

THE SCOURGING AT THE PILLAR 1

Flagellation is a punishment provided by the Roman criminal law to be imposed on the condemned to death. It is part of the punishment, the sentence of a court.

Understanding, flogging, therefore implies re-situating it in its legal context and understanding the stakes involved in the trial of Jesus.

This is played out in three acts: The interrogation of Jesus by the Sanhedrin and the trial before Pilate, in which an appearance takes place before Herod. These three acts unravel in the choice to be made between Jesus and Barabbas.

A. Jesus is taken before the High Priest where He is falsely accused, buffeted and insulted.

“When day came, all the elders of the people, chief priests and scribes, brought Him before their council; If Thou art the Christ, they said, tell us. Why, He said, if I tell you, you will never believe me: and if I ask you questions, I know you will not answer them, nor acquit me. I will only tell you that a time is coming when the Son of Man will be seated in power at God’s right hand. And they all said, Thou art, then, the Son of God? He told them, your lips have said that I am. And they said: What further need have we of witnesses? We have heard the words from his own mouth” (Lk 22:66 sq).

The decision to deliver Jesus to condemn Him to death is, therefore, taken because of “*blasphemy*”. In this and on the part of the Sanhedrin, there is a refusal to listen to the Word of God, since the arguments of Christ, which is presented “*according to the Scriptures*” and as that which they preached, are rejected.

But this decision is as much a consequence of the will of the members of the Sanhedrin to preserve their earthly power, to protect their status and influence.

B. The Jewish leaders take Jesus before Pilate, for only he can impose the death penalty.

Jesus is found guilty of blasphemy, which is religiously punishable by death. But since, at that moment, only the Romans can inflict this punishment, Jesus must be accused of a political crime.

But the claim of a messianic kingdom is a political crime in the eyes of the Romans since it constitutes a rebellion against their power (Lk 23:1-23).

C. Pilate can “find no cause in Him”.

During the trial, Pilate understood that Jesus claimed a non-aggressive kingship against him. He is not a revolutionary leader because He evokes a kingdom for which nobody is fighting and, therefore, a non-violent reign.

In the eyes of the governor, Jesus is, at most, an exalted religious Who does not cause any disturbance to public order, especially since one of the foundations of Pax Romana lies in the religious freedom left to the peoples submitted to them. For Pilate, Jesus should have been acquitted and several times he testifies to his innocence.

But Pilate is frightened, says the gospel of John (19:8). Informed of Jesus' affirmation to be "*the son of God*," he manifested a superstitious fear of challenging some divinity.

Now, faced with this spiritual fear of Pilate, the accusers of Jesus will oppose another, much more concrete, that of falling into the disfavor of the Emperor (Jn 19:12).

The fear of a possible disgrace and therefore, of losing his position and his power, in short, the concern for his career will take precedence over the fear of the divine powers. In the end, Pilate prefers to take the risk of condemning an innocent rather than that of questioning his place. It is, therefore, not for a political reason that Pilate delivers Jesus, but by calculation he arouses a situation in which he satisfies the demands of the high priests without taking direct responsibility for them and, in so doing, he protects his status and his place.

D. The sentence: yet to appease the Jews, Pilate orders Jesus to be scourged.

Neither Herod nor Pilate nor the Sanhedrin succeed in establishing a fault or a political crime on the part of Jesus. He is objectively considered innocent and without danger for the powers in place. The only legally established accusation is that of blasphemy, therefore, religious. However, the grounds for His condemnation will be officially political: "*the King of the Jews*"! How did we get there? What does that mean?

The stake of the trial is, therefore, very religious!

It is a matter for the crowd to choose between the Messiah of a God who proposes Himself by the force of truth in love, or the Messiah Who imposes Himself in the concrete of existence by force and violence. Finally, the question arises in terms of "*power to exercise*".

On the one hand, the high priests who endeavor to preserve their religious power; Pilate who endeavors to preserve his own from a possible disavowal of the Emperor; Herod, who also endeavored to preserve his own by sparing the Roman authority; the crowd which, through Barabbas, chooses the possibility of regaining a power over historical reality.

On the other hand, Jesus dissociates the religious from the temporal and renounces to exert an influence other than by the Word of truth and the love concretely manifested.

In the account of the gospel trial, Jesus reveals to us the face of a God who allows Himself to be robbed of all earthly power until He can be wiped out.

Flagellation as a penal condemnation expresses the refusal of a God who does not conform to the representations Jews have of it: Almighty, triumphant, dominating.

Christ reveals to us a God Who intervenes, not with the power of the One who imposes Himself or Who crushes, but of the One Who becomes vulnerable and fragile.

It was almost systematic before any crucifixion except, perhaps, in the case of crucifixion in series when time was not available.

"And so Pilate being willing to satisfy the people, released to them Barabbas, and delivered up Jesus, when he had scourged him, to be crucified" (Mk 15:15-16).

"Then Pilate took Jesus and scourged Him" (Jn 19:1).