JESUS’ TRIAL BEFORE PILATE

Matthew 27:1-31

Key Verse: 11

“Meanwhile Jesus stood before the governor, and the governor asked him, ‘Are you the king of the Jews?’ ‘Yes, it is as you say,’ Jesus replied.”

In the last lesson, we thought of Jesus’ trial before the Sanhedrin, the highest Jewish ruling council. It was a completely illegal and unjust trial and he was condemned to death. He was so badly tried undergoing the humiliation of being spit at, stricken and slapped, yet he showed his holy and perfect majesty as the Son of God, declaring, “I say to all of you: In the future you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven.” At the very moment he was tried before the human judge, he declared that he would come back as the true ultimate Judge. He was tried in our place so that we might be saved from eternal condemnation and live for righteousness, for his name’s sake and his kingdom, following him closely. We also thought of Peter, who followed Jesus at a distance and experience dreadful failure, denying Jesus three times. But in God’s merciful providence, he was restored as he remembered the words of Jesus and repented. In today’s passage, we see the tragic end of Judas, who regretted what he had done, but did not turn to God. Even in this we see the exaltation of Christ for his innocence is proven true, more and more. Because of Pilate’s compromise, Jesus was flogged and mocked. Yet, in all this, we see further the exaltation of Christ through his absolute innocence.

In verses 1 and 2 it says, “Early in the morning all the chief priests and the elders of the people came to the decision to put Jesus to death.” Some may wonder why their decision to condemn Jesus to death was written again, since through their radical midnight meeting, they had already made the verdict, charging Jesus with blasphemy. Here, we see their disgusting hypocrisy. They wanted to legalize their decision at their quick daytime meeting most probably held in the hall of judgment in the temple complex, while the crowd was still absent. They bound him, led him away and handed him over to Pilate, the governor. They could kill Jesus by stoning him, as they did to Stephen later written in Acts 7. They knew that then there would be an uncontrollably big riot because of Jesus’ popularity. They also wanted to make the execution of Jesus legal by going through the Roman procedure. Yet, all these were taking place under God’s sovereign leading. Their original plot was not to kill Jesus during the Feast of the Passover, but they were going to do so, for they did not want to lose this opportunity. And Jesus had predicted repeatedly that he would die, being lifted up, which meant being crucified by the hands of the Romans. God is fulfilling his purpose, step by step.

Then in verses 3-11 there is quite a long description of Judas’ terrible end, uniquely written in Matthew’s gospel among four gospel accounts. What’s Matthew’s intention? Let’s try to get it. In verses 3 and 4 it says, “When Judas, who had betrayed him, saw that Jesus was condemned, he was seized with remorse and returned the thirty silver coins to the chief priests and the elders. ‘I have sinned,’ he said, ‘for I have betrayed innocent blood.’” Surely nobody could expect that Judas would come back to see Jesus’ being condemned and make such a drastic confession. Judas saw Jesus leaving the judgment hall in transit or having arrived at the place of Pilate in Fort Antonia. It was just several hours before he had led the crowd armed with swords and clubs and had Jesus arrested. What happened to Judas for the past several hours? We don’t know fully. What Matthew wrote was that Judas was seized with remorse after seeing the condemned Jesus. He regretted what he had done, and said “I have sinned, for I have betrayed innocent blood.”

This unexpected confession of Judas must have been a shocking to the chief priests and the elders. It is clear they had come thus far to the point of condemning Jesus to death through the help of Judas. With Judas’ help they could arrest Jesus for the trial. They used bribe money to get Judas to accomplish their purpose. Judas’ role for them was significant. Now Judas regretted what he had done and tried to undo it, returning the money to them, confessing, “I have sinned, for I have betrayed innocent blood.” Now to the eyes of Judas, Jesus was innocent. Here, the chief priests and the elders had to reconsider and even undo what they had done to him, like Judas.

