

The good confession

Tim Hemingray

IMAGINE THE SCENE—we were in the Central Criminal Court, the Old Bailey. The press box was full of busy reporters; the jury, the clerk of the court, attendants and administrators; the judge and the legal counsels for the crown and for the defence, all in wig and gown. Quite an impressive scene to anyone who had not been in court before.

There, at the back of the court, was the accused. He had declined to give evidence. As the slow course of justice proceeded I began to wonder what was going on in his mind. He knew absolutely whether or not he was guilty. They were sitting in judgement upon him; and his reputation, possibly also his business prosperity, his family happiness and his freedom were all at stake. Here was the world against him, enquiring into the darkest corners of his life. I began to feel very sorry for him as he sat there silent, listening to it all. How humiliating it must have seemed.

When the court adjourned for lunch we went out into the street to join the photographers. After a few moments out came the accused from the main entrance. The cameras flashed, and some of the press surrounded and pursued him as he strode purposefully down the street. Why could they not at least leave him alone? I thought. Yet he was subsequently found guilty, and is now serving a four-year gaol sentence.

The sufferings of Jesus

Contemplate now the harrowing story of the sufferings of our innocent Lord Jesus Christ during his trial. As we read Mark 14 we are told of the anointing at Bethany, the plan to arrest Jesus and bring him to trial, the sadness and perplexity that came over all the eleven when Jesus told them that one of them should betray him, the role of Judas Iscariot in all this. We are reminded too of the inauguration of the Lord's Supper, and of Peter's fierce declaration of fidelity and his later denial.

We go with Jesus to the garden and feel the sorrow he experienced when his three closest disciples could not even stay awake to watch and pray with him. We are shocked by the sudden appearance of the arresting crowd from the chief priests, and have marvelled at the quiet-

ness with which our Lord dealt with the situation in which his "familiar friend" betrayed him with a kiss. We have marvelled too how he remained in control when Peter drew his sword and wildly swung at the crowd, wounding one of them. We marvel at the quiet words of rebuke on such a fraught occasion, considering the unreasonableness of arresting him under cover of night when they so easily could have taken him during the day in the temple precincts. We are dismayed when all forsook him and fled.

With horror we read about the perversion of justice at the hands of the high priest. Jesus had been arrested, not because of evidence, but for jealousy and hatred. The whole assembled council was right behind the high priest, and now had the task of justifying their actions: they must find something they could make stand up in court and which would justify the death penalty. And they tried everything in the book. Every witness was considered, whether reliable or not, but their statements did not agree. The final accusation (Mk. 14:58), we are sickened to hear, was a deliberate misquotation, a distortion of something he had said at the beginning of his ministry, about three years before: "I will destroy this temple that is made with hands, and within three days I will build another made without hands". Even with this there was disagreement among the witnesses.

To all these accusations Jesus uttered not a word in self-defence. That is amazing. In his place we would have challenged at every turn, questioned every witness, brought our own witnesses in defence of the truth. Jesus remained silent.

And then the high priest asked him the ultimate question: "Art thou the Christ, the Son of the Blessed?" (v. 61). Against all the evidence, Scriptural and practical, to the contrary, the high priest and his council had decided that he was not the Messiah, not the Son of God, and even if he was, they were determined to get rid of him. So the answer Jesus was constrained to give must declare him guilty, to be given the death penalty: "I am: and ye shall see the Son of man sitting on the right hand of power, and coming in the clouds of heaven" (v. 62). They spat on him, they struck him, they taunted him. Then

they tied his hands securely with cords and sent him to Pontius Pilate to seal their decision.

Before Pilate

Let us now look at what happened when Jesus appeared before Pilate. Everything that Mark records in chapter 15 is to be found in John's Gospel. John, however, gives us more detail, and so we consider his account. As we go through this record, ask yourself at every phase how *you* would have spoken in the same situation as that of Jesus.

The first thing we notice from John's record is that Jesus says more to Pilate than to the high priest—much more. The things that should interest us in these exchanges are not only what Jesus says, but also why he makes these replies and the way in which he makes them. Why does Pilate ask, in the first place, "Art thou the King of the Jews?" (Jno. 18:33)? John does not explain this, but Luke does. The Jewish leaders had said to Pilate: "We found this fellow perverting the nation, and forbidding to give tribute to Caesar, saying that he himself is Christ a King" (Lk. 23:2).

There are three accusations here. The first is that Jesus had been perverting the nation, but in fact he had been trying to bring the nation peacefully back to his heavenly Father, not perverting them or stirring up trouble. So that was wrong. Regarding the second, far from forbidding payment of Roman taxes, he had enjoined on Jews the importance of paying whatever taxes the Romans demanded of them. "Render therefore unto Caesar the things which be Caesar's" (20:25), he had said to these very accusers. So that was an outright lie. The third was that he claimed to be the Messiah, a king. Though Jesus himself did not make this a frequent claim in his teaching, it was indeed true. Very clearly these charges were political, not religious, and designed to persuade Pilate against him.

