

"I, Pilate"
John 18:28-38
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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. In all the Roman Empire, Jerusalem is the only city WITHOUT such an image for the Judeans to bow down before. Therefore, wishing to impress the emperor with his loyalty, the young governor sent under the cover of night a large group of soldiers to set up such an image on a watchtower that overlooked the Temple area of the Jews- their most holy domain. He figured it'd be unlikely that the Jews would demonstrate within the Temple area since if they did, he'd then have an excuse to send his soldiers in and that would desecrate the area with the Gentiles' presence.

But he had made a grave mistake. He figured that with the DOZENS of gods the Romans had to bow down to, the presence of just one image would not mean much to these Jews, or so he THOUGHT. For a people who had but one God and 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—the Jewish high priest--mobilized an army of up to 7000 Jews to surround the governor's palace and for six days and nights, those Jews prayed that God would change his heart. The Roman leader could not look out his door without seeing 7000 Jews praying before him.

In desperation, he told them to gather at the marketplace where he would meet and speak with them. When he got there, he ordered his soldiers to surround the marketplace and then threatened to massacre the whole lot of them if they did not stop asking for the images to be removed. Then he returned home. However, he had badly underestimated these people. They bared their necks and replied, "It is better to DIE than to have images in Jerusalem" and then they waited for the order to come. But it never came as the governor knew that if one of his first deeds was to massacre 7000 Jews and word of it got back to Rome, his career would be over. Angry and feeling deeply humiliated, he relented and had the images taken down.

ANOTHER time, he wanted to build some aqueducts to supply the city with fresh water. They would run from the pools of Solomon to Jerusalem's interior and he had widespread support from them to do this. However, rather than use ROMAN funds to construct them with, the young leader raided the Temple treasury and used money that was solely meant for religious purposes. When the Jews heard of it, they rioted. The governor responded by sending in his army which resulted in the deaths of many persons. Word of this got back to the emperor who sharply rebuked the young leader. ONCE AGAIN, he was humiliated and enraged at the Jews.

Still again, 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. Word of this was sent back to Rome and Caesar, in the interest of preserving peace in the region, ordered the offensive shields removed. The Roman leader now had FURTHER cause to hate these Jews. He was running out of favor with Rome and THEY were the cause of it. But there was an EVEN MORE notorious incident to be mentioned which has permanently enshrined him in our history books. That young governor was none other than Pontius Pilate.

Following 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 often presided over civil cases. Even though Jesus had been found guilty in their own JEWISH COURTS, they lacked the authority to put someone to death and, wanting to see Jesus eliminated once and for all and by the most painful and humiliating way possible, crucifixion, this would require taking him to CIVIL court and having the local governor try and convict him AS WELL. The charges brought against Jesus was that he was anti-Caesar, anti-Rome, that he was in fact setting himself up as a RIVAL king to Caesar. If the Jews had gone to Pilate and merely said they wanted him killed on the charge of blasphemy, for declaring himself to be the son of God, they would have been laughed out of the courtroom for the Romans had DOZENS of gods THEMSELVES. Thus, if the Jews were going to ever get Jesus killed, they would have to lie and paint him to be a violent revolutionary bent on overthrowing the power and authority of Rome. Then Pilate would have NO RECOURSE but to execute him and they knew it. The irony here was that the Jews--the most anti-Caesar, anti-Roman race in the entire empire--would seek to have Jesus put to death for the very cause THEY THEMSELVES epitomized?

Of course, every word of their charge was a lie. If Jesus HAD BEEN the rebel he was depicted to be, Pilate would have heard of him long before. Rather than FIGHT the laws and customs, Jesus exhorted his disciples to OBEY them, to render unto Caesar the things that were Caesar's. Yes, Jesus was a king but of a kingdom that was not of this world; certainly not a king to challenge CAESAR. The scriptures show time and time again that when the multitude sought to MAKE HIM just such a king, he fled from them into the mountains, alone.

Pilate takes Jesus into his private chamber in order to learn more just what kind of king this Jesus thought he was. He takes a good look at his prisoner and asks him straight out, "Are you the king of the Jews?" whereupon Jesus replies that his kingdom is not of this world for if it was, the Jews would never have taken him. "Rather," he says, "my kingdom is from above." With that, Pilate can rest a bit easier now. 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 one and disrupt the order Rome tried so hard to preserve. To Pilate's mind, the only place Jesus' world existed was in his own imagination and nowhere else. If his kingdom was not of flesh and blood, of wood and stone and metal, it was then not a REAL kingdom and thus harmless. Call him a dreamer, a mystic, a poet, perhaps even a madman, but a REVOLUTIONARY- it was evident to the Roman leader that he was NOT!

