

Jesus Before Pilate: Truth on Trial

Reading: Matthew 27:11-26

And Jesus stood before the governor. And the governor questioned Him, saying, Are You the King of the Jews? And Jesus said to him, You say it. (12) And when He was accused by the chief priests and the elders, He answered nothing. (13) Then Pilate said to Him, Do You not hear how many things they testify against You? (14) And He did not answer him, not even to one word, so that the governor greatly marveled. (15) And at a feast, the governor customarily released one prisoner to the crowd, whom they wished. (16) And they had then a notable prisoner, Barabbas. (17) Then they, having been assembled, Pilate said to them, Whom do you wish I may release to you, Barabbas, or Jesus being called Christ? (18) For he knew they delivered Him up through envy. (19) But as he was sitting on the judgment seat, his wife sent to him, saying, Let nothing be to you and that just one. For I have suffered many things today by a dream because of Him. (20) But the chief priests and the elders persuaded the crowds, that they should ask for Barabbas, and to destroy Jesus. (21) And answering, the governor said to them, From the two, which do you wish that I release to you? And they said, Barabbas. (22) Pilate said to them, What then should I do to Jesus being called Christ? They all say to him, Crucify Him! (23) But the governor said, For what badness did He do? But they the more cried out, saying, Crucify! (24) And seeing that nothing is gained, but rather an uproar occurs, taking water, Pilate washed his hands before the crowd, saying, I am innocent of the blood of this righteous one; you will see. (25) And answering, all the people said, His blood be on us and on our children. (26) Then he released Barabbas to them. But having flogged Jesus, he delivered Him up that He might be crucified.

True Christian Religion #126 by Emanuel Swedenborg

The Lord had two purposes in coming into the world, redemption and the glorification of His Human; and by these He saved both men and angels. These two purposes are quite distinct, but still they are combined in effecting salvation. The nature of redemption was shown in the preceding paragraphs to be a battle against the hells, their subjugation and afterwards the ordering of the heavens. Glorification, however, is the uniting of the Lord's Human with His Father's Divine. This took place by stages and was completed by His passion on the cross. For every person ought for his own part to approach God, and the more nearly he does so, the more closely does God on His side enter into him. It is similar to the building of a church: its construction by human hands must come first, and then afterwards it must be consecrated, and finally prayers must be said for God to be present and unite Himself with its congregation. The reason why the actual union was fully achieved by the passion on the cross is that it was the last temptation which the Lord underwent in the world; and temptations create a link. In temptation it looks as if a person is left to himself, but he is not, since God is then most closely present in his inmost, and secretly gives him support. When therefore anyone is victorious over temptation, he is most inwardly linked with God, and in this case the Lord was most inwardly united with God His Father.

I just wanted to draw on the events around Jesus interactions with Pilate in the Gospel of Matthew this morning with a view gaining a little more understanding about what these events leading up to the death of the Lord mean in terms of our own interaction with the Word or when we are confronted with truths about ourselves. In the story the Jewish authorities had taken and bound Jesus to be led to Pontius Pilate the Roman governor of Judea at that time. The Jewish religious leaders, in particular, had become increasingly uncomfortable with the presence and influence Jesus was having on the masses and saw this as going against their own interests, so much so that they were willing to falsely accuse him, and stage what was effectively a mock trial to condemn him to death. But there was a problem with this in that due to Roman rule they had no authority to enact capitol punishment, something left to the Roman authorities. So having bound Him they sent him off to Pilate with a view to getting Roman approval to put him to death.

These events, framed in a historical way, are understood, from the perspective of Spiritual Christianity, to represent internal spiritual realities. And so as we enter this time of Easter I offer a

few thoughts in the hope that they may assist us to use this period to remember the Lord's work in our own lives. There is a part of us that, like the religious authorities of Jesus' time, is unwilling to face up to certain spiritual responsibilities that we are obligated to perform in the face of our understanding of truths in relation to areas of our life we need to deal with if we are to grow into our full potential as spiritual beings.

We can so easily read of these events and wonder at the cruelty of those figures who could take an innocent man and subject him to such barbarity out of envy. Jesus' activities were unsettling for the Jewish leaders because, if he became too popular it could well undermine their power and influence as far as the people were concerned. This could then have a direct influence on their own lives and, from their perspective that just would not do! The high priest actually said as much when he said, what of it if one man should die for the sake of many. He, of course, was unaware that these words amounted to a prophecy concerning the Lord. We may well look on all this and think that this is something we would never participate in. What we don't so easily see is that every time we are confronted with truth and look to dismiss it as something we don't need to apply to ourselves we are in a sense looking to dismiss that truth, and if we feel its too confronting we may even look to raise arguments against it to justify our position in opposition to it.

These events, spiritually understood, confront us with this fact, because they confront us with the nature of self interest or self love. It is self love that looks to dismiss the truth because the natural side of us, our ego or proprium, is a power that will not willingly submit itself to the authority of the Word. The Lord had to play this story out in the events of his own life in such a dramatic and forceful way because we just don't get it. All the characters and events in the Word describe our own states and tendencies, and if we think we don't fall into the traps that involve dismissing truth in our life so that our world can remain the same and because we don't like feeling uncomfortable, or have the status quo upset, then we simply haven't reflected on our life to any real depth.

