

## Matthew 27:11-14

### “Jesus Not-Saying”

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*Matthew 27:11-14 Now Jesus stood before the governor; and the governor asked him, "Are you the King of the Jews?" Jesus said, "You have said so." But when he was accused by the chief priests and elders, he made no answer. Then Pilate said to him, "Do you not hear how many things they testify against you?" But he gave him no answer, not even to a single charge; so that the governor wondered greatly. (Gospel for Passion Sunday)*

Nowadays when you're asked to preach on something which Jesus said, your first worry might be, Did the historical Jesus really say this? Or if maybe he did, is "maybe" certain enough? Are we certain enough to proclaim that he did? As you know, there are New Testament scholars -- I'm thinking about those skeptics in The Jesus Seminar -- who worry about that kind of certitude, lest they might believe something about Jesus for which they don't have compelling evidence. They worry in much the same way their biblicistic opponents do. And both groups, skeptics and biblicists alike, try to police **our** historical certainty as well. I can see why preachers, especially those who are easily intimidated by professors, might have second thoughts anymore about quoting Jesus in public. But in this pastoral conference today the tables are turned. The professor has to preach and the preachers get to watch. There is poetic justice in having a professor stand before you, being made to preach, to put up or shut up, about something Jesus said or did not say.

About something Jesus did **not** say? How could anyone preach about that? Exactly. And that is the dilemma facing this preaching professor this afternoon. I refer to the verse in our text, verse 14, "But [Jesus] gave [Pilate] no answer." No answer. That raises a whole new historical question for the professors, this time not about Jesus' "sayings" but, worse yet, about his "not-sayings." How could we ever prove that he said that, namely, nothing? It's like proving a negative. It's hard enough to make a case for what he did say. But for what he did not say, his silence? What's to preach? You see what I mean by poetic justice. It's not the first time the God of the Scriptures has had the last laugh on us professors, previously called the scribes.

**So** silent is Jesus that he does not even reply, "No comment." Jesus "gave [Pilate] no answer, not even to a single charge." So says Matthew, and so do Mark (15:5) and Luke. (23:9) And in a way, so does John. (19:9) In a way. Yet John cannot resist the impulse to have Jesus say at least something by way of reply lest the reader get the misimpression that Jesus might have been at a loss for words.(19:11) Yet even John's Jesus does not

answer the accusers themselves. He merely explains, in an aside to Pilate, why he does not answer the accusers' accusations. (19:36, 37)

What John is reminding us, lest we miss the point, is that there is a reason for Jesus' silence. Jesus' silence is eloquent. In its own way it is a reply. Jesus' no-answer is an answer, an awesome answer, awesome to the point of leaving Pilate deeply disconcerted. John says Pilate was "afraid." (19:8) Mark says Pilate "marveled." (15:5) Our Matthew text says Pilate "marveled exceedingly." (27:14) That much you've got to say for Pilate: at least he was still capable of wonder, not like the scribes. Can we do less than Pilate?

No, sisters and brothers, with due credit to Pontius Pilate consider this little sermon likewise to be an act of "marveling exceedingly," an act of wonder. And what causes us to wonder is not **whether** Jesus kept silence -- anyone can ask that -- but **why** he did. That is much the more important question, Why. Without that Why it doesn't make much difference **whether** he kept silent. I am reminded of a lecture some years ago in which a popular theologian, Karl Barth, was lecturing about that scene in the Garden of Eden where the serpent is tempting Eve. At that point a skeptic in the audience interrupted with the historical-critical question, "But Professor, did the snake actually speak?" To which Professor Barth replied with a wink, "The question is not whether the snake spoke but rather what did it say." Similarly with our text the question is not merely whether Jesus was silent -- he probably was -- but far more important, what does his silence say?

So then we ask, Why in face of such incriminating charges from his accusers, why in face of the very sentence of death did Jesus still give Pilate "no answer, not even to a single charge" -- unless of course he was guilty of the charges? But surely that could not be. Or could it? Might it just be, after all, that there was some truth to the accusations against Jesus, namely, that he **had** let people think he was "the King of the Jews" or even "the Son of God" and, because he had, he could not now with good conscience retract that earlier impression? And so, mightn't there have been real basis for charging him with blasphemy? And mightn't that be why he could not honestly deny the charges now, and so kept silent?

But ah, you say, if he **was** the Son of God, as indeed we believe he was, then it was not blasphemy for him to encourage that belief -- not blasphemy at all but, on the contrary, utter honesty. Yes, that too is true. But then all the more, brothers and sisters, why doesn't he come right out and say so, that he **is** the Son of God and therefore innocent of any charge of real blasphemy? What greater opportunity could he have had for declaring himself than this pivotal moment in his public trial, one of the most publicized moments in all of human history? Why, if being the Son of God and therefore innocent of any real blasphemy, does he still waste this one last chance to come clean? Why instead does he leave the whole matter in doubt, as if he had something to hide? Surely it was not that he was too proud to dignify these proceedings against him, too proud to stoop to answering

them. His whole life and ministry had been a stooping to the most humbling conditions, intentionally so. Why now, in this climactic moment, does he blow the opportunity to clear himself, unless after all he is somehow guilty?