So the first question Pilate asks Jesus, in all four Gospels, is, "Art thou the King of the Jews?". Matthew, Mark and Luke record a very definite 'Yes'. John does too, but only after an interesting exchange. What would you have said at this point? Why does Jesus ask, "Sayest thou this thing of thyself, or did others tell it thee of me?" (Jno. 18:34)? Why should Jesus answer by asking in his turn where the question had come from? It was a very bold thing to do in the face of the power which Pilate had over his life. Jesus very often knew the answer to such questions, but

nevertheless put the question to make the other think carefully about the matter.

Pilate's response shows he has been prompted to ask because of what the Jews have said; he did not really believe that Jesus posed any threat to his own authority. Pilate was responsible for Roman justice, and was likely to treat the matter dispassionately, unmoved by the jealousy and unreasonable hatred he knew the Jews had. The effect of Jesus's question was to make Pilate declare that the accusations came only from the Jews. They were wholly responsible. So what had Jesus done to cause such a furore? Pilate asks. What would you have said at this point?

The King

Instead of answering that he had done nothing illegal, Jesus begins to explain the nature of his current kingship. The underlying assumption is that he is indeed a king, but he does not say so immediately. Our Lord was very circumspect and sensitive in this matter. "My kingdom is not of this world", he said, and he indicates that his servants will not fight to prevent him being handed over to the Jewish leaders, which was all very reassuring to Pilate (v. 36). Jesus shows himself and his followers to be a threat neither to the Roman authorities nor to the establishment among his own nation. The final phrase, "but now is my kingdom not from hence", is sufficient to convince Pilate that the origin and nature of Jesus's authority, whatever it is, will cause him no trouble.

However, to be sure, Pilate puts his question again: "Art thou a king then?" (v. 37). Notice the difference; he is no longer concerned whether he is the King of the Jews, but seems to understand that Jesus may be a king of something else. What would you have said? Jesus confirms that he is indeed a king, as Pilate's words suggest, and that the whole reason for his birth and mission was to teach about the truth of his kingship. Anyone who has any regard for that truth will listen to him. What Jesus has done is to reassure Pilate that he is not under threat, and has then—as far as Pilate is able to understand—quietly revealed the absolute truth of the matter to him. Perhaps Jesus has deliberately used the word 'truth' to make Pilate aware that, humanly speaking, we are frequently unable to unravel the truth of a matter, that there is no means by which he can know what to believe and what not to believe. "What is truth?" is the cynical, despairing comment Pilate is constrained to make (v. 38).

The whole of this conversation has been conducted by Jesus with a dignity and quietness of spirit, accommodating what he has to say to the ability of his listener to understand. He has made no denial to Pilate, no protestation of innocence, no plea for mercy, not even for a fair trial or for justice. His trust in his Father is complete. Despite the noise of the mob outside the judgement hall, he shows no wavering.

Pilate goes out to say quite firmly to the Jews, "I find in him no fault at all" (v. 38). Barabbas is released against Pilate's better judgement. Jesus, still bound, is whipped with a scourge, crowned with thorns, given a purple robe. The soldiers mock him and strike him. Pilate then brings him out to the Jewish leaders and to the crowd to show what sort of grilling and punishment he has meted out to him. "I find no fault in him", he says (19:4), but to no avail. "Crucify him, crucify him", chants the crowd. The chief priests insist vehemently that he must be put to death because he has made himself the Son of God (v. 7).

At this point Pilate realises there is something seriously dangerous in what he is about, that perhaps there is something above the human about this prisoner who behaves so quietly and confidently, who clearly suffers, yet utters no cry of pain when scourged and crowned. Perhaps it is at this time that the servant enters with the message from Pilate's wife: "Have thou nothing to do with that just man: for I have suffered many things this day in a dream because of him" (Mt. 27:19). As a man of Gentile superstition, a cold shiver runs down his spine.

The effect of bringing him out to face such a crowd must have been very terrifying for Jesus. Pilate makes no progress with them, and takes Jesus back into the judgement hall, where the second part of their conversation takes place.

The Son of God

"Whence art thou?" (Jno. 19:9), he asks. He is unsure now of the identity of this man, where he comes from and with what authority he might be speaking. What would you have done? Jesus answers with silence. He stands bleeding from torn flesh, unimaginably sore and bruised from his flogging, dried blood streaking his face from the wounds of the thorns, yet he gives no answer. Why? Why at this time did he not say, 'I am the Son of God; I am His Son by virgin birth as foretold by the Jewish prophets; I speak and teach with the authority of my heavenly Father'?

Would Pilate have believed him? Did Pilate accept the Jewish faith? He had declared half an hour before that he did not. 'You don't expect me to believe such rubbish', he would have exclaimed, 'you're just a religious nutcase'. For Jesus to have answered his question would have achieved nothing, apart from perhaps making Pilate resolve to hand him over to the Jews there and then. His heavenly Father was in control.

