

The Vote Of The People 1

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[0 : 00] I don't know how to put all this together, but the cartoon in the Globe and Mail has to do with the Ayatollah Khomeini visiting a publisher in London discussing a book that has been recently published and to which he objects in the strongest nature.

And of course, I suppose he is very concerned about the character of the prophet and what happens to the prophet if he is subject to slander, such as that book is alleged to do.

And of course, I suppose the great vulnerable point for the Christian faith, similarly, is who is Jesus Christ?

And historically, all through the centuries, people have attacked him from all sorts of different points of view. And with, I suppose, varying degrees of success and failure, but it becomes very important to some people to be able to discount the person of Christ.

I was very much helped by a quotation which comes from John McQuarrie, who is a very significant theologian, contemporary theologian.

[1 : 33] He says, it is asked whether or not it is conceivable that God would have wished to grant a universal knowledge of himself through this particular man living at this particular time, in this particular part of the world, referring to Jesus Christ.

Perhaps one can only reply with a counter-question, how else could he have done it? And I don't know if you find that a vastly entertaining question.

I mean, a stimulating question. You can spend a lot of time putting yourself in the place of God, which humanly speaking, we're very able to do for some strange reason.

And to put yourself in that place and how you're going to make yourself known to your world. And, you know, the Muslim rejection of Christianity was based on the fact that God would not come himself, but would send a prophet.

And so the integrity of the character of the prophet is very important. And I suppose that's why the Muslim world is very stirred up about this book, of which I know nothing at all, except what I've read in the newspaper.

[3 : 00] And we as Christians, I think, are endlessly involved in the question of who is Jesus Christ and the testimony to him in the New Testament and the testimony to him of the church in the centuries since he walked this earth as Jesus of Nazareth.

And so the centrality of the person of Jesus Christ is, at least indirectly, affected by the cartoon in the editorial page of the Globe and Mail this morning.

At least that's the way I see it. We've looked in Luke 23 at two people so far. The first we looked at was Pontius Pilate.

And Pontius Pilate, from the very beginning in the Gospel of Luke, is convinced of the innocence of Jesus Christ. But he is in a politically vulnerable position and sensitive position.

And you will remember there are four ways in which he tried to avoid giving over Jesus Christ to the obvious wish of the high priestly party who wanted to have him crucified.

[4 : 13] And Pilate was caught between the political decision and the personal awareness of who Jesus Christ was.

He had to make a political decision. And he ultimately, as the story tells us today, gave Christ over to the will of his enemies.

He tried by sending him to Herod to avoid the responsibility. He tried by scourging him and arousing the pity of the crowd towards him to get them to release him.

He tried by washing his hands to say that he had nothing further to do with this man. And the fourth thing he did was try and substitute Barabbas in the place of Jesus and release Jesus to them in accordance with a particular Passover amnesty, which the Roman governor had the right to grant to

the Jewish people.

So there you have it, that God has chosen. This is the heart of Christian faith, that God has chosen. God, the creator of the whole of the universe, has chosen to reveal himself as a particular man in a particular place at a particular time.

[5 : 45] And that man is Jesus Christ. And the reason we know him is because we have the testimony of the New Testament, contemporary witnesses to the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

And these we study 2,000 years later in order that we might, in the circumstances of our own lives, come to some conclusion about the question of who is Jesus Christ.

We, like Pilate, live in a divided world. Pilate had his political responsibilities and his personal convictions. You know, that's not very different from Bill Vanderstam, who is in great trouble most of the time because he doesn't distinguish between, he doesn't distinguish carefully enough between his personal ideas and his political decisions.

And so you see that one of the characteristics of our world is this breakdown, that there are two sides. And most of us live in that kind of world, where what we are required to do politically is not necessarily what we believe personally.

And that terrible tension is wonderfully illustrated in this 23rd chapter of Luke's Gospel. The personal and the political truth are divided.

[7 : 13] The ultimate purpose of our life is cut off from the immediate practical necessity of our life.

All the time we're having to do things which seem to us to be immediately practical and necessary, while we deny the ultimate purpose of our existence by doing them.

We're confronted with those kinds of choices all the time. The ultimate purpose and the efficient cause are always divided. The public side of our life is divided from the private side of our life.

The scientific reality, which our minds are forced to acknowledge, is over against some kind of final meaning of our life, which science won't even consider as a question.

And so that kind of divisiveness is what is at the heart of our humanity. Herod took Jesus on and made a mock king of him.

[8 : 23] And his sort of contemporary historical writing tell that this happened from time to time. For the entertainment of the mob, somebody was set up as a mock king and then derided and despised and destroyed.

And that's in fact what happened to Jesus. You can mock what ultimately you must worship. And that tends to be how we behave.