Is Jesus somehow guilty? Somehow, yes, he is. And there is a very Matthean way of explaining **how** he is guilty. He is guilty of **our** sin, which he bears in our stead as his own. The idea of course is not original with Matthew. He had gotten it from that part of the Old Testament Scriptures which we call Second Isaiah, specifically the Suffering Servant Songs. Already early on in this gospel (8:17) Matthew explains Jesus' works of healing, not as some magical cure performed by the waving of a ten-foot wand, as if Jesus cured all this infection and putrefaction at an antiseptic distance without himself being contaminated. No, says Matthew, "This was to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah, 'He **took** our infirmities and **bore** our diseases.'" And only so, by taking them into himself, did he take them away.

What the old Isaianic song had sung about the Suffering Servant, Christians now found to be coming true in Jesus.

Surely he has borne our grief  
and carried our sorrow  
yet we esteemed him stricken,  
smitten by God, and afflicted.  
But he was wounded for our transgressions,  
he was bruised for our iniquities;  
upon him was the chastisement that  
made us whole,  
and with his stripes we are healed.  
All we like sheep have gone astray;  
we have all turned to our own way;  
and the Lord has laid on him  
the iniquity of us all.

Jesus, says Matthew quoting Isaiah, went to all the trouble. And he took the trouble. And only so, did he take the trouble away. He suffered our sin, and only so, by suffering it himself, did he suffer it out of existence. The traditional color for Lent is purple -- the color, as someone has said, of a very bad bruise. But whose bruise? Ours or his? Answer: yes. His because ours.

But may that not also be why, before Pontius Pilate, Jesus "gave him no answer, not even to a single charge?" Long before this trial, when Jesus was still going about freely teaching and healing, Matthew had said of him (again quoting a Suffering Servant Song), "He will not wrangle or cry aloud, nor will anyone hear his voice in the streets." (Mt.

12:19) How aptly that describes this mute defendant in our trial scene. Matthew might have quoted another Servant Song even more aptly: "He was oppressed and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth; like a lamb is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is dumb, so he opened not his mouth." (Is. 53:7) And why didn't he, if he was as innocent as a lamb? True, innocent he may have been -- he himself. But as the Isaianic singer continues, "he was stricken for the transgression of my people." (V. 8)

And may I add, "for the transgression of **my** people" as well? Even though, says Isaiah, "**he** had done no violence, and there was no deceit in **his** mouth," "they made his grave with **the wicked**." (V. 9) We don't have to be paranoid, just free enough, to recognize ourselves in that designation, "the wicked." *Res tua agitur*. It is your case, Robert Bertram, and your case, sisters and brothers, that is being tried. "Send not for whom the bell tolls, it tolls for thee." This Suffering Servant of Israel, this Jesus before Pilate and his accusers, might well have protested his own innocence if that had been all there was to it. But on second thought, aren't we glad he did not stand up for himself and let us fend for ourselves? Instead he was like the older brother defending his kid sister against the neighborhood bullies, all the while knowing that their charges against her are true yet never for a moment disassociating himself from her.

Or let me try another analogy. Suppose you are in a rage against someone and you set off with a loaded gun to do them in. Someone dials 911. But that doesn't stop you. Soon a friend of yours comes rushing in who tries to dissuade you. "Come on," he says, "give me the gun. Else you're going to hurt somebody." Angrily you refuse. You order him out of the way. He keeps pleading. You're ready to shoot **him**. But he doesn't give up on you. Finally, very reluctantly, you hand him the loaded weapon. Just then the police rush in. Finding your friend with the gun, by now covered with his prints, the officer demands, "Is this yours?" No answer. The officer, more furious by the minute, repeats the question. Still no answer. Pointing to your friend, the officer commands, "Take him away and book him." I ask you, in face of the officer's question, didn't your friend's stubborn silence co-incriminate him in your crime? Wasn't it similar with Jesus before Pilate?

Given the dilemma Jesus was in, and willingly so, silence may well have been the only way to go. Yet for this older brother to lug us as his burden, his handicap -- so to speak, with one hand tied behind him -- must have severely cramped his style. No, I don't think so. That would have been so only for a macho Christ, toughing it out for himself alone. But he was not alone. Weren't you there as well -- and you and you and I -- when they crucified my Lord? Sometimes that causes us to tremble, to "marvel exceedingly."