

Monday Evening Bible Study Group: St John Chapter 19: Some Notes

One aspect of this Chapter is the encouragement it gives to all those Christians who reach a point, maybe an end of life point, where they can, with a bit of an effort, piece together a few blessings to count, but are very hard pressed to scrape together any “successes”. When Chapter 19 ends, Jesus has moved from a borrowed cradle/crib to a borrowed tomb via the most painful and ignominious of deaths... and his few declared friends have summoned up courage (4 women and 1 man) to stand by him to then end, and to bury him (2 men); but hardly seem to be on the verge of a new movement to continue and extend His ministry. “Failure!!!” (big time).

The famous quote at the beginning of Chapter 19 is “Ecce Homo” – “Behold the Man! A bruised and bleeding figure wearing a tattered purple robe, and crowned with a thorn crown. (Perhaps palm tree – which would link with the palm branch procession into Jerusalem of the other Gospels.) The Roman soldiers have done their best to show just what they think of Jewish kings, and especially this most unlikely of kings. Mobs did this sort of thing to weirdos. They still do. Maybe, just maybe (because they probably weren’t Italians), they were enjoying being able to say Ave Caesar mockingly, without being dead the next day!

You have to give Pilate credit for not just saying “One more dead Jew? Who cares!” He made some effort to do Roman justice, and he did enough research to establish to his own satisfaction that Jesus of Nazareth wasn’t in the Jesus Barabbas category, The Romans didn’t get where they were by being stupid, so Pilate may well have known about Jesus before he was presented with Him as a sacrificial lamb. In John’s Gospel, the flogging precedes the judgment; and seems to have been designed to satisfy the Jewish authorities with an humiliation of their “enemy” rather than His death. The Jews were familiar with the idea of a Messiah who wasn’t God (though sent by God). The Romans and Greek were familiar with the idea of gods turning up in human guise. So Pilate, who was desperately anxious not to offend the (highly paranoid) real Emperor and pseudo god, was also anxious not to get on the wrong side of a possible god incarnation – and there was something special about this chap from Nazareth who was rumoured to be able to order spirits about. It is doubtful that Pilate was a religious man (even if his wife was), but rationalists can still be superstitious.

If you have an eye for detail, you may wonder why Pilate was OK with releasing a known violent revolutionary, Barabbas, but scared of upsetting the neurotic Tiberius (who had a reputation for ordering the death of his officials) by letting Jesus free. But Jesus was portrayed as a rival Emperor. Barabbas was just a revolutionary – one of many; and probably, after some time in Roman custody, not up to much soldiering.

We need to remember just how far the Jewish leaders (and, apparently, their recruited crowd) sold out to the enemy by claiming that their only king was the Roman Emperor. They were literally denying that they were Jews.

The familiar INRI is the Latin version of Jesus of Nazareth King of the Jews. The three languages made sense in terms of what those who could read would see; but symbolically this is Jesus proclaimed as King by the literary and philosophical world (Greek), the political world (Latin), and the religious world (Hebrew/Aramaic). It is highly significant in John's terms that the Jewish leaders ask, in vain, for the super-scriptio to be changed to "He said I AM..." Jesus' I AM sayings had been at the heart of the hostility of the Jewish leaders to the Jesus message.

I have been puzzled by the 5 items of clothing, including the seamless robe. The answer seems to be turban, sandals, girdle, tunic... and the seamless robe, which parallels the priestly robe of the Old Testament, and might well be a robe Mary had made for her son. (This was a Jewish tradition.) You will pick up the numerous Old Testament references packed into this chapter. Four ladies. Mary of Nazareth's sister is thought to be Salome, mother of John and James. This makes sense of why Jesus did that loving thing of entrusting John and Mary to each other – especially if His other siblings were not on His side at this stage. It can be argued that the women were there is strength, whereas the male disciples were not, because the women were less at risk. A more straightforward explanation is that the women had more commitment, and guts. It is interesting that the last recorded encounter between Jesus and his aunt Salome was when he took her to task for seeking top jobs for her two sons. She had continued to learn!

{Sponge of} sour wine on a lance, or on hyssop? There is scope for linguistic confusion, but the hyssop ties in with the hyssop used at the Exodus and at Passover to sprinkle lambs' blood on the door posts. The final words from the cross are hugely significant – IT IS COMPLETED [ACHIEVED]!

Joseph and Nicodemus may have been secret disciples, but they showed considerable courage in what they did. In the Roman tradition – the Romans inherited crucifixion from the Persians, and apparently couldn't think of anything worse: bodies were left to rot, be eaten by carrion feeders, and be carried off by stray dogs. (A bit like gibbets in England in later centuries – a long lasting reminder to others to behave themselves.) In the Jewish tradition, especially on the eve of the Sabbath/the Passover, the bodies were buried in a special plot, away from decent folk. An expensive and honourable burial was not on the agenda. That Pilate agreed tends to underline his belief in the innocence of Jesus.