You know what I mean? The only way we can handle the sacred and powerful and overwhelming reality of marriage is to make fun of it.

We don't know how to take it seriously and to talk about it that way. So we make jokes and we do all sorts of things about it because it's very difficult to give it the dignity and the honor and the place that it's meant to have.

And of course some people take mockery of marriage as being the truth about it. And I think most of us are aware that underneath is a terrible reality that we need, I mean a terrible in the sense of awesome reality that we need to come to terms with.

[9 : 36] You mock what ultimately you must worship and humanly speaking we worship what ultimately we must mock. And that's our lifestyle.

What a person believes is the thing that he makes fun of. Well, what I want just to show you today is what happens.

In Jerusalem, Jerusalem is sort of like that. That's the outline of the city. In this corner up here is the Temple Mount where the temple was built.

Adjoining the Temple Mount is the Fortress of Antonio. And that fortress was the residence of the Roman governor. And that's where Pontius Pilate lived.

And that's where Jesus was taken. Over here on the western side of the old city was a very elaborate palace built in 26 B.C. by Herod the Great.

[10 : 39] And it was called Herod's Palace. And the city wall came over like this and down like this. So that just outside the city wall, as the archaeologists tell us, was the hill shaped like a skull.

And that's where Christ was crucified. But he was brought before Pilate, sent to Herod. Now he comes back to Pilate. And it's in this prison, in the Antonio, which is named after Mark Anthony, who's famous for his association with Cleopatra and his help at the murder of Julius Caesar.

That's who this was named after. In jail here were four prisoners. Three of them were insurrectionists.

And insurrection is a word which means that they took a stand. The stand they took was on behalf of the Jews against the tyranny of Rome.

And so because they enforced their stand by murder, they were arrested and put in the jailhouse in the Antonio Fortress.

[11 : 56] And they were to be crucified. Those three men. They were held there. And the Passover of the Jews was coming when Jews from all over the land would come into the temple area to worship.

And Pilate regarded this as something of an opportunity to show the iron fist of the Roman Empire in the midst of the religious festivities of the Passover weekend by having these three prisoners available to him whom he was going to have crucified just outside the city wall.

And so demonstrate to the Jews from all over the country how strong and how unrelieved was the tyranny of Roman superiority for them.

So that was the plan when along came during the night another man who was brought in by the high priestly guard and who was accused of having done something dreadful which Pilate himself could not understand.

But he had a man who had proven his desire to overthrow the power of Rome with blood on his hands who had been arrested in the very act and was awaiting crucifixion the next day.

[13 : 27] He had him and then he had this man who came because he had been upsetting people up and down the country teaching that he was a king.

And Pilate of course asked him if he was a king and he said yes I am a king. And so Pilate sent him to Herod remember and he comes back again and now Herod is still caught between his personal decision and his political decision what is he going to do?

How is he going to cope with this? And so it comes to his mind that at the Passover it was traditional that the Roman governor could grant an amnesty to a prisoner who would be the choice of the people.

And so he thought well I will try this I will suggest to them having scourged this man which is as near as anything to putting him to death by torture or whipping I will scourge this man so as to arouse the pity of the crowd and then I will present him to the crowd and ask if they will not claim him as the one who is to receive the Passover amnesty and allowed to go free.

The high priests on the other hand who in a sense were the inheritors of the whole of the scriptures and who should have known who Jesus was recognized that their purposes would be better served not by having Jesus released to them but by having Barabbas released to them.

[15 : 10] And so they suggested to Pilate that rather than release rather than release Jesus he would in fact release Barabbas to them.

Interesting you see that this guerrilla fighter this bandit this freedom fighter of his day I suppose certainly was more popular to the crowd and probably of more significance to the crowd than was the person of Jesus.

And certainly he was more congenial to the high priests because he had proven beyond any shadow of doubt his enmity with the Roman tyranny.

they so that you come to this sort of poignant moment where the high priest the whole sort of religious establishment says ultimately we want Barabbas.

And again you see how politically significant that is. And I suppose this is why the church always gets in trouble on the subject of politics because politics confers power on people.

[16 : 29] And what was happening here was that they recognized the necessity of some kind of open rebellion against the Roman Empire.

And the thing which God had promised in the scriptures the kingdom which had been long foretold the reign of God through his Christ which all of them had been taught from the time that they were infants all this was gone.

And when Christ was presented to them scourged and presumably handcuffed they cried and said we want Barabbas.

It was I mean it's a it really is a classic statement of the human heart that they made that choice.

Isaiah had said about them a long time ago that they would hear and hear but not understand they would see and see but not perceive their heart the heart of this people would be fat their ears heavy

and their eyes shut.

