

Pilate: Artificial Innocence

Four at the Crossroad:

Matthew 27:19-26

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Have you ever been stuck in traffic? It's frustrating. My worst experiences have been in Chicago and Los Angeles. I once sat in Chicago with Denny & Gloria Butterbaugh near O'Hare International Airport. For an hour and a half we watched cars drive the wrong way up entrance ramps to escape our situation. Another time, I drove south of Los Angeles and observed five north-bound lanes of stop-and-go traffic tangled for 45 miles. It was a Sunday afternoon. In traffic, your every action is affected in some way by those you travel with.

That was true of Pontius Pilate, who sent Jesus to the cross. He was shaped by those he traveled with, and especially the traffic jam in Palestine. Pilate managed the affairs of the Roman Emperor Tiberius in Judea, a politically and religiously-charged region.

Historians believe that Pilate previously held some military posts, and one account has him ruthlessly subduing barbarians. That success may have shaped his tendency to intimidate with force rather than negotiate. Perhaps, the emperor wanted a firm hand, but Pilate floundered. Roman society was decadent, self-indulgent, sexualized, and pluralistic. To a degree, it corresponds with our experience. Judea, by comparison, was punctuated with religious zealotry and turmoil. The rules and passion of Palestine did not coexist easily with the laissez-faire religious and moral vision of Rome. For example, Roman coins carried a customary image of a Roman god or emperor, but in Judea no such images were used or tolerated. That was lost on Pilate. Although he had a lengthy ten year term in Judea, it started badly and ended tragically.

Soon after he and his wife, Claudia, moved to the Judean seaport of Caesarea, he ordered his army to move their headquarters to Jerusalem. He must have thought that fear of force would quell the obstinacy of the Jews. When the soldiers marched into Jerusalem during the cover of night carrying standards bearing the image of the emperor, the city reacted in riotous outrage. Protestors poured into Caesarea demanding their removal. For five days, Pilate reasoned with them; but then, having concealed armed soldiers among them, he surprised the petitioners by surrounding them and threatening to kill them all if they didn't stop troubling him. Instead of relenting, the Jews flung themselves to the ground and bared their necks ready to die rather than tolerate the violation of their law. Unwilling to begin his term in Judea slaughtering unarmed Jews in mass, Pilate backed down. He caved to their request.

On a second occasion, the emperor had to intervene when Pilate refused to acquiesce to Jewish demands. Tiberius ordered the removal of gold shields that carried the images of Roman deities from within Pilate's Jerusalem palace.

Pilate started a riot on a third occasion when he ordered that temple money given as a part of religious vows be used to build an aqueduct for the city of Jerusalem. He sent soldiers into the protesting crowds with daggers and killed many. In the Bible, we read:

About this time Jesus was informed that Pilate had murdered some people from Galilee as they were sacrificing at the Temple in Jerusalem. (Luke 13:1, NLT)

We do not know today whether this is the same incident or not. We do know that Pontius Pilate had stained his hands with blood long before he