

In book, pope says Jesus' death cannot be blamed on Jewish people

VATICAN CITY – In his latest volume of “Jesus of Nazareth,” Pope Benedict XVI says the condemnation of Christ had complex political and religious causes and cannot be blamed on the Jewish people as a whole.

The pope also said it was a mistake to interpret the words reported in the Gospel, “His blood be on us and on our children,” as a blood curse against the Jews.

Those words, spoken by the mob that demanded Jesus' death, need to be read in the light of faith, the pope wrote. They do not cry out for vengeance, but for reconciliation, he said.

“It means that we all stand in need of the purifying power of love which is his blood. These words are not a curse, but rather redemption, salvation,” he said.

The pope's treatment of the events of the Passion form the core of his new book, “Jesus of Nazareth. Holy Week: From the Entrance Into Jerusalem to the Resurrection.” It was to be officially presented at the Vatican March 10, but excerpts from three chapters were released March 2.

The work is an extensive reflection on the Gospel texts and on the arguments of Scripture scholars, in effect offering Pope Benedict's version of “The Passion of the Christ.”

In Chapter 7, the pope examines the trial of Jesus before Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor in Judea. The pope said Pilate is presented realistically in the Gospels as a man who knew that Jesus posed no real threat to the Roman order, but who had to deal with political realities – including pressure from Jesus' accusers.

“Now we must ask: Who exactly were Jesus' accusers? Who insisted that he be condemned to death?” the pope wrote. He noted that the Gospel of St. John says simply it was “the Jews.”

“But John’s use of this expression does not in any way indicate – as the modern reader might suppose – the people of Israel in general, even less is it ‘racist’ in character. After all, John himself was ethnically a Jew, as were Jesus and all his followers,” he said.

What St. John was referring to with the term “the Jews,” the pope said, was the “temple aristocracy,” the dominant priestly circle that had instigated Jesus’ death.

In St. Mark’s Gospel, the pope said, this circle of accusers is broadened to include the masses or mob of people. But he said it also would be a mistake to see this, too, as referring to the Jewish people as a whole; more specifically, they were the followers of the imprisoned rebel, Barabbas, who were mobilized when Pilate asked the crowd to choose amnesty for one of the accused: Jesus or Barabbas.

The pope said the trial and condemnation of Jesus was a classic conflict of truth versus power, posing questions that still reverberate in modern politics. When Jesus said that his kingship consisted of bearing witness to the truth, Pilate – the representative of worldly power – did not know how to react, and asked pragmatically: “What is truth?”

“It is the question that is also asked by modern political theory: Can politics accept truth as a structural category? Or must truth, as something unattainable, be relegated to the subjective sphere?” the pope said.

He said that when “truth counts for nothing,” justice is held hostage to the arbitrariness of “changing opinions and powerful lobbies.” The history of great dictatorships fed by ideological lies demonstrates that only truth can bring freedom, he said. In essence, he said, bearing witness to truth means giving priority to God.

The pope drew a parallel between the condemnation of Jesus and the modern “failure to understand the meaning of creation ... the failure to recognize truth.”

“As a result the rule of pragmatism is imposed, by which the strong arm of the powerful becomes the god of this world,” he said.

The pope also examined the figure of Barabbas, saying Gospel accounts depict him as a “terrorist or freedom fighter” against Roman rule. In effect, the pope said,

Pilate was looking at two criminals accused of rebelling against the Roman Empire.

It is clear, the pope said, that Pilate prefers the nonviolent “fanatic” that he saw in Jesus. But the crowd supports the rebel Barabbas because “they would like to see a different solution to the problem.”

“Again and again, humanity will be faced with this same choice: to say yes to God who works only through the power of truth and love, or to build on something tangible and concrete – on violence,” he said.

The pope said the Barabbas scene and its many recurrences throughout history represent a challenge to Christians and should “tear open our hearts and change our lives.”

He went on to describe the physical cruelty of the Passion, including the “barbaric” practice of scourging, which left Jesus near death, and the crowning with thorns, which aimed to humiliate Jesus and his claims to be a king.

The pope said the soldiers involved in these acts of brutality were scapegoating Jesus. “Whatever may be afflicting the people is offloaded onto him: In this way it is to be driven out of the world,” he said.

When the beaten Jesus is presented to the crowd with his crown of thorns and reed scepter, he manifests his fully human nature, the pope said.

“In him is displayed the suffering of all who are subjected to violence, all the downtrodden. His suffering mirrors the inhumanity of worldly power, which so ruthlessly crushes the powerless,” he said.

In the end, the pope wrote, Pilate may have convinced himself that he had defended Roman law and civil peace. But at a later date, he said, it would become clear that “peace, in the final analysis, cannot be established at the expense of truth.”

In the book’s third chapter, Pope Benedict looks at the figure of Judas. He noted that the other disciples believed that in betraying Christ, Judas had come under the grip of Satan.

Judas did take a step toward conversion when he later acknowledged his sin and gave back the money he was paid for his betrayal, the pope said. But Judas' "second tragedy" was that he could no longer believe in forgiveness.

"He shows us the wrong type of remorse: the type that is unable to hope, that only sees its own darkness, the type that is destructive and in no way authentic," the pope said. "Genuine remorse is marked by the certainty of hope born of faith."