But they replied, “What is that to us? That’s your responsibility.” What a disgustful response! They were really agents of Satan. They seemed to be worse than Judas. What did Judas do? He threw the money into the temple and left. Then he went away and hanged himself. Since they refused to receive the bribe money back, Judas threw it into the temple, in the holy place, probably hoping to cut off any relationship with the religious leaders, although he could not undo what he had done. And because of the overwhelming sense of guilt, he left the temple and went away and hanged himself. We see that his conscience was still there; God’s given alarm system in him was not completely dead. Judas seemed to be a sincere person, but did not know repentance, that is not only to feel sorry for what he had done but to turn to God believing in his mercy. He had feelings but there was no change in his heart about sin; there was no change in his mind to come back to God. There was no desire for the truth; there was no belief in Jesus Christ as the Son of God and the Savior. He just wanted to get rid of his pain. He wanted to unload his guilt.

Now even in Judas’ eyes Christ Jesus was innocent. Then how does the story go further? Verse 6 says, “The chief priests picked up the coins and said, ‘It is against the law to put this into the treasury, since it is blood money.’” They broke all the laws in arresting and trying Jesus, but they wanted to appear as the ones who do not go against the law, do what is lawful. Yet, they unwittingly recognized that the money was blood money. What is blood money? It is the money illegitimately paid to someone to get someone else killed. The source of the money was the treasury of the temple which was under their responsibility. And the money was used to finally condemn Jesus to be executed, the one in whom they could not find any evidence of crime. Even to them the money could not be acceptable for it was blood money. What a contradiction! Yet in that, there is the truth that the money was blood money, which also testifies to their evilness and Jesus’ innocence, that is the exaltation of Christ Jesus.

Then verses 7 and 8 say, “So they decided to use the money to buy the potter’s field as a burial place for foreigners. That is why it has been called the Field of Blood to this day.” With the money they still wanted to do something good on behalf of their reputation among the people. It is really interesting that for the people of that time, Matthew called the place “The Field of Blood”, and not just “The Potter’s Field”. The population of Jerusalem also seemed to acknowledge the innocence of Jesus as well as the bloody evilness of the religious leaders. It is likely that as time passed, things exalted Christ Jesus more and more, revealing his innocence, purity, perfection and majesty.

Why is Jesus’ innocence so important? It is because he would be the perfect Lamb of God unblemished to be sacrificed for the sin of world. He had to be innocent not only before God but also proven by the world.

Finally, verses 9 and 10 say, “Then what was spoken by Jeremiah the prophet was fulfilled: ‘They took the thirty silver coins, the price set on him by the people of Israel, and they used them to buy the potter’s field, as the Lord commanded me.’” When we read the Old Testament, it is not spoken by Jeremiah, but Zechariah written in Zechariah 11:12-13, which says, “So they paid me thirty pieces of silver. And the LORD said to me, ‘Throw it to the potter’—the handsome price at which they priced me! So I took the thirty pieces of silver and threw them into the house of the LORD to the potter.” Yet Matthew wrote that it was spoken by Jeremiah, for to the Jew, the Old Testament consisted of three sections: the Law, Jeremiah and the Psalms. So when the writer refers to Jeremiah, he is simply taking the name that was at the top of the prophetic roll which was Jeremiah, because his prophecy was listed first. Even in this tragic event, Matthew saw God’s sovereign will through the fulfillment of God’s prophecy over the evilness of man, which also exalted Christ.

Now let’s think about Jesus’ trial before Pilate. Verse 11 says, “Meanwhile Jesus stood before the governor, and the governor asked him, ‘Are you the king of the Jews?’ ‘Yes, it is as you say,’ Jesus replied.” “The king of the Jews” is mentioned in the four gospel accounts and this title has a profound meaning. When Jesus was born, Matthew wrote that the Magi from the east came and asked, “Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him” (Mt 2:2). The king of the Jews is the one whom all mankind has been seeking for, ever since men were cast out of the Garden of Eden. The king of the Jews is to be the object of worship and to be king of the whole world. He is Christ, the Messiah, the Anointed One, who all mankind have been waiting for. So Jesus’ answer to the question, “Are you the king of the Jews”, “Yes, it is as you say,” is truly of tremendous importance.

