

They Met at the Cross: “The Judge Who Sentenced Him”

John 18:28-19:16 (NRSV)

To use the word “trial” of the judicial proceedings that culminated in the crucifixion of Jesus Christ is to misapply the term. It seems that eight hours after his arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane he was on the cross. In the brief space of six hours he was examined five times and by four different authorities. He was accused by witnesses who contradicted one another. He was condemned on a deliberate misinterpretation of his words, and he was sentenced by a judge convinced of his innocence. Yet this does not rob the record of its amazing and moving power. The issues involved are tremendous, the characters are vividly etched and the consequences are momentous for the whole human race.

Prominent in these last scenes of the life of Jesus is **Pontius Pilate**, the Roman procurator of Judea, the study of whose character to which we now turn. We have three sources of information concerning this man: **all four Gospels; the writings of a Jewish, thoroughly Romanized historian, Josephus; and the works of Eusebius of Caesarea, an early church bishop and historian.** Of these, the works of Eusebius are more legendary than historical, and thus can be disregarded. Josephus gives the history of Pilate’s appointment and rule, while the Gospels shed a searching light on his inner character. The combination of these two sources provides us with a powerful picture.

Of **Pilate’s ancestry**, nothing is known. He was a **Roman leader of the “equestrian” rank** – a rank just below the rank of senators and patricians -- a man of the upwardly mobile, middle class, as we might say today. He would have had some experience in commanding troops in the Roman army. His position in Judea was that of **procurator** – a sub governor under the governor who ruled all of the Roman province of Syria. It wasn’t in itself a high position, but the office was often sought as a steppingstone to bigger and better things. The Roman law forbade the appointment to the office of anyone under the age of twenty-seven years of age. Pilate was appointed in A.D. 26 and could not, therefore, have been less than thirty-one at the time of the crucifixion of Christ.

His association with the Jews was unhappy from the get-go. Admittedly, they were a difficult people for anyone to govern, but particularly for a junior official of limited experience.

In accordance with their universal custom, **the Romans had given the Jews full religious freedom** – Judaism was one of the legal religions of the realm -- and in one particular, the Roman state had been especially conciliatory, granting it an unusual concession. As was well known, Judaism was the only important religion in the Old

World completely intolerant of idols, and at this time emperor worship was being fostered among the Roman legions. Roman soldiers were encouraged not only to recognize the emperor as their king, but also to worship him as God, and accordingly they carried on their standards little images of the current emperor, to which they frequently offered homage. The special privilege granted to the Jews was this: it was agreed that these images wouldn't be carried in the vicinity of their holy place; no idols were to be brought into the precincts of the temple.

Pilate arrived in Judea **and, almost at once, scornfully disregarded this concession.** He sent his garrison troops to Jerusalem for the winter and ordered that the standards, with the idolatrous images upon them, should also be taken by night into the sacred city. The Jews awoke the next morning to discover these vile things in the shadow of their temple. Their religious sentiment was outraged. Multitudes marched all the way down from Jerusalem to Caesarea Maritima on the coast (where the procurator usually lived) and their leaders pleaded for an interview. For days, Pilate wouldn't see them. When he finally gave them a hearing, he immediately threatened them with death if they persisted in their request. But they persisted and he finally, grudgingly, gave in.

In his next important difference with them, Pilate had a little more success. **He decided to build an aqueduct from the coast to Jerusalem** – part of which is still standing in Caesarea today – and he raided the contents of the temple treasury to pay for it. Although they couldn't do much about it, the Jews were bitterly resentful. They argued they'd paid their imperial tribute in the usual ways and that it wasn't within the power of any Roman official to appropriate money they'd dedicated to God. Again, a confrontation broke out and the Roman soldiers restored order.

But **what Pilate couldn't restore** (because it never existed) **was a kindly feeling between himself and the people he governed.** The smoldering flame of resentment in Jewish hearts steadily increased, and even when they fawned upon him, it was only a cover for an ever-deepening hatred.