Satisfied that Jesus isn't any kind of political rival, Pilate inquires further of this kingship of his. 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 hears Jesus' words but he cannot hear the voice BEHIND those words. As a military man, PILATE'S truth came at the end of swords and spears for what could talk louder than brute force? 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 wanted to exonerate Jesus, ON THE OTHER, he knew he couldn't just let him go. Due to his past history with them, he knew he was in no position to antagonize them any further; for the sake of peace, he would have to placate them in some manner. So, Pilate tries a series of clever political maneuvers. First, he had him transferred to Herod's jurisdiction, but as we saw last week, Herod had no interest in getting involved and sent him back to him. Next, he hoped he could get by with just having him flogged and then letting him go, but that failed to satisfy ANYONE. Then he resorted to the custom of granting an amnesty during the Passover holidays confident that the crowds would choose to free Jesus rather than set a thief and a murderer loose. Finally, when all these half-measures failed, he tries to wash his hands of the entire proceeding, declaring, "I am innocent of this man's blood"- then handing him over to be crucified.

When the crowds insisted, "If you let this man go, you are no friend of Caesar. Anyone who claims to be a king opposes Caesar!" Pilate had no choice but to condemn him to death. He was now forced to be decisive, to demonstrate before this mob his higher loyalty to Caesar, Emperor of the great Roman Empire, and not to this King of the Jews- this "ruler" without a country who the JEWS THEMSELVES did not even want. For Pilate, the choice was between honor, on the one hand, and ambition, on the other; between principle and political survival- and he chose the latter both times. 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- afraid for his job, afraid for his relationship to Caesar, afraid for his future in the empire. Pontius Pilate had Jesus murdered because he was a moral coward and all the water in all the world could not wash that stain from his hands.

The moral cowardice of Pontius Pilate helped nail Jesus to that tree, but so does the moral cowardice WE exhibit when WE are forced to make a decision between some issue of honor and principle, and that of personal expediency. 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. Let's face it, Pilate is every bit OURSELVES and HIS COWARDICE is OUR COWARDICE. But Jesus had some stern advice for the Pontius Pilates of this world when he said, 'What profiteth a man if he gains the whole world but lose his soul!' All of us are in danger of becoming just such a person- one without principles, one without truth, a person without a soul.

This evening, the 96th Academy Awards will be held and once again, THE ENTIRE WORLD will be watching. The FIRST Academy Award held on May 16th, 1929 was actually nothing like it is today. It was a private dinner function with only 270 guests in the Blossom Ballroom of the Hollywood Roosevelt Hotel- there was no radio broadcast of the event and of course, no television. The Oscar for Best Picture went to the war movie *Wings* while the awards for Best Actress was given to a young Janet Gaynor (who would be nominated again eight years later for *A Star Is Born*), while the Best Actor Oscar was awarded to the 45-year-old Swiss actor, Emil Jannings for two silent dramas, one made in 1927 and the second in 1928.

The story of Emil Jannings is really a tragic one. Born in Switzerland in 1884, he ran away from home at 16 to become a sailor, but quickly decided that he wanted to be an actor instead. He landed his first film role in 1918 starring in a German silent film called *The Eyes of the Mummy* and quickly established himself as one of the great talents in German cinema. His work attracted the attention of Hollywood and, in 1927, he was lured to America with a

lucrative contract from Paramount Pictures where he was given extraordinary control over scripts, roles and even the choice of directors. By the time the movie *The Last Command* was made in 1928, Jannings was 44 and had already been through three short-lived marriages that had ended in divorce and was estranged from his own two children. Although he wed again--to a former Berlin cabaret performer and actress--it didn't stop him from trying to seduce a number of other actresses. Described as a spoiled and temperamental man, he had very few friends and there were many MORE who hated and despised him.

With the success of *The Jazz Singer*, America's first talkie, it was clear that actors would now be required to talk on screen. With Jannings' thick German accent, he found himself with limited work as there were few roles available for someone with his voice. Sensing that his career in America was over, he returned to Germany to make films. His portrayal of an elderly professor who is destroyed by his infatuation for a cabaret singer played by Marlene Dietrich in *The Blue Angel* was an instant hit and it quickly established him as "the king of the European film stars."

Hitler's rise to power in the early 1930s coincided with a decline in demand for the Jannings' services. However, Joseph Goebbels, appointed as Reich Minister of Public Enlightenment and Propaganda, soon believed that he could be a useful tool for the Nazis and suggested he work on propaganda films for them. In *The Old and the Young King*, Jannings portrayed Prussian King Friedrich Wilhelm I. This was a historical biopic intended to extol the idea of "Führerprinzip," which, simply put, is the concept of blind obedience to the leader- the Führer. The film pleased Hitler who went out of his way to praise Jannings' performance in that and other movies. Jannings, in turn, sought to endear himself to Hitler and his cronies, and in the 1938 elections, he vigorously campaigned for him and the Nazi party. In exchange for his loyalty, he received career advancement and a lavish lifestyle. Goebbels placed Jannings on the board of Tobis Films and gave him "overall artistic control" of the state studio's productions. Eventually, he was given the title "Artist of the State" and awarded the "Ring of Honour of the German Cinema." Emil Jannings was now a powerful propagandist- his films were blatantly antisemitic, and he continued to praise and promote the Nazi cause.