And that was exactly the point in history they came to when Pilate took two men and presented them to him. So that if you were I mean it's possible that this is the way it went.

[17 : 59] What happened and there's a very sort of interesting detail about this that there were two men presented to them Jesus. And this man's name was Jesus and this man's name was Jesus.

This was Jesus Barabbas and the fact that he is called Barabbas means that he was the son of a notable father of some kind.

This was Jesus who is called the Christ. Now this comes really from a footnote in Matthew's gospel that Barabbas' name was Jesus.

And so what was presented on the porch at the Antonio Fortress were these two men. And one was Jesus Barabbas and the other was Jesus who is called the Christ.

Barabbas and they say who do you want? And they chose Barabbas and of course we still do.

[19 : 20] We still choose Barabbas. The freedom fighter, the person who is prepared to challenge the establishment, the person who is prepared to employ violence.

He's the hero of the 20th century and you can name who they are. They are the people who we have chosen because we hoped that through them that kind of political situation would be developed in which we could maximize the potential for every one of us.

And so we choose the politically orientated freedom fighter as opposed to the kingdom orientated freedom fighter who is Jesus Christ.

Ronald Niebuhr says about democracy that man's capacity for justice makes democracy possible.

That is because we have a sense of what justice is we give people a vote.

but he also says man's inclination to injustice makes democracy necessary. You know in other words that the only way we can make decisions in our society is by the vote.

[20 : 44] And when the vote was thrown to this crowd of people outside the Antonio fortress and they said Jesus Barabbas or Jesus who is called the Christ they said Jesus Barabbas and I think ultimately that's as far as democracy can ever go because democracy will never say Jesus the Christ because Christ's kingdom is not of this world.

It's something which is essentially different and we see we suffer from this breakdown between the sort of political solution to our problems and the personal solution to our problems.

The solution we find the solutions we find therefore don't ultimately solve the problems we have.

We set up the democratic system we find solutions in a democratic way but we recognize that having found them they have not dealt with the ultimate human problem.

And the ultimate human problem has got to be this that what we believe in our hearts we practice in our lives. That the kingdoms of this world and the kingdom of our God have to become one.

[22 : 22] And we cannot put them together because we have to live by political expediency we have to choose Barabbas and we have to crucify Christ.

We have to dismiss him from our world. And that's what we have done. That's how we live our lives. That's the central sort core and reality of our experience.

When Jesus is king, when the kingdom comes, then our political choice will be an expression of our personal conviction.

I mean, you people say it all the time, you know, well, I don't know who to choose for, who to vote for, you know, I don't like any of them. Well, that, you know, that expresses profoundly the human dilemma because we want something more than mere, you know, political parties can provide.

There is a deeper longing, a more intrinsic problem in the human situation than a murderer and an insurrectionist who takes a stand courageously on behalf of his people against the tyranny of Rome more than he can produce.

[23 : 52] We've got a bigger problem than that. And so, that's who Barabbas is. He is the man whom we profoundly understand, and he is the man whom ultimately we vote for.

And the consequences of that vote are that Barabbas is set free among us, and the struggle for political power continues to be the struggle for the kingdom.

And that kingdom which Christ came to bring is still a hidden kingdom. And it's a hidden kingdom in the same way that our hidden, private, personal, profound convictions are hidden with us.

So that Christ can only have in our world, in a sense, secret believers. And I should suggest that he knows the secret.

And that it's a profound, I mean, probably the most profound reality for all of us in our lives ultimately is whether we live our lives by saying Barabbas.

[25 : 18] And then when Pilate comes along and says, and what will you do with Jesus? And we corporately, our society, our culture, our philosophy, says, crucify him.

And so Pilate gives him over to be crucified. And then, by the grace of God, we come to this amazing discovery that the one whom we have crucified is God.

And we had to do it. And we're left in that situation. And it's I don't know that we can go any further than that, really.

Except that as we trace the story of that crucifixion, we realize that God's purpose was not frustrated by that great democratic choice, but that God's purpose will yet be fulfilled.

and that it is yet possible to choose to be a servant of Jesus Christ in a world which neither knows nor honors him.

[26 : 44] And that's the invitation, really. And I don't think it's an easy one, but I think it's the only ultimately significant one.

let me pray. Father, there is a terrible simplicity to this story where Jesus is set before us and Barabbas is set before us and expediency demands that we say to Barabbas, release him, let him go.

And we say to Jesus, crucify him. Father, by your spirit and with your word, bring the awareness of this to the deepest level of all our hearts, that we might begin at least by believing in our hearts and confessing with our mouths that the one whom we long to serve and desire to serve is Jesus Christ. We ask this in his name. Amen.