witnesses against the accused. None of this happened. And he had been arrested after a bribe, tried in a private home and accused by false witness. This court should have been there to protect innocence not prove guilt. But the Sanhedrin were accuser, judge and jury.

When the Sanhedrin looked at Jesus they saw a heretic, a blasphemer. Several times Jesus had come close to being killed because of this. e.g. John 8 "Before Abraham was I AM". It was their duty to get rid of Him.

The Sanhedrin were oblivious to the fact, but it was they who were under examination. They were looking at the Master, and the masterpiece. Before them stood the Son of God. The Messiah, longed for throughout generations. One of their number, Nicodemus, did however realize this. He had been involved in an earlier cross examination of Jesus and it had started him on a trail to becoming a disciple of Jesus. The same thing still happens today.

3. Pontius Pilate. Jn 18v28-40. 19v1-16.

Pontius Pilate was the Roman Governor of Judea. He had been appointed four years earlier by the Emperor Tiberius. He was a bull in a china shop. He had bungled his way through & was in danger of being recalled to Rome. He had raised Roman standards in the shadow of the Jerusalem Temple & caused a riot; he had used Temple money to finance an aqueduct to the city. He was ignorant of or impervious to Jewish sensitivities & he was loathed by the people for his brutality. He was the typical bully: a weak, insecure man making a show of strength. Because of his incompetence his position as Governor was vulnerable.

He soon realised that Jesus was a threat in his power struggle. He first tried to release Jesus, not out of justice or compassion, but to spite the Jewish authorities. But they were more cunning; they shaped their charge politically. Pilate was out-manoeuvred. He saw the potential for personal disaster. In the end it was Jesus or his own skin. So there was only one option for Pilate. He handed Jesus over.

Pilate was the one on trial here more than Jesus. When he looked at Jesus he saw a bloodstained victim clothed in mock robes with a crown of thorns. Pilate thought he was in

charge. That he had power over Jesus. But the reverse was true. He was staring at the Master; at the masterpiece. Before Pilate stood the King of Heaven. Jesus, the King of kings & Lord of lords; the One with supreme power - standing meekly; having laid aside His power; having refused to call on Legions of angels. John 19v11. *"You would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above."* He could have eliminated Pilate, and the entire Roman Empire with the click of a finger. Standing alongside Jesus it is Pilate who is on trial. He is seen for what he is - a frightened bully. Self-interest made his decision for him.

4. Herod. Luke 23v6-12.

This was an interlude in Pilate's interrogation. Herod the tetrarch was one of the sons of Herod the Great. His father was the one who had massacred the infants at the birth of Jesus. This Herod was called Herod Antipas. He was tetrarch of Galilee and Peraea (part of Jordan) He only had this status because Rome allowed it. In due course the Emperor Gaius got rid of him. He was hated by most of the population. He had put John the Baptist in prison after the prophet denounced his immorality; and then had him put to death to please his wife. Jesus had immediately launched into his public ministry in Herod's territory preaching the same message of repentance. Jesus constantly honoured John, but referred to Herod as "that fox".

Jesus was a threat to Herod . He had heard talk of Jesus as King of the Jews. Herod liked to think that he was King of the Jews! So he did what many do when they are afraid or insecure - he had a laugh. He made a joke of Jesus. Herod went for the trivializing approach. He thought he could snap his fingers and Jesus would dance to his tune; like a puppet on a string. Some of you will be familiar with Herod's song in 'Jesus Christ Superstar'.

*"So you are the Christ, you're the great Jesus Christ,
Prove to me that you're divine - change my water into wine.
That's all you need to do and I'll know it's all true,
C'mon King of the Jews.*

*So you are the Christ, you're the great Jesus Christ,
Prove to me that you're no fool, walk across my swimming pool,
If you do that for me then I'll let you go free
C'mon King of the Jews.*

When he looked at Jesus this is what he saw: somebody to have a bit a fun with. A Royal variety Performance! But this man was no plaything. It was not Jesus who was the Puppet king. Herod was face to face with the Master: the masterpiece.

Herod was on trial not Jesus. While Herod was looking for entertainment, Jesus was about the most serious work ever undertaken in the history of the world. He was a King about to take His throne on a cross: the Servant King, giving His life. He had come not to be served, but to serve, and give His life as a ransom for man. Herod was looking at the One who has all authority in heaven and on earth. One who had enjoyed the glory of heaven from all eternity, yet who willingly had laid aside His authority and His glory.

No wonder Jesus did not even open His mouth. No words were necessary. Herod's shallowness needed no commentary. It was all too obvious.

Finally:

Some of you will remember the statue of Jesus that stood by London's National Gallery in 1999. Mark Wallinger cast it in marble resin & called it 'Ecce Homo'. It was the first of three contemporary sculptures planned by the Royal Society of Arts to occupy an empty plinth in Trafalgar Square. The figure seemed so out of place. It was dwarfed by the other statues and the surrounding buildings. Opinion about it was mixed. I thought it was wonderful: the small, insignificant, lonely figure of Jesus, almost naked, hands tied behind his back and a gold plated crown of barbed wire on his head.

In fact it was exactly as Isaiah prophesied of Jesus: "*He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him.*" He stood there looking at the embassies and the galleries and the famous churches. He gazed silently at monuments to kings & generals on horseback and Nelson towering overhead. He watched as the crowds hurried by about their business and their leisure: someone begging sitting under him, a policeman directing traffic behind him, a tourist taking his photograph.

As I looked at the statue it seemed to me that our world was under the microscope not Jesus. British history; proud London; economic power. He was the One doing the watching. And I was being watched by him too. Just like Annas my materialism is naked to His gaze. Just like the Sanhedrin my straying into empty religion. Like Pilate my self-interest. Like Herod my shallowness. How do *you* fare under the gaze of Jesus this morning?

If you are not yet a disciple of Jesus how do you feel under His scrutiny? When you begin to consider Jesus and his claims you may think you are investigating Jesus. But that isn't so. I suggest to you that you are the one under the microscope, not Jesus. He is not on trial; you are. You are looking at the Master; the masterpiece.

What is your reaction to His claims? What do you make of Jesus fully God & fully man. What do you make of his life - sinless, full of love & compassion, amazing teaching, extraordinary miracles? What is your verdict on his death on the cross, his resurrection? What do you make of them? The only appropriate response is worship. Jesus you are my Great High Priest, the Son of God, the Lord of Heaven, the Servant King.

JESUS ON TRIAL

But who is really on trial?

Jesus is the master,
and He is the masterpiece.

Jesus had two trials, Jewish and Roman : both
were in two stages.

**But who was on trial - Jesus, or those who
questioned Him?**

The Jewish Trial

Annas a powerful former High Priest

Caiaphas and the Sanhedrin

The Roman Trial

Governor Pontius Pilate

(Interlude)

Herod