



John 19:1–5

19 Then Pilate took Jesus and had him flogged. 2 The soldiers twisted together a crown of thorns and put it on his head. They clothed him in a purple robe 3 and went up to him again and again, saying, ‘Hail, king of the Jews!’ And they slapped him in the face. 4 Once more Pilate came out and said to the Jews gathered there, ‘Look, I am bringing him out to you to let you know that I find no basis for a charge against him.’

5 When Jesus came out wearing the crown of thorns and the purple robe, Pilate said to them, 'Here is the man!'

Reflection

It's early morning on Good Friday, in the Praetorium, Pilate's military residence, his palace in Jerusalem. After being arrested under the cover of darkness in the Garden of Gethsemane late Thursday evening, throughout this long night Jesus has been subject to both the Jewish and Roman justice systems. In today's passage, we see the culmination of these two trials. Jesus has been tried under both Jewish and Roman law and today we see the outcome.

Jewish law, originating as it did in the Old Testament Scriptures was regarded as the most humane of legal systems in the ancient world. It did everything to preserve life and to avoid executions. The Roman courts, in their day, sought to apply what was generally thought to be the most highly developed system of law known to man. Roman law was known for its comprehensiveness, its systematization of statutes, its specification of procedures, and its affixing of fair and just penalties to each crime. It has been said of the ancient world that Judea gave religion, Greece gave letters, and Rome gave law. So what on earth is happening here? Reading today's passage, from John 19:1–5,

19 Then Pilate took Jesus and had him flogged. 2 The soldiers twist-

ed together a crown of thorns and put it on his head. They clothed him in a purple robe ³ and went up to him again and again, saying, ‘Hail, king of the Jews!’ And they slapped him in the face. ⁴ Once more Pilate came out and said to the Jews gathered there, ‘Look, I am bringing him out to you to let you know that I find no basis for a charge against him.’ ⁵ When Jesus came out wearing the crown of thorns and the purple robe, Pilate said to them, ‘Here is the man!’

What is going on here? Believe it or not, Pilate is trying (somewhat half-heartedly) to save Jesus. Already in 18:38 Pilate has declared his innocence to those assembled outside,

‘I find no basis for a charge against him.’

And as was customary at major Jewish festivals – to demonstrate the benevolence of Rome and to keep the goodwill in occupied territories during heightened periods of religious zeal – Pilate has offered the customary release of a popular prisoner on death row. The choice is between Barabbas, a rebel and insurrectionist against the Roman state, and Jesus. And Pilate is stacking the decks in Jesus’ favour, which brings us to Jesus’ flogging.

In ancient Rome, historians tell us that there were three types of flogging as punishment for crime. The first and least severe was the *fustigatio*, typically pun-

ishment for relatively light offences such as hooliganism or troublemaking, often accompanied by a severe warning. For more serious offences there was a brutal flogging known as the *flagellatio*. The last form of flogging was known as the *verberatio*. For victims who, like Jesus, were neither Roman citizens nor soldiers, the favoured instrument for the *verberatio* was a whip whose leather thongs were fitted with pieces of bone, lead or other metal. The beatings were so savage that the victims sometimes died. Eyewitness records report in graphic nature that such brutal scourings could leave victims with their bones and entrails exposed.

Jesus will be whipped twice, suffering the first and third forms of flogging almost back to back. But in today's passage, it's

the lighter *fustigatio* and some sport in the barracks to rough Jesus up some more.

2 The soldiers twisted together a crown of thorns and put it on his head. They clothed him in a purple robe 3 and went up to him again and again, saying, 'Hail, king of the Jews!' And they slapped him in the face.

A crown of thorns, most likely twisted together from the long spikes of a date palm. Its thorns grew up to twelve inches; pressed roughly down on Jesus head, blood streaming down his face to match the bleeding lacerations on his back and ribs. Then there's the 'purple robe', probably a military cloak, and Pilate's soldiers, all lining up to pay mock homage to the

king,

‘Hail, king of the Jews!’

