

Aim of lesson

For the young people to understand how unlawful was Jesus' trial, and so to appreciate the wickedness of human beings and the wonderful grace of the Lord Jesus in giving himself.

Bible background

Matthew 26; Mark 14; Luke 22; John 18

Preparation required

Read through the students' notes and relevant scripture passages so that you can understand what went on at Jesus' trial.

Suggested outline of lesson

Jesus underwent a double trial. Two independent systems of criminal justice were called upon.

The Jewish Trial

Jewish law had many strict safeguards against miscarriages of justice, both in God's law and in the traditions which had overlaid it. Make sure the students understand that it was the Jews who wanted Jesus killed and could try him under their own laws - the Old Testament laws of God and the rules laid down in the Mishna. The Sanhedrin was the Jewish governing body and it consisted of about 70 priests and scribes. However, because Israel was an occupied country they had no power to sentence a man to death.

The Roman Trial

Thus Jesus had to appear before Pilate who was the Roman Governor. Ask the students to read the students' notes and answer the questions on the first part of the lesson.

Roman law was based upon principles of justice which were designed to bring peace and stability to its empire. As well as reviewing the case, Pilate had the power to legally interrogate the accused in order to get to the bottom of the dispute. He asked Jesus' accusers, "What evil hath he done?" The reply was,

"We found this man,

- perverting our nation;
- forbidding to give tribute to Caesar;
- saying that he himself is Christ, a King."

The first of these was of no concern to Pilate, concerning as it did the Jews and their religion. The second was the opposite of Jesus' teaching and was, like the first, untrue. But the third accusation required Pilate to interrogate further. In the privacy of the Palace, where the Jews could not enter, a genuine conversation was entered into, recorded in John 18:33 - 38. Jesus was a King, he said, but not of this world! Therefore His claim posed no threat to Rome and its emperor, and contravened no Roman law. Thus Pilate "went out again unto the Jews and said unto them, 'I find no crime in him.'"

The trial was ended. The verdict was pronounced - a verdict of not guilty. Roman justice had done its task, and had acquitted Jesus Christ. By rights Jesus should now have been set free, but the chief priests and the crowd's anger began to frighten Pilate - they were set on defying the law, ignoring Pilate's acquittal of Jesus, and cried out for his blood. Gradually Pilate capitulated, yet still he repeated his declaration of Jesus' innocence.

He tried to shirk his responsibility by sending the prisoner to Herod who only returned him. He tried to appease the mob's animosity by having Jesus robed in purple, with a crown of thorns. But they would not be satisfied with scorn alone - they clamoured for crucifixion. That was lynching! He tried to dodge his responsibility by passing it on to the crowd, washing his hands in public. But he could not abdicate his responsibility. He was not brave enough to oppose them. "Law failed, administrative order failed; the mob was in command."

He hit upon the idea of releasing a prisoner - this way his conscience would not be outraged; order would be

preserved; law would be satisfied, and Jewish customs respected. That too failed. But he finally caved in when they threatened him with accusations before the emperor, "If you let this man go, you are not Caesar's friend." It was no longer just a religious issue now, but political, threatening his career and even worse (he could die if the emperor turned against him). Pilate had tried to resist the inflamed Jews by correct application of Roman law, but the threat of personal impeachment wilted his courage. At the Jewish court the charge had been blasphemy, but in the political Roman sphere it became treason: a clever twist by Caiaphas to achieve their deadly aim.

Relevance to our lives

It is moving to consider Jesus' calm courage, even in the face of such a terrible miscarriage of justice. Idealistic young people will feel this sense of injustice. (Human injustice, that is. It is another lesson to show that God was just through all this - see Romans 3:26.)

"For consider him that endured such contradiction of sinners against himself, lest ye be wearied and faint in your minds. My son, despise not thou the chastening of the Lord, nor faint when thou art rebuked of him:"

Prayer

Dear Lord God, we have thought of the Lord Jesus Christ, of his bravery, of the way both Jews and Romans conspired together to have him killed, and we have reflected on his quiet gentleness throughout all these things. We thank you Father, for his grace, and that all this was for us. We are ashamed that we so often make a fuss when we think we have been wrongly treated, and we pray that we may keep his example before us and learn to be like him. Amen.

Other suggestions for activities

Write a newspaper report of the trial, as though you were an impartial eyewitness to these events.