After the war ended with Germany's defeat, Janning's went into exile in Austria but when located and confronted about his complicity with the Nazis, Jannings replied: "Open resistance would have meant a concentration camp," excusing his past actions by insisting he was "ordered" by Goebbels to make the propaganda films. He never acted again. He became an Austrian citizen and converted to Catholicism, but nothing seemed to bring him peace. He sought solace in heavy drinking, a factor in his death from liver cancer on January 2nd, 1950 at the age of 65. "He died alone, bitter and in disgrace," said his biographer- his body ravaged and his legacy tainted forever as a salesman for the Nazis. "The joys and the infinite sorrows, they all end," reads the epithet on his grave. Thus, the winner of history's first Oscar did in fact "inherit the world" and in the end, he lost both it AND his soul in the process.

It would be a grave mistake to think that someone of Jannings' character and temperament was simply an aberration, an anomaly, a rarity in public life who, like Pontius Pilate, appears once every generation or so. The truth is that people like them are really quite common, being found EVERYWHERE and in EVERY AGE- as old as HUMAN HISTORY ITSELF is. They are a microcosm of the world, representing the great masses of mankind who are so caught up in the affairs of this life, so possessed in trying to get ahead, so consumed in

looking after number one that they're incapable of aspiring to spiritual values and truths. With no interest in anything the eye cannot see or hands cannot touch, they care very little for the values and principles Jesus came to reveal such as justice or love or mercy or peace or hope or truth- they're obsessed with their OWN interests and no one else's.

Pilate is alive and well in many of our MAJOR BUSINESSES AND INDUSTRIES where the philosophy is "the worker be damned" and "financial profit is always the bottom line"; where people are willing to climb over the bodies of their co-workers as they ascend up the corporate ladder REGARDLESS of who they hurt in the process. Pilate is alive and well in WASHINGTON AND THE HALLS OF CONGRESS where politicians sell their souls to lobbyists and private interests for the highest dollar, where they know and discuss the truth behind closed doors but then say something different when in PUBLIC for it might cost them some votes or even their seat. And Pilate is alive and well in our CHURCHES where pastors are forced to choose between personal integrity on the one hand and their own job security on the other. When they surrender to the demand that every sermon be soothing and entertaining and must leave the congregation feeling good about themselves afterward instead of "afflicting the comfortable and comforting the afflicted" as TRUE preaching SHOULD be; where if they even dare to address issues of a controversial nature, they are threatened for it afterwards- yes, Pilate is even present in our Houses of Worship. The Pilates of this world are small, shallow, petty individuals and they are present wherever people shut their hearts to what is right and just and true, wherever people operate in the name of greed and power and self-interest.

In this confrontation between Jesus and Pilate, what we have here is MORE than the meeting of two men but the meeting of two contrasting WORLDS. PILATE'S world was MATERIAL- a kingdom of wealth and power and glory; Jesus' was SPIRITUAL- a kingdom of humility and peace and love. Caesar ruled over men's bodies while JESUS ruled over men's HEARTS. The strength of one was in SOLDIERS AND ARMS AND FORTRESSES, the strength of the OTHER lay in PRINCIPLES AND VALUES AND THE COMMITMENT TO DIVINE TRUTH. The goal of CAESAR was external security; the goal of JESUS was LOVE, JOY AND PEACE THROUGH FELLOWSHIP WITH GOD. CAESAR'S empire could extend no further than his armies; JESUS' empire had NO LIMITS AND WAS DESTINED TO REACH EVERY LAND. Eventually, both CAESAR AND HIS EMPIRE would pass away while the kingdom JESUS came to establish would LAST FOREVER!

Pilate was a pathetic ruler- a conceited, arrogant, and ambitious soldier whose ambition and pride and love for this world blinded him to the ruler of a kingdom infinitely greater than his own. As Jesus stood before him in chains, you can't help but feel that PILATE was really the one on trial, the one being judged there. In a very similar way, we find OURSELVES in that same witness box and the question that is asked of US is NO DIFFERENT. Where are OUR interests, OUR commitments, OUR loyalties this morning- to the kingdom PILATE was a representative of, or the one from above which CHRIST came to testify to. You see, Jesus' truth was MORE than just a philosophy we might think about and debate over as we do with MOST philosophies. Rather, it was a LIFE to be LIVED; it was HIS LIFE, HIS EXAMPLE- THAT was his truth. He said, "I am the way, the truth and the life" and only insofar as we seek HIS kingdom, insofar as we make HIS principles, HIS values, HIS example our very own, will we ever prove ourselves to be loyal disciples of Jesus Christ rather than soldiers of Pilate whose gaze could never see beyond the glory and interests of this world. Let us pray...

Gracious God, our Heavenly Father, the temptation is always there to be a person after Pilate's own heart than our Lord's, to love the allure and benefits of being a citizen of this world with none of the virtues or principles or perspectives that Christ came to bring. But we know that WITHOUT Jesus to bring balance to our lives and to remind us what is REALLY important in this world, we can easily fall into ruin. Help us to see what TRUE greatness in this world is, that it is not measured in money and power and status but in humility and truth and love, the ONLY qualities that count in God's kingdom. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen and amen.