

“2nd Station of the Cross: Jesus Stands Before Pontius Pilate”

Rev. David K. Wood, Ph.D.

John 18:28-19:16

Deer Creek United Presbyterian Church/Pleasant Unity United Presbyterian Church
February 14, 2021

The Roman Governor over the region of Judea pays a visit to Jerusalem and discovers that there is no image of the Emperor to be found. Jerusalem is the only city in the entire Roman Empire without such an image for the Judeans to bow down before. Wishing to impress the Emperor, the young governor sent by night a large group of soldiers to set up the images on a watchtower that overlooked the Temple area of the Jews, their most holy domain. He figured that it would be highly unlikely that the Jews would demonstrate within the Temple area for if they did, he'd then have an excuse to send his soldiers in and desecrate the area with the Gentiles' presence. It was a big mistake. He thought that since the Romans had DOZENS of gods to bow down to, the presence of just one image wouldn't mean a thing to these Jews. But for a people who had but one God, who refused to make any graven images of that God, the command to worship the image of another human being was an outrage!

The day after the pictures were hung from the Tower, Caiaphas mobilized an army of up to 7000 Jews to surround the palace of the governor. For six days and nights, those Jews prayed that God would change the governor's hardened heart. The Roman leader could not look out his door without seeing 7000 Jews praying before him. Finally, he relented-- somewhat--and told them to gather at the market place where he would meet with them and speak. When he got there, he ordered his soldiers to surround the marketplace and threatened to massacre the whole lot of them if they did not stop asking for the images' removal and went quietly home.

But he underestimated these people for they replied, "It is better to DIE than to have images in Jerusalem" and they bared their necks and waited. However, the order never came. The governor was wise enough to know that if as one of his first deeds was to massacre 7000 Jews and word of it got back to Rome, his career would be over. He was forced to give in and with a deep sense of rage and humiliation, he had the images taken down.

But there was another incident concerning this man- not altogether different from this one. The governor wanted to build some aqueducts into the city to supply the inhabitants with some fresh water. They would run from the pools of Solomon to the interior and there was much widespread support from the Jews on it. To finance it, however, the young governor raided the Temple treasury and stole money that was to be used for religious purposes only. When the Jews heard of this, they rioted. The governor sent out his army and many men and women were killed. When the emperor received word of it, he sharply rebuked the young leader. Once AGAIN, he was humiliated and enraged at the Jews.

Another time, while staying at Herod's palace in Jerusalem, as he often did, the governor brought with him a large number of shields bearing the images of his own heathen gods. Once again, the Jews complained to Caesar. In the interest of preserving peace in the region, the

governor was subsequently forced to remove the offensive shields. The Roman leader now had one MORE cause to hate the Jews. He was running out of favor with Rome and he saw them as the cause of it. This brings us now to this morning's text and the event for which more than any other is why Christians all over the world know his name. That young governor was none other than Pontius Pilate.

After Jesus' religious trial in which the Sanhedrin examined him and found him guilty of blasphemy for calling himself the Son of God, he was immediately led to the Praetorium at the palace of Herod where Pilate, when he was in town, presided over civil cases. The reason the Jews take Jesus to a civil court is because although they had found Jesus guilty in their own Jewish courts, they were powerless to punish Jesus to the degree they wanted to. They wanted nothing short of DEATH for Jesus, and by the most painful and humiliating execution available- crucifixion. Such an order could ONLY come from the Roman court and its local governor- Pontius Pilate.

The charges brought against Jesus are 3-fold: They accused Jesus of 1) subverting their nation; 2) opposing the payment of taxes to Caesar; and 3) for claiming to be the Messiah, a King. The charge they bring Christ up on was sedition, that he was unpatriotic, too worldly, too political. They said he was anti-Caesar, anti-Rome, that he was trying to set himself up as a rival king to Caesar. Of course, every word of their charge was a lie. If the Jews were going to get Jesus killed, they would HAVE to lie- by portraying this peace-loving rabbi as a violent revolutionary bent on overthrowing the power and authority of Rome.

