

## The Judgment of Jesus<sup>1</sup>

I recently did a little survey of one of the Gospel accounts with the question, "How much opposition did Jesus endure, whether in a subtle whispering campaign or in overt aggression." Here's what I learned. Jesus was never without opposition. There really was always someone out to get Jesus. You'd think that when God decided to come into the world to reach out to broken people and to set humanity free from sin and death, that everyone would want to be supportive and appreciative. But even before Jesus' birth threats to his existence were out there. Would his father, Joseph, claim his rights to punish Mary who had become pregnant...not by him? King Herod sent thugs to Bethlehem to slaughter babies hoping one of them would be Jesus.

Jesus was forever being judged. Many people placed much hope in him. Some entrusted him with their futures. But many others doubted. And many decided that Jesus' and his message needed to be snuffed out.

In the gospels, opposition to Jesus reaches its zenith in the twin trials—one before the ruling class religion leaders, and one before the political empire represented by the regional governor, Pontius Pilate. It's in these trials—which unfortunately we usually glance at in passing during Holy Week—

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<sup>1</sup> Douglas DeCelle preached this sermon on March 14, 2010 at the First Presbyterian Church in LaGrange, Ga.

it's in these trials that the real meaning of all the opposition starts to come out.

The Bible accounts of these trials are surprisingly lengthy which suggests how important they are.

Now, towards the end of John's account of poor Pontius Pilate who vacillates between questioning Jesus and trying to manage the crowd of Jews. There is an exquisitely subtle little detail that I think you'll find fascinating and haunting. The text at 19.13 reads that Pilate comes back out to face the crowd and that he sits down on the judgment seat. The judgment seat is like the judge's bench where quite ceremoniously and formally the one in authority gives the verdict. So we would expect that Pilate would sit on the judgment seat to deliver his verdict on Jesus.

But here's where this is intriguing. The Greek words for "he sat down" could just as legitimately been translated, "he sat him down." In other words, Jesus, the condemned, sits on the judgment seat.

Now the scholarly debate over the correct meaning is complicated and not conclusive. I only mention it, because the idea of Jesus sitting on the Judgment Seat gives us a snapshot of what the writer, John, is trying to say all through his gospel, namely people's judgment of Jesus is really God's

judgment of them. How people make up their mind about Jesus in many ways exposes the true condition of their souls and the summation of their lives. John says it as plain as can be: "This is the judgment that the light has come into the world and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil." John repeatedly plays with the idea that if Jesus is the light, when we get near him, he illuminates our true nature.

We see this powerfully in Jesus' trial. The religion leaders, the upper, ruling class, resort to an array of tactics to find Jesus guilty. They bring in false witnesses, they conduct the trial by night, and the witnesses can't get their story straight. They slap Jesus around. The religion officials are cowardly about actually carrying out their hatred and so they manipulate the Romans to do it for them.

In other words, the Priests and Pharisees abandon the very principles of Judaism and God's law that is their claim to fame. In the light of Jesus' presence they are the phoniest people imaginable. We have to wonder who really is being judged.

John's gospel gives us an even more detailed look at Pilate. Historians tell us that Pilate was placed in power by a patron and trusted friend of Tiberius Caesar, a man by the name of Aelius Sejanus. Any friend of Sejanus, so we're told, was a friend of Caesar. But in 31 a.d.—likely before the trial of

Jesus—Sejanus lost power. Suddenly Pilate is governing out in Palestine, neither known by nor necessarily supported by Caesar.

The Jewish mob has an uncanny way of putting their finger right on what keeps Pontius Pilate awake at night. "If you release this man you're not Caesar's friend, everyone who makes himself a king sets himself against Caesar." Suddenly, the Priests and Rabbis are more true blue Roman citizens than is Pilate. "Nanna, nanna! We're going to riot, we're going to tell, you're going to look bad!" Suddenly, the light of the world comes and the grand representative of Roman might is seen as utterly powerless. Notice that once the crowd took this tack, Pilate collapses and hands Jesus over. This whole scene says far more about the so-called judges and leaders than it does about Jesus.

You and I are learning a bracing truth about how God works and about ourselves. And Jesus is still on trial today. We see this everywhere. There are people totally indifferent to him. There are people amazingly hostile to Christ. There are people who choose him and trust him. The Risen Jesus is still calling disciples and working for the reconciliation of the world. And how people judge him; how people react to him; whether we come to him, embrace him, and trust him is still the measure of our lives. We think we are evaluating him, but the truth is that he

is still on the judgment seat and his light illuminates us to the core of our being.

Let me finish by telling you of the life of Malcolm Muggeridge. Muggeridge was a journalist with a quick wit and nimble intellect. In his early years, he was no believer in God and he was attracted to Communism. But Muggeridge was both too bright and too well-traveled to stay with his earlier intellectual convictions. Muggeridge looked baldly into the face of human societies and soberly realized that no era had seen more death, more displacement, or more destruction. Muggeridge's disillusionment was pierced by what he described as the light of Jesus Christ. He noticed that the very forces that he most despised and feared—the communist dictatorships—were also the sources of the most insistent rejection of Jesus Christ. Better he thought to be hated by these horrible regimes than ignored by them. Muggeridge saw the hatred of Jesus in the 20<sup>th</sup> century as a repeat of the historic trial of Jesus. It was the light shining in the darkness that beckoned Malcolm Muggeridge. He was never a theologian nor a conventional church-goer. But in the 1960's Muggeridge "came out" as a believer in Jesus Christ. He published the first of many books on Christ, this one titled Jesus Rediscovered.

An all-important choice confronts every one of us. And how we chose is deeply the key to who we are. To come to Jesus Christ; to judge him as worthy is paradoxically our own judgment and pardon and life. It's who we are and it is to be flooded with his light. That is our great hope.