And then Pilate became aware of **another problem** brewing from another, more dangerous direction. Apparently, the Emperor Tiberius himself had received complaints concerning Pilate's deteriorating relationship with his subjects. And he was warned by the highest sources that he'd better amend his ways, otherwise not only his future prospects, but also his immediate standing might be in jeopardy.

This is the background against which we must view Pilate's condemnation of Jesus Christ.

But before we consider Pilate's role in Jesus Christ's death on Calvary we must consider another thing.

The four evangelists have but one purpose in writing their Gospels – to tell the story of Jesus Christ. Other characters are incidental. They're of importance only in the measure in which they touch upon the life of Jesus, but as they touch him they get their valuation. Jesus Christ seems to move through the story as some unseen assessor, some touchstone whereby the real worth of humanity is revealed and people's inmost character is made clear. We never seem to see the real worth of a man or a woman until he or she appears in the same scene as Jesus Christ. It is when he/she moves into the direct beam of the Light of the World that we are no longer deceived by the tinsel or the dark shadows of the earth that may surround a person – whether he be a high priest or a procurator – and we see him as he really is.

So let's look at Pilate a little more closely.

1. **Pilate was Roman.** Please note, that is not a trite statement; it has to be borne in mind all the time. He belonged to the world conquerors of the time, people who considered themselves to be superior. He had all the overbearing arrogance of his race, added to a deep-rooted contempt for the people he governed. At one point, Pilate contemptuously asked Jesus, "Are you the King of the Jews?" And when Jesus replied by asking another question: "Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?" Pilate countered by asking, "I'm not a Jew, am I?" (Jn. 18:33-35). The implication was clear. Much like the Nazis of the twentieth century, Pilate would've regarded the imputation of Jewish nationality as the greatest insult one could offer to him. He never understood or cared for his subjects. He would've said it wasn't his business to understand them; it was his business to govern them and, maybe also, to teach them a thing or two.

Further, **Pilate was a cynic.** It's what we should have expected of such a man in such an age. He knew something of the subtle intrigues of the imperial court; he knew that influence counted for more than merit in getting choice appointments; he'd seen honest men fail and rogues succeed; and he had no antidote for all that dirty chicanery.

Of course, there is only **one antidote to cynicism**: a strong and passionate faith in Almighty God and a life of moral purity and integrity. But, as for religion was concerned, Rome was only able to supply a variety of versions of voluptuous paganism. Under his first cross-examination by Pilate, Jesus asserted he'd come into the world "to testify to the truth," but Pilate cynically retorted, "What is truth?" (Jn. 18:37-38). I don't think he really expected an answer to this rhetorical question. It was more like an

assertion that there is no universal or verifiable truth. As far as Pilate was concerned everything was relative.

Yet, like most cynics, Pilate wasn't entirely free from **superstition**. The record shows he was strangely disquieted by the sublime dignity of Jesus. We're told "the governor wondered greatly" about him and his responses to his questions (Matt. 27:14b; Mk. 15:4), so much so that Pilate declared to the chief priests and the multitudes, "I find no basis for an accusation against this man" (Lk. 23:4). "I find no case against him" (Jn. 18:38b). There was an air of detachment about his prisoner, a nobility, almost a superiority, which he found disturbing and which, perhaps surprisingly, touched him deeply. Moreover, his wife had warned him that in a dream she'd had the night before the final judgment that Pilate should "have nothing to do with that innocent man" (Matt. 27:19). Maybe that also played with his conscience.

At the least, **Pilate was annoyed** – annoyed with himself for not finding it easy to condemn a Jew, annoyed with Jesus that he didn't seem to be impressed with his quasi-imperial presence and authority. He told Jesus, "Do you refuse to speak to me? Do you not know that I have power to release you and power to crucify you?" And Jesus answered, "You would have no power over me unless it had been given you from above" (Jn. 19:10-11a). Pilate couldn't choose between the clamorous Jews outside the praetorium and the silent prisoner within, and a superstitious fear grew within his heart. He didn't believe the charges.

He was familiar enough with the typical rebel and he knew very well that this man is no mere rabble-rouser, nor serious rival to the might of Caesar.