Pilate takes Jesus into his private chamber in order to find out more as to just what kind of king Jesus is. He asks him straight out, "Are you the king of the Jews?" Jesus replies, "My kingdom is not of this world. If it was, the Jews would never have taken me. Rather, my kingdom is from above." Pilate has to feel relieved. Since his kingdom was NOT of this world, it would pose no threat to Caesar's empire which was OF THIS WORLD. Jesus could live in the heavenlies for all he cared so long as he didn't try to subvert the power and authority of THIS world and disrupt the order Rome tried so hard to preserve.

Satisfied that Jesus is no political rival to him, Pilate digs deeper into his claim of kingship. He asks, "So, Jesus, you are a king?" whereupon Jesus responds "You say correctly that I am a king. For this I have been born, and for this I have come into the world, to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth hears my voice."

Pilate's truth came at the end of swords and spears. After all, to his mind what could talk louder than brute force? That had been his method since the first day he became governor. His truth came from Roman law which organized life like an efficient clock- he only had to make sure it remained wound up and ran on time. What need did he have of any truth Jesus might have, truth that by Jesus' own account was not of this world. Therefore, he contemptuously offers his famous retort to Jesus, "What is truth?" or put another way, "What do I care about any truth YOU may have, Jesus. If it is not made up of WORLDLY wisdom; it can't help me get ahead in this world- what use would it be to me.

But Pilate soon finds himself in a political bind. If, on the ONE HAND, he wants to

exonerate Jesus, ON THE OTHER, he knows he can't just let him go. The Jewish leaders, who on several occasions had complained to the Emperor about Pilate, want swift action taken against him and the Roman governor is in no position to antagonize them any further. For the sake of peace, he will have to placate them in some manner.

Pilate thus tries a series of clever political maneuvers. First, he has him transferred to Herod's jurisdiction but Herod has no interest in getting involved, sending him back to him. Next, he hopes he can get by by having him flogged and then letting him go, but that fails to satisfy anyone. Then he resorts to the custom of granting an amnesty during the Passover holidays in the hopes that THAT might free him, but the crowds clamors for Barabbas instead. Finally, when all these half-measures fail, he tries to wash his hands of him declaring, "I am innocent of this man's blood"- then proceeds on handing him over to be crucified ANYWAY.

When the crowds insist, "If you let this man go, you are no friend of Caesar. Anyone who claims to be a king opposes Caesar!" Pilate has no choice but to condemn him to death. Before this mob, he is now forced to be decisive, to demonstrate his higher loyalty to Caesar--the Emperor of the Empire--and not to this King of the Jews, this "ruler" whom the Jews themselves do not even want.

Pilate was really nothing more than a state functionary, an administrator in a large and often unruly system which at times forced him to resort to cruel and inhuman means to maintain order and keep the peace. He simply gave and followed orders, and if you were to confront him with all the evidence, that pure and simply would be his justification- that he was just doing his job. He wasn't a philosopher or a moral/religious teacher like Jesus. He didn't care about such questions as what is beautiful or what is true. Pilate was a PRAGMATIST; he was a man more interested in GETTING RESULTS than questioning the rightness of his actions.

As a result, when faced with a decision between honor and ambition, when forced to choose between principle on the one hand and political survival on the other- he chose the LATTER. Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is found innocent in the heart and mind of Pilate, found innocent in the eyes of Roman law, but is nevertheless sent to his death because Pilate is afraid- he is afraid for his job, afraid for his relationship to Caesar, afraid for his future in the empire. Pontius Pilate is a moral coward and all the water in all the world could not wash that stain from his hands.

The picture of Pilate which the Gospels have painted for us is one of a rather complex personality, of a man who could be arrogant and cruel in one minute, and somewhat compassionate the next. Instead of a blood-thirsty tyrant or raging killer like a Nero or Caligula, he appears as a somewhat sympathetic figure, as a man confronted with the kind of dilemma or tough decision we OURSELVES are often forced to make- decisions concerning what is right for himself, his career, or his family. He makes a sincere effort to do everything he can to try to save Jesus' life but when he realizes that the tide of public opinion is against him, he resigns himself to it and accepts what will be Jesus' fate. Does that make him a bad man? Being the pragmatist that he was, he chose to shed innocent blood to solve what was a political problem. In our modern political culture--EVEN TODAY--politicians sacrifice principle for political advantage ALL THE TIME.