Then in verses 12-14 it says, “When he was accused by the chief priests and the elders, he gave no answer. Then Pilate asked him, ‘Don’t you hear the testimony they are bringing against you?’ But Jesus made no reply, not even to a single charge—to the great amazement of the governor.” Pilate must have met many people who spoke so many words at the time of their trials. Yet, most probably he never met a person like Jesus who did not make even a single charge. According to Matthew, at the time of trial, Jesus spoke only when he was asked about his identity. Before the Sanhedrin, when he was asked, “Are the Christ, the Son of God?”, he said, “Yes, it is as you say. In the future, you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven.” And here before Pilate, when asked “Are you the king of the Jews?” he said, “Yes, it is as you say.”

Pilate’s great amazement, at Jesus giving no reply to the chief priests and the elders at their accusation and making no reply to his own question concerning the accusation, implies that Jesus was innocent to his eyes, the eyes of the Roman governor. Then what did he attempt to do? In verses 15-17 it says, “Now it was the governor’s custom at the Feast to release a prisoner chosen by the crowd. At that time there was a notorious prisoner, called Barabas. So when the crowd had gathered, Pilate asked them, ‘Which one do you want to me to release to you: Barabbas, or Jesus who is called Christ?’” We see that Pilate wanted to release Jesus making use of the governor’s custom. He was almost sure that the crowd would choose Jesus because of his popularity among the people, which was sky high at Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem on Monday. The author Matthew commented in verse 18, “For he knew it was out of envy that they had handed over Jesus over him.” Pilate had been the governor of Judea from 26 AD to 36 AD, which included the whole years of Jesus’ ministry, and also he had sent his soldiers to help for arresting Jesus. So he must have known what was going on concerning Jesus and could see the envy of the religious leaders toward Jesus, which was the main cause of all these happenings.

Then the question is why Pilate did not release Jesus right away but used the compromising method, which went totally against his wishes. Yes, he had no courage to do so. It was also because of his bad record in ruling the Palestine area, the hot spot of the Roman colony. He had made three big mistakes that made the Jews outrageous and caused them to riot: his troops had come in originally to the city of Jerusalem with images of Caesar; he took money out of the temple treasury to build an aqueduct; and he had the inscription of Caesar’s name on the shields, which the Jews thought was idolatry. Each time it was reported to the Tiberius the Emperor and he was warned for not being able to maintain peace in that area. He was in the crisis in his political career. So he seemed to do his best in his own situation to release Jesus. Yet, compromise was compromise, which ended in an irrevocable historical fact that Jesus suffered under Pontius Pilate.

Here, what’s going on further? Verse 19 says, “While Pilate was sitting on the judge’s seat, his wife sent him this message: ‘Don’t have anything to do with that innocent man, for I have suffered a great deal today in a dream because of him.” What another interesting story! Jesus was innocent also in the eyes of the wife of the governor. Most probably the matter concerning Jesus boggled her a lot to the point of dreaming about Jesus and suffering greatly, not being able to escape from the dream. How her message affected Pilate is not written.

After the brief interval what happened? Verse 20 says, “But the chief priests and the elders persuaded the crowd to ask for Barabas and to have Jesus executed.” This manipulation worked. “Which of the two do you want me to release to you?” asked the governor. “Barabbas,” they answered. “What shall I do, then, with Jesus who is called Christ?” Pilate asked. They all answered, “Crucify him!” “Why? What crime has he committed?” asked Pilate. But they shouted all the louder, “Crucify him!” Here are three attempts by Pilate to release Jesus and the crowd’s opposite offensive reaction. Especially the question of Pilate, “What shall I do, then, with Jesus who is called Christ?” is noteworthy. This question is extremely important not only to Pilate himself but to all people of the world. For how to deal with Christ Jesus sets one’s eternal destiny. At the time of the presentation of the baby Jesus, Simeon said to Mary, “This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed” (Lk 2:34). Indeed, he is the cause of the falling and rising of mankind in eternity according to how each one treats him. He is the Christ, the Son of God, the King of the Jews, the King of all. John 3:16 says, “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.” And John 3:36 says, “Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God’s wrath remains on him.” At the end of the book of Romans it was Paul’s prayer that all nations might believe and obey him” (Ro 16:26). Those who believe and obey him are eternally blessed and those who do not are eternally cursed.

