

John 18: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] John chapter 18. When Jesus had spoken these words, he went out with his disciples across the brook Kidron, where there was a garden, which he and his disciples entered. Now Judas, who betrayed him, also knew the place, for Jesus often met there with his disciples. So Judas, having procured a band of soldiers and some officers from the chief priests and the Pharisees, went there with lanterns and torches and weapons. Then Jesus, knowing all that would happen to him, came forward and said to them, Whom do you seek? They answered him, Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus said to them, I am he. Judas, who betrayed him, was standing with them. When Jesus said to them, I am he, they drew back and fell to the ground. So he asked them again, Whom do you seek? And they said, Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus answered, I told you that I am he. So if you seek me, let these men go.

This was to fulfil the word that he had spoken. Of those whom you gave me, I have lost not one. Then Simon Peter, having a sword, drew it and struck the high priest's servant and cut off his right ear. The servant's name was Malchus. So Jesus said to Peter, Put your sword into its sheath. Shall I not drink the cup that the father has given me? So the band of soldiers and their captain and the officers of the Jews arrested Jesus and bound him. First they led him to Annas, for he was the father-in-law of Caiaphas, who was high priest that year. It was Caiaphas who had advised the Jews that it would be expedient that one man should die for the people. Simon Peter followed Jesus, and so did another disciple. Since that disciple was known to the high priest, he entered with Jesus into the courtyard of the high priest. But Peter stood outside at the door. So the other disciple, who was known to the high priest, went out and spoke to the servant girl who kept watch at the door, and brought Peter in.

The servant girl at the door said to Peter, You also are not one of this man's disciples, are you? He said, I am not. Now the servants and officers had made a charcoal fire, because it was cold, and they were standing and warming themselves. Peter also was with them, standing and warming himself.

The high priest then questioned Jesus about his disciples and his teaching. Jesus answered him, I have spoken openly to the world. I have always taught in synagogues and in the temple, where all Jews come together. I have said nothing in secret. Why do you ask me? Ask those who have heard me what I said to them. They know what I said. When he had said these things, one of the officers standing by struck Jesus with his hands, saying, Is that how you answer the high priest?

[2 : 4 7] Jesus answered him, If what I said is wrong, bear witness about the wrong. But if what I said is right, why do you strike me? Annas then sent him bound to Caiaphas, the high priest.

Now Simon Peter was standing and warming himself. So they said to him, You also are not one of his disciples, are you? He denied it and said, I am not. One of the servants of the high priest, a relative of the man whose ear Peter had cut off, asked, Did I not see you in the garden with him? Peter again denied it, and at once a rooster crowed. Then they led Jesus from the house of Caiaphas to the governor's headquarters. It was early morning. They themselves did not enter the governor's headquarters, so that they would not be defiled, but could eat the Passover. So Pilate went outside to them and said, What accusation do you bring against this man? They answered him, If this man were not doing evil, we would not have delivered him over to you. Pilate said to them, Take him yourselves and judge him by your own law. The Jews said to him, It is not lawful for us to put anyone to death. This was to fulfill the word that Jesus had spoken, to show by what kind of death he was going to die. So Pilate entered his headquarters again and called Jesus and said to him, Are you the king of the Jews? Jesus answered, Do you say this of your own accord, or did others say it to you about me? Pilate answered, Am I a Jew?

Your own nation and the chief priests have delivered you over to me. What have you done? Jesus answered, My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would have been fighting that I might not be delivered over to the Jews. But my kingdom is not from the world. Then Pilate said to him, So you are a king? Jesus answered, You say that I am a king. For this purpose I was born, and for this purpose I have come into the world, to bear witness to the truth.

Everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice. Pilate said to him, What is truth? After he had said this, he went back outside to the Jews and told them, I find no guilt in him, but you have a custom that I should release one man for you at the Passover. So do you want me to release to you the king of the Jews? They cried out again, Not this man, but Barabbas. Now Barabbas was a robber. In John chapter 18, we read the events leading up to the crucifixion of Christ. Jesus crosses the brook Kidron at the beginning of it, something that should be related to David's crossing of that brook in 2 Samuel chapter 15 verse 23 during Absalom's coup. David retreats from Jerusalem. [5 : 34] He's leaving the city, going into the state of exile for the people, to return one day. In the same way, Christ is going into a state of exile here. He's leaving the city. As David left before Absalom and his coup, Christ is leaving as it is the hour of the rule of this world, as it is the time when his enemies seem to have their ascendancy. But Christ will return. In the garden on the far side of the Kidron, Jesus is captured by his enemies, who have been brought to him by Judas. Jesus answers those coming to arrest him with the highly significant words, I am, at which they draw back and fall to the ground as if in worship. His words in verses 7 to 9 also show his commitment to suffer on behalf of the disciples and to protect them even as they abandon him. He wishes for them to be delivered, but he will take the full force of the time of testing upon himself. Peter attacks the high priest's servant, cutting off his ear. Malchus, in many ways, could be seen as Peter's opposite number.