One by one they bow down and then rise to slap Jesus in the face.

All this in preparation for verse four. Pilate again addresses the crowds outside his palace. It's the Passover. The crowds are filled with Jewish nationalistic zeal at this important week in their religious calendar. Pilate has placed Jesus' fate in their hands. He did so because he can't stand the Jewish religious leaders who literally were hell bent on seeing Jesus crucified. And so Pilate, under pressure to appease them but unwilling to do so, has given the choice over to the people, and done his best to stack the decks. ‘Barabbas or Je-

sus, who will you choose?’ Reading verse 4,

4 Once more Pilate came out and said to the Jews gathered there, ‘Look, I am bringing him out to you to let you know that I find no basis for a charge against him.’ 5 When Jesus came out wearing the crown of thorns and the purple robe, Pilate said to them, ‘Here is the man!’

After exonerating Jesus, and no doubt infuriating the Jewish religious leaders in the process, Pilate dramatically presents ‘the King of the Jews’.

‘Here is the man!’

Your so-called ‘King of the Jews’, this great

and terrible threat to the Roman empire who must be crucified immediately. Jesus is shoved forward into full public view. A sorry sight, swollen, bruised, blood streaming down his head from those cruel, ridiculous and humiliating thorns. Pilate's working at a few levels. Firstly, he's ridiculing the Jewish authorities, 'Is this the man you're so concerned about?'. But more importantly, he's trying, in a half-hearted and callous kind of way, to stack the decks in Jesus' favour. The prophet and teacher who was welcomed into Jerusalem with palm branches and singing, who held these crowds under a spell through his teaching in temple is brought forward beaten and bloodied, humiliated by the Romans. Pilate's either hoping that the crowds will have sympathy on Jesus, or be infuriated at him for doing this to such

a popular figure, and either way, choose to release Jesus over Barabbas who is a far greater threat to Roman rule.

Think & Pray

Fix this scene in your mind as you think over today's passage again. Two trials, two great legal systems degenerated into farce, and Jesus' life hangs in the balance of the 'thumbs up' or 'thumbs down' of a crowd. Carnival games and bloodlust. The mockery and the brutality of the soldiers' barracks. The cowardice and callousness of Pilate; his half-hearted attempt to see justice done more to spite the Jewish authorities than out of any real concern for Jesus. Picture Jesus' body, his public humiliation; and what will shortly follow. Fix this scene in your mind this morning, the

ugliness of humanity, and the suffering of our Lord. Isaiah said of him some eight hundred years earlier,

13 See, my servant will act wisely;
he will be raised and lifted up and highly exalted.

14 Just as there were many who were appalled at him

his appearance was so disfigured beyond that of any human being and his form marred beyond human likeness –

15 so he will sprinkle many nations, and kings will shut their mouths because of him ...

He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him,

nothing in his appearance that

we should desire him.

3 He was despised and rejected by mankind,

a man of suffering, and familiar with pain.

Like one from whom people hide their faces

he was despised, and we held him in low esteem.

4 Surely he took up our pain

and bore our suffering,
yet we considered him punished by God,

stricken by him, and afflicted.

5 But he was pierced for our transgressions,

he was crushed for our iniquities;
the punishment that brought us peace was on him,

and by his wounds we are healed.

6 We all, like sheep, have gone
astray,

each of us has turned to our own
way;

and the Lord has laid on him
the iniquity of us all.

7 He was oppressed and afflicted,
yet he did not open his mouth;
he was led like a lamb to the slaugh-
ter,

and as a sheep before its shear-
ers is silent,

so he did not open his mouth. Isa-
iah 52:13–15, 53:2–7

Jesus went through this for us. That by his
wounds we might be healed. He walked
this gauntlet for us. And he was crucified
in our place. So that we, like Barabbas,
might walk free. Pour out your heart to him

this morning in prayer. Thank him for suffering and dying in our place. And commit to him to live this day ahead in a way that is worthy of him.