What did Pilate do? When Pilate saw that he was getting nowhere, but that instead an uproar was starting, he took water and washed his hands in front of the crowd. “I am innocent of this man’s blood,” he said. “It is your responsibility.” The final responsibility was to be on the judge. That’s why he was on the judge’s seat. But he relayed the responsibility. As we studied, the religious leaders said to Judas, “That’s your responsibility” although obviously they were main figures for the responsibility of the event. In a true sense who can be responsible for the sin of the world? No one. We really thank and praise Jesus who took responsibly for our sins and our eternal destiny and would suffer much and die as the Lamb of God. Hebrews 5:8-9 says, “Although he was a son, he learned obedience from what he suffered and once made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him.”

In verse 25 all the people answered, “Let his blood be on us and on our children!” What a terrible response! We all the more pray that we may be a blessing upon the people around us and our children and the next generation through our life of faith and obedience.

In verse 26, Pilate released Barabbas to them. But he had Jesus flogged, and handed him over to be crucified. Roman flogging is a horrible torture. In the scouring, they used a short wooden handle on whose end were a series of leather thongs and at the end of those thongs were bits of lead and brass and bones sharpened to a razor’s edge. The whipping would make the flesh rip with open wounds and gushing blood. Roman flogging was limitless, while Jewish flogging was up to forty lashes minus one. That flogging could cause the one flogged to faint and even die. The flogging was often done before crucifixion to speed up death on the cross. Jesus received such torture with his body tied to a post. According to John’s gospel, Pilate’s intension was to present the tortured Jesus to the Jews in order to soothe them and to show the helplessness of Jesus to let them know that Jesus had nothing to do with rebellion against Rome. Yet, it didn’t work. In his compromise, he made Jesus suffer tremendously.

In verses 27-31 is the mockery of the Romans soldiers: Then the governor’s soldiers took Jesus into the Praetorium, Forth Anthony, and gathered the whole company of soldiers around him, a cohort, one tenth of the legion of 6000 soldiers. They stripped him and put a scarlet robe on him, and the twisted together a crown of thorns and set it on his head. They put a staff in his right hand and knelt in front of him and mocked him. “Hail, king of the Jews!” they said. They spit on him, and took the staff and struck him on the head again and again. After they had mocked him, they took off the robe and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him away to crucify him.” Here, “robe”, “crown” and “staff” signify the kingship. They made Jesus a king momentarily to mock him. They were treating Jesus like a clown, a fool. They knelt in front of Jesus and mocked him, saying, “Hail, king of the Jews” and spit on him and stuck his thorn-crowned head. Here also “scarlet” reminds us of our sin (Isa 1:8) and thorn, God’s curse (Ge 3:1). In this mockery of the Roman soldiers, Jesus bore our sin and the curse. When we think more of this Jesus, he had a sleepless night. He received many slaps and punches at the trial before the Sanhedrin. He went through the flogging. And here he was spit at again and stricken on his head, pricked by thorns. His blood flowed from his brow and mingled with the spittle. His face must have been distorted and twisted with no beauty as a human at all. What grace of our Lord Christ Jesus, bearing our sins including the sin of compromise!

Thank Jesus who was tried before Pilate and flogged and mocked in our place for the salvation of our souls. In this grace of Jesus, may we put our faith in him all the more and live a life of faith in repentance and obedience to our Saviour and King with no compromise so that we may indeed be a blessing to others and our children and next gens, participating in the divine responsibility for the perishing souls.