

Growing Deeper in Mark

MARK 15.1-15

VERSE 1: Mark moves from the courtyard of the high priest back into his residence. Jesus has been betrayed by Judas, denied by Peter, and abandoned by the rest of the disciples, his closest companions. Now Mark recounts the rejection of the high priests, the elders, the teachers of the law and the whole Sanhedrin. These are the ones who are supposed to be the servants of God. Throughout the Old Testament we see again and again how the people of Israel turn away from God (in the desert wandering, in the times of the judges, in the teachings of the prophets), but now God has shown up in the flesh and yet they still reject him. This has to be just as painful as the disciple's failings. Israel, his chosen people, has despised and rejected him. They turn him over to the Romans.

Commentators mention the irony of Jesus, the peaceful prophet, being bound and led away. However, I can't help but think that the leaders of Israel were still intimidated by Jesus. They know of his miracles. I think they fear his power. Even as the Lilliputians seek to restrain Gulliver, so the religious leaders bind God. None of this happens without Jesus consent.

VERSE 2: It seems amazing to me that Pilate gets to the crux of the matter asking, "Are you the king of the Jews?" and Jesus tells him all that matters, "Yes, it is as you say." It had taken the Sanhedrin all night.

VERSES 3-5: It must have been rather anticlimactic, for the chief priests jump right in making more and more accusations. But just as he had done at the high priest's residence, Jesus did not respond (Is. 53.7). Pilate is amazed at this. He sees how weak the case against Jesus is, but if he won't defend himself that leaves Pilate in a pickle.

VERSE 6: Commentators tell us that there is no other extrabiblical record of this tradition of releasing a prisoner at the Passover. Perhaps Mark could have created the event as a teaching device to demonstrate how the innocent, sinless Son of God died in the place of those who truly deserved death. But that has not been Mark's practice to this point. More likely that it was a brief, local custom that just didn't garner a lot of attention. What historian is interested in a common criminal that had no bearing on the course of history being set free?

VERSES 7-8: What was common and well recorded by historians, was the practice of crowds to be loud and boisterous at trials and to seek to influence the judge. Barabbas is an interesting figure. Mark tells us he was an insurrectionist, he sought to overthrow Roman rule in Judea. He had committed murder in that cause. This is what most wanted Jesus to be, an insurrectionist...turns out they had to settle for a resurrectionist!

VERSES 9-11: Pilate thinks he has an opportunity to do for Jesus what Jesus is not willing to do for himself. Pilate asks the crowd if he should release the king of the Jews. It must have seemed like a slam dunk in Pilate's mind. The chief priests had an ax to grind with this Jesus, but surely the people would want their 'king' released. But the chief priests had worked too hard to get to this point and they were ready to counteract Pilate's trickery. They stirred the crowd to ask for Barabbas.

VERSES 12-15: Pilate then unwittingly, I believe, opens the door for the chief priests to seal the deal. "What shall I do with the one you call the king of the Jews?" The chief priests already have control of the crowd so it is a minor thing to get them to shout, "Crucify him!" I can almost see the look of dismay on Pilate's face. "Why? What crime has he committed?" He thought he could use the crowd to legitimize Jesus' release. Rather, he has provided a way for the chief priests to pronounce the sentence upon Jesus, the death sentence. This is something they did not have the authority to do on their own (that is why they took him to Pilate; they could not pronounce a death sentence). Now the crowd has been used against him, and Pilate cared far more for keeping the peace and avoiding a riot than the life of one poor prophet who didn't even want to defend himself.

So contrary to his better judgment, Pilate releases Barabbas and turns Jesus over to be flogged and crucified.

Can you relate to Pilate? Are you prone to be pragmatic? Prone to please people rather than do what is right? Prone to wash your hands of things?

Can you relate to Barabbas? Have you done things worthy of judgement? Has Jesus paid your penalty that you might live?