

Homily for Good Friday 2010

Last night I spoke about the conversation between Peter and Jesus at the Last Supper. Today I want to look at another conversation, the one between Jesus and Pilate. I suppose that you could call it a kind of a trial, in that at the end of it Jesus is condemned to die, but there is no taking of evidence, no hearing of arguments. This is a purely administrative procedure, whereby a decision is made about how to deal with the problem in front of Pilate: what shall he do with this man that the Jewish leaders have brought before him.

It is worth looking for a moment at the staging of this drama. The conversation between Pilate and Jesus is in fact taking place at the same time as a conversation between Pilate and the crowd. The crowd is outside Pilate's palace, and Jesus is inside. Neither the crowd nor Jesus moves, but Pilate does. He comes outside and speaks to the Jewish leaders, then he goes inside and speaks to Jesus; he comes outside again to speak to the crowd again, then he is back inside once more to speak with Jesus. The Roman Governor is acting as a kind of go-between. When he is with the crowd he is swayed by them, he is worried about their numbers and about the danger of them getting out of control; when he is with Jesus, though, he is strangely fascinated by what this man says. After hearing both sides Pilate is anxious to set Jesus free, because he knows there is no case against him, but he dare not. Pilate's movement back and forth, in and out of the Praetorium, are a sort of image of his wavering mind: one moment he wants to please the Jewish leaders, the next he wants to set Jesus free. What has Jesus done, what has he said, that has left Pilate so disturbed?

In fact, the interrogation of Jesus by Pilate turns out to be a very unsettling affair. Pilate asks Jesus a question 'Are you the king of the Jews?' and instead of answering the question, Jesus replies with a question of his own: 'Do you ask this of your own accord or have others spoken to you about me?' Immediately Pilate is on the defensive. He can see that Jesus knows his actions are really governed not by his own will, but by other people. In fact, as the two men continue to confront each other the roles seem to be strangely reversed. In our minds we know that Jesus is the prisoner and Pilate is the judge; yet as we read the story, Jesus is the one who appears to be free, the one who can say what he wants, the one with nothing to fear, while Pilate is far from free, he wants to do one thing but feels he has to do something else, he knows what he should do but he dare not. Jesus is free, but Pilate is trapped. Then comes the key part of the conversation. Jesus says that he has come into the world to bear witness to the truth. "Truth?" says Pilate, "What is that?" Jesus, who has truth on his side, is free; Pilate, who rejects truth because it gets in the way of what is convenient, suddenly looks like the prisoner.

I can't help thinking, every time I read this story, of the interrogation scene in the film about the death of Sophie Scholl, the young German student executed for opposing the Nazis. In that film, based on the transcripts of the interrogation, Sophie and her interrogator face each other across a desk, and as they stop talking about the specifics of the case and start talking about Nazism and conscience, the young woman who is reconciled to dying for doing the right thing looks like the free person, while her interrogator is trapped in a system of laws and beliefs that is indefensible. 'What can we rely on if not the law?' says the interrogator. 'Our conscience' replies Sophie;

'Nonsense' says the interrogator, sounding at his most like Pilate (Truth? What is that?). Sophie ends the exchange with 'The law changes. Conscience doesn't.'

'The truth will set you free' (Jn 8.32). These words of Jesus explain why it is that Jesus looks like the free man, while Pilate looks like the prisoner. Pilate is so disturbed by this that he tries everything to set Jesus free, but it does not work. Finally, stung by Jesus refusal even to speak to him, Pilate resorts to another big word: 'I have power to crucify you'. Jesus is dismissive. This power is nothing, it is God's power that matters. We human beings drone on about power, but faced with truth it is hardly very convincing.

Who is the prisoner, who is the judge? What do we learn from this conversation about Jesus, what do we learn about Pilate? Ronald Knox once wrote:

'When man judges man, the accused knows whether he is innocent or guilty; it is for the judge to find out. When God judges man, the judge knows the truth already; it is the accused that has to learn it.' [Sermon on Self-examination, preached at the time of the Nuremburg Trials]

Pilate is so disturbed by this encounter because, while he has learned a great deal about Jesus, he has learned far more about himself.