Both are servants of a high priest. Peter is the lead priestly assistant to Jesus, a fact that's particularly significant from this chapter onwards. This is the sort of laying down of his life that Peter had in mind in chapter 13 verse 37. He was less prepared to lay down his life in the manner that Jesus actually required of him. Jesus is said to act to fulfil the word that he had spoken. Of those whom you gave me, I have lost none. Jesus' protection of his disciples from being caught up and being crucified with him is one of several ways in which we see Christ's death in John portrayed as a suffering on behalf of others, a giving of his life so that others would not perish. Jesus opposes the use of violence to defend himself, knowing that he must drink the cup that the father has given to him.

Like David rebuked Abishai, who sought to kill Shimei when he was cursing him as he left Jerusalem during Absalom's coup, Christ opposes Peter's action of violence towards the high priest's servant.

Simon Peter serves as a sort of high priest among the disciples under Christ. While Jesus is being tried before Annas and Caiaphas, Peter is denying Jesus in the high priest's courtyard. And there's an important parallel being established. Peter stands around the fire of coals. And later on, Jesus has a fire of coals when he restores Peter in chapter 21 verse 9. The other disciple, presumably the disciple Jesus loved, was known to the high priest and he seems to have good connections and access. Jesus is questioned, but Peter is also questioned at the same time, heightening the contrast between them. Jesus' I am's contrast with Peter's not me's. Peter is questioned by the servant girl at the door, primarily about his association with Christ's disciples, then by the servants and officers warming themselves by the charcoal fire, then by one of the high priest's servants, a relative of Malchus. Peter's denial, along with the entrance into Jerusalem, is mentioned in all of the Gospels. Peter is not the hero of this story. Having faced Caiaphas, Jesus is sent from Caiaphas to [8 : 52] Pilate. This is early in the morning. It's probably around dawn. These are the first events of that first Good Friday. They're dealing with Jesus as a matter of urgency. They're concerned to be able to eat the Passover, which raises some chronological questions. It's possible that they were using different calendars.

Jesus using the solar calendar, for instance, for the Passover. There's no reference to a lamb at the Last Supper. The Last Supper may be connected to the Passover, while not itself being the Passover meal.

But the different Gospel accounts have their differing purposes and intentions. John, as elsewhere, focuses more upon the relationship between the symbol of the Passover and the fulfilment with

Christ as the Passover lamb. Christ is, as Paul declares in 1 Corinthians chapter 5, our Passover, sacrificed for us.

Pilate asks for an accusation against Christ. He isn't particularly keen to get involved, and this would serve an apologetic purpose. The true enemies in John's Gospel are not the Romans. The leaders of the Jews didn't have the authority to give a death sentence, so they are eager for Pilate to declare judgment, a death sentence upon Christ. Once again, we're reminded that Jesus' word is being fulfilled, even in the events of him being condemned to death. Pilate questions Jesus, presumably after hearing the accusation that he presents himself as the King of the Jews, a claim that he would naturally interpret as revolutionary in character. His triumphal entry would also seem to give some substance to this claim. However, Jesus doesn't seem to emphasise the title. Jesus defines his kingdom in terms of truth rather than in terms of ethnicity and nation. His is a different sort of kingdom. If his kingdom were like other kingdoms, his disciples would fight. And truth means different things to different ears.

Pilate's question what is truth is ambiguous. Probably he's dismissing Jesus as a mere philosopher, harmless for his sort of political purposes. To avoid having to cast any final sentence, Pilate speaks of the custom of absolution at the time of Passover. The Jews insist that he release Barabbas, the insurrectionist, instead. They falsely presented Jesus as a political revolutionary, but now ask for an actual violent revolutionary to be released to them instead. They have chosen their course of action. It's better for one man to die than for the whole people to die. And they will eventually align themselves with Caesar. We have no king but Caesar. They've committed themselves to that course. There's an irony in the Gospel of John. People say much more than they know on a number of occasions. There are contrasts between the surface meanings and intentions of people's actions or statements and the deeper things that are happening or being communicated. A number of such moments occur in the context of Christ's trials and the events leading up to and involving his crucifixion.

[11 : 55] A question to consider. In this passage we see the religious leaders of the Jews, the most enlightened religious teachers in the world, and a governor of the greatest empire in the world to that date, the Romans, both condemn Christ and seek his death. Why is it that Christ, so often perceived by us to be nothing more than gentle Jesus meek and mild, poses such a threat to such authorities?