His silence caused Pilate to try the ultimate threat to get him to speak: "Speakest thou not unto me? knowest thou not that I have power to crucify thee, and have power to release thee?" (v. 10). He had asked to know Jesus's authority, and if he did not get an answer he was quite prepared to assert his own. What would you have said at this point? The answer Jesus now gives reduces him to a pawn in this deadly game, and declares that, though Pilate himself is guilty, the Jewish leaders are even more so. "Jesus answered, Thou couldest have no power at all against me, except it were given thee from above: therefore he that delivered me unto thee hath the greater sin" (v. 11).

The effect of this, you would imagine, would be to enrage Pilate, but not so. Why? I think it is most important to remember that the tone of what is said is more powerful than the words themselves. It reveals the attitude of the speaker to the listener. Yes, Jesus could have spoken these words proudly, disdainfully, and in doing so would have alienated Pilate. Pilate's sympathy is, however, by no means diminished, for we read: "And from thenceforth Pilate sought to release him" (v. 12). It was those who were determined to pursue the greater sin who proved to be the cleverer political tacticians. Our Lord must have spoken these words quietly, sympathetically, well aware of the mental agony Pilate was going through.

We have so much to learn from our Lord Jesus Christ: when to speak and when to keep silent; to listen carefully and sympathetically to what others have to say; to consider how much to say according to the listener's knowledge; to consider how much to say according to the listener's state of mind; to guide a conversation and provoke others to think carefully about what we say; not to be over-defensive when our position is attacked; to adjust our tone of voice to avoid causing offence. So very often our responses in the position of Jesus would have been very different, both in what we might have said and in the way we would have said it.

A good confession

Our Lord Jesus Christ gave an excellent confession before Pontius Pilate. Does that not sound familiar? It takes us to the First Epistle to Timothy. From this letter it is clear that Timothy had had a very sound upbringing by a Jewish mother and grandmother, was well read in the Scriptures, and that Paul had high hopes of him. He had left him in charge of the young ecclesia at Ephesus, and the letter was being written to encourage him in that responsibility. So Paul exhorts him to give good practical advice about behaviour expected of brethren and sisters. He warns of apostasy; he gives him personal advice about holding to the faith. In the second letter, written perhaps several years later, the same matters are dealt with but the tone is much more urgent, as though Timothy were really failing in personal faith, confirming the fears at the back of Paul's mind in the earlier letter.

In the context of this first letter, Paul wrote: "Fight the good fight of faith, lay hold on eternal life, whereunto thou art also called, and hast professed a good profession before many witnesses" (6:12). "A good profession before many witnesses" is an interesting phrase. What occasion was Paul referring to? Was it Timothy's baptism, as reported to Paul? Was it some event before Paul met Timothy in which he had demonstrated his faith in public in the face of opposition or persecution? Was this the reason we read in Acts 16:2: "[he] was well reported of by

the brethren that were at Lystra and Iconium"? Was it perhaps the occasion of his submitting to circumcision? Or was it possibly some other public occasion when, as elder at the ecclesia in Ephesus, he had defended his faith in Christ against Judaistic or Gentile opposition? We do not know.

What is further interesting is that the AV translators got it wrong in 1 Timothy 6:12. The Greek text says quite clearly, not a good profession, but *the* good profession, and more recent translations confirm this. Moreover, the phrase is repeated precisely the same in the next verse: "I give thee charge in the sight of God, Who quickeneth all things, and before Christ Jesus, who before Pontius Pilate witnessed a good confession" (v. 13). Again, 'confession' is the same word as 'profession', and it is *the* and not a profession. What is being referred to is Christ's confession before Pontius Pilate. It is not any old confession, but that particular one, one made in public before many witnesses, and it is being held up to us as well as to Timothy as *the* model for us to follow.

How wise, understanding, sympathetic and loving toward us was our Saviour when he stood in all the suffering, the agony of mind and body, and answered for us before Pontius Pilate. In our taking of the emblems let us pray for the mind that was in Christ Jesus to be in us, that we may learn to give Christlike answers to each other and to all men.



Principles, Preaching
and Problems

EDITOR: Trevor Maher, 5 Birch Court, Doune,
Perthshire, FK16 6JD. Tel. 01786 841830;
e-mail: TAMaher@msn.com

God's purpose with Israel

5. Israel not replaced by the Church (Part 1)

Stephen Green

HAS ISRAEL been replaced by the Gentile Church as the centre of God's interest and salvation, and as the fulfilment of Old Testament prophecy?

It is a very widespread view in the Christian religious world that, because national Israel rejected Christ when he came, they have themselves been rejected, and their special place in the prophecies of the Old Testament has been

taken by Christian believers, mainly Gentiles, who are frequently designated as 'spiritual Israel'. There is therefore no longer a national place for Israel in the purpose of God.

This view requires the terms of Old Testament prophecy to be reinterpreted in a very non-literal manner, which is often difficult to sustain in detail. A major effect is that the national structure contained in God's promises to Israel,