Let this little be said to Pilate's credit – **he did endeavour, however feebly, to administer justice**. When the Jewish leaders first brought their unresisting captive to him, he refused to hear them, except on a stated political charge (Jn. 18:31). When he then examined the prisoner and had assured himself of Jesus's innocence, he definitively stated that fact before them all (Jn. 18:38b; 19:4; Lk. 23:4, 22a). When this failed to get them to withdraw the charges, he seized on a privileged custom and offered Jesus as the prisoner who should be released at the Passover feast.

But to this the Jewish leaders replied with their last and strongest argument: "If you release this man you are no friend of the emperor. Everyone who claims to be a king sets himself against the emperor" (Jn. 19:12). That was when their case was won. The fierce struggle in the mind of Pilate was over. Superstitious fear, the good in him and his sense of justice on the one side, stood opposed to private ambition and his slipping sense of security on the other. Given his own shaky standing with the Emperor Tiberius, his

choices ran out. Besides Jesus was only another Jew. Thus Pilate had no trouble deliberately sentencing an innocent man to death.

The judgment of history on Pilate has varied widely. On the one hand, **Philo**, a first-century Jewish-Christian philosopher of Alexandria, denounced him as **an unmitigated scoundrel**. The Egyptian **Coptic Church**, on the other hand, believed a legend of his conversion and reveres him as a martyr and **a saint!** Both are exaggerations. **Pilate is to be found, like most of us somewhere in between the two.** His central weakness, like ours, was here: the good in him was unbuttressed by vital moral principles; he preferred social standing to spiritual stability. He wouldn't be just, if to be just, he had to be poor. Moral values clashed with earthly values – and he chose the earthly.

This is where our likeness to Pilate grows more apparent. We must all face this issue sooner or later. To every man and woman and young person **the inevitable choice** comes. Indeed, it comes constantly. Which is first in my life – the spiritual or the material? We know that often within ourselves there are two warring elements. There are the higher aspirations of our soul, our spiritual nature, and the lower, coarser tendencies of our “fleshly,” or sinful, human nature.

The apostle Paul put it this way:

I am of the flesh, sold in slavery to sin. I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. ... I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. ... I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? [But he realizes what Jesus has done for him.]

Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!

(Rom. 7:14b-15, 18b-19, 22-25)

We are constantly legislating between the two natures within. Our best self points out the hard and costly, “narrow way” which Jesus advocated; our lower self derides it and urges us to play for immediate satisfaction. Our best self challenges us to be the best we have power to be; our lower self tells us that we must always take care of “number one.” So the struggle goes on **until Jesus Christ breaks the logjam**, or slices through the impossibly complicated Gordian knot, and gives us the power to choose wisely. So our essential character is shaped. The light of eternity will reveal what choices we have made, and what we have ultimately become.

So Pilate pronounced sentence and then, in an infamous, unforgettable act, **took water and washed his hands** saying, “I am innocent of this man’s blood; see to it yourselves” (Matt. 27:24). He washed his hands but the bloodguilt was on his soul. Years later **Lady Macbeth** found out the same thing. Nothing, no matter how hard she tried to talk it out, could wash out the “damned spot” of her complicity in the king’s murder that also lay on her hands and heart.

Pilate returned from the praetorium, doubtless, to the remonstrances of his wife. **He’d condemned an innocent, just man**, despite her plea. One can almost hear him saying, testily, “Yes! Yes! I know! Yes! Of course – but it’s done now, and it will all be forgotten in two or three weeks!” But, for two thousand years, with subdued voices the incessant refrain has arisen: “I believe in Jesus Christ ... Who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead and buried.... The third day he rose again from the dead” **We will never forget Christ Jesus, our Saviour and Lord.**

As far as Pilate is concerned, was ever retribution more complete and persistent? He fell from power almost immediately through some trouble he later encountered with the Samaritans. He was recalled to Rome, and but for a broken shard of rock found in the ruins at Caesarea with his name on it, **he has disappeared from history**. And, if anyone does actually remember his name, it is only another name associated with infamy.

Amen

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