When we do reflect on our lives, with a view to working on them, it becomes painfully obvious that the proprium, our love of ourselves, is capable of anything in the service of its own interests. Thankfully there is another side to us, that the Lord has implanted within us, a side that desires what is higher and this is open to higher heavenly influences, which if we are open to, is able to give us the courage we need to find our way through those things we have to deal with if we are to have our attachments to what is lower in us broken and put into their proper place and order. In the gospel story the side of self interest is represented by those elements that are opposed to the Lord, the heavenly or spiritual side is represented by the Lord Himself and those men and women who followed Him. This higher side comes to the fore in the story of the resurrection, which we will look at on Sunday - but today we have the opportunity to learn more about this lower side. We need to learn about it so we can come to recognise it in our own lives, because if we are unable to see how it operates it will continue to bind truths as they enter our minds and prevent them from having an influence for real positive change in our lives.

Self interest is always looking to bind the influence of truth in our lives. Truth is always looking to move us towards being more loving and compassionate in our responses by giving us the ability to reflect on our motives, identify our evils and work with the Lord to have their influence removed. This self interest within us is represented by the actions of the Jewish religious authorities who bind Jesus. Jesus, as we have seen in previous weeks, is the power of the Word to save us and it does this by a process that involves uncovering the true nature of our motives so that we can see where we miss the mark and so seek the Lord to have them purified that good might flow more freely. But when we are unwilling to hear what the Word is saying and actively resist it because we prefer to remain in selfish states of life we effectively look at truths that challenge us and judge them as having no authority in the areas of our life that are being exposed; In such instances we judge the truth or in the context of our reading today we put the truth on trial, that is we make it subject to our own selfish interests and so bind its influence for good in our life.

The next thing that happens is that the truth bound by self interest is then exposed to Pontius Pilate to be judged. The meaning of his name is revealing from a spiritual perspective. Pontius means "belonging to the sea" and Pilate means "armed with a spear". The office he held was that of governor. So he represents something in us that governs and is able to make judgements, assess things and deliver decisions. You will notice that all these abilities are abilities most associated

with intellectual functions - the ability to weigh evidence, to question and probe and arrive at the "truth" of a case. These are functions commonly associated with reasoning and this, of course, is what Pontius Pilate represents within us, our lower reasoning faculties. When spiritual truths lose their ability to influence our mind its reasoning powers become dominated by lower lusts belonging to the self, from a spiritual perspective, the mind created for truth, is then dominated by a foreign power, the love of self. This is illustrated by the foreign occupation of the Holy Land by Rome. Israel represents the spiritual aspect of our mind and Rome our natural reasoning powers. So we see that the whole state of the nation at this time represents our state when we refuse to heed the Word and so allow what is lower in us to use our reasoning powers to judge the truth.

The meaning of the name Pontius, "belonging to the sea" gives us more insight into the representation. For all names in the Word correspond to the quality of some aspect of our mental world, and the sea being what is low represents what is lower in us. Water taking the form of a sea represents that vast sea of facts present in our minds, in Isaiah this imagery is used where it says...

Isa 11:9 *They shall not do evil, nor destroy in all My holy mountain. For the earth shall be full of the knowledge of Lord, as the waters cover the sea.*

Here we see that waters and sea is associated with the idea of knowledge. The second part of the name is Pilate or "armed with spear". This is a weapon of war, and the weapons of the Word represent truths which can disarm false arguments which are weapons in the hands of evil. We use such terms in debating, we talk of the cut and thrust of an argument, having a sharp mind etc. The name Pilate refers to the function of this level of the mind when it is not really interested in truth but is motivated by whatever seems best in terms of its own interests and so gathers facts to support and justify its stance. All facts are gathered in accordance with our underlying beliefs to strengthen our point of view. When the mind is occupied with what is lower it uses its powers to produce reasoned arguments or weapons to resist truths, it becomes armed with a spear to ward off whatever threatens its position.

Despite Pilate washing of his hands in the situation, he had the power to free Jesus - to free love, he chose not to, preferring to abdicate this responsibility and handing it onto the crowd who were being influenced by the Jewish religious authorities. This is typical behaviour of our own reasoning faculties when we find it difficult to face truths about ourselves and actively work against them. With a little reflection we are able to see this in those times where we have been or are being challenged about something that needs attending to in our life in which that lower part of us finds some kind of delight or pleasure. There is always this clamour of voices that arises from lower influences that demand to be satisfied and if we will not heed higher heavenly influences and take a stand against this crowd of lower self orientated demands then that faculty within us represented by Pilate becomes powerless and yields. It simply washes its hands of all responsibility and does nothing to protect the innocent. This act results in Barrabas being freed - the spirit of Barrabas represents spirit of rebellion or insurrection that is our proprium or ego - when the Lord's truth is bound then so is His love and when truth is condemned or judged to be of no real consequence the rebellious spirit of the self, Barrabas is released back into life to wreck its havoc.

We all will have areas in our lives we are being challenged in - let us take these lessons of Easter to heart so that we can be more aware as to how our proprium operates and so with this knowledge work to have our evils removed, looking to remain open to the good influences of the Word and so be ever responsive to truth as it examines us and exposes our motives to the light of the one true judge of all that is in heaven and earth, Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

Amen