What in fact we see in Pontius Pilate--flaws and all--is really a reflection of OURSELVES- to quote from that famous Pogo cartoon, "We have met the enemy and he is us." Just as the moral cowardice of this man helped nail Jesus to that tree, so does the moral cowardice each of US exhibit when WE are forced to make a decision between some issue of honor and principle, and that of personal convenience. None of us ever wants to rock the boat, none of us wants to upset the system even when the system may be wrong or corrupt because it just may jeopardize OUR jobs, OUR security, OUR futures. Ideals, principles, questions of right and wrong often take a back seat to our personal wants and interests, and if it happens enough, if we continue to disregard matters of truth and conscience when we have important decisions to make, then we may possibly endanger our very SOUL.

AS CHRISTIANS, we are currently at the forefront of many battles- struggles on behalf of the poor and others who are pushed to the margins of our society; struggles on behalf of the elderly who are often our forgotten citizens; struggles on behalf of the unborn as well as for the handicapped for whom the easiest tasks become a great struggle; those on behalf of minorities whose only sin was they were not born white and of European ancestry; those on behalf of the homeless, the imprisoned, and the mentally ill. The church must be their supporters for often, we are the only advocates they have. And we CAN if only our consciences remain sharp, if our notions of what is right and what is wrong remain clear and unambiguous.

And this we MUST do by recognizing the deep spiritual roots from which our conscience springs. The conscience is that spiritual organ implanted by God within the human soul to speak to us. Through it, God reminds each of us that we are part of his creation and thus wholly accountable to Him. It is through the conscience that God tells us what is fair and what is not, what is right and what is wrong. It reminds us how our highest obligation is not to another man or to the state but foremost to GOD. Without these moral intuitions, we would forget there IS God.

But it isn't enough to allow our conscience to be formed and molded by our society. You see, our conscience often reflects the same values and interests of the society we live in. If we fall into error by letting our culture develop our conscience for us, we can also make the mistake of RATIONALIZING away a troubling conscience, something all of us have become quite adept at. If we repeat enough justifications to ourselves, we can excuse our conscience for just about anything. This is why our conscience must, ABOVE ALL, be SPIRITUALLY shaped and developed. It must be grounded in the SCRIPTURES and nourished regularly through PRAYER and WORSHIP; only THEN can our consciences become a reliable guide upon which to base our lives. When we humbly sit before God's Word and prayerfully meditate upon its meaning, it begins to transform us from within- altering our attitudes, changing our desires. Over time, we discover how it has the power to gradually transform our character more and more into the character and personality of CHRIST HIMSELF.

Friends, let's be honest about it- Pilate IS every bit a reflection of ourselves; he is YOU and he is ME! A life rooted in self-interest should remind us of our OWN selfishness, and his great acts of cowardice of our OWN lack of courage. But Jesus had some stern advice for the Pontius Pilates of this world when he said, 'What profits a person if he or she were to gain the ENTIRE WORLD but lose his or her soul in the process!' All of us are ever in danger of

becoming just such an individual- a man without principle, a woman without truth, a person without a soul. What Pilate didn't understand was that when Christ stood before him in his Praetorium, it wasn't JESUS that was on trial, but rather PILATE HIMSELF, that it was PILATE who stood before that judgment seat and NOT our Lord. Similarly, may WE remember that when we stand in the presence of Christ, it is not HIS motives, HIS actions that fall under scrutiny. Rather, it is OUR OWN! Let us pray...

“God of conscience and God of courage, lead us beyond ourselves to care and protect, to nourish and shape, to challenge and energize this world with wise and bold decisions. Guide us through this time of spiritual confusion and public uncertainty, and lead us beyond all fear and apathy to NEW hope in you with hearts brimming with faith. Give us the courage to confront those things that compromise our consciences or threaten our integrity, and may we revere those individuals who dared to challenge wrong and change it, DESPITE the severe cost to themselves. In Christ’s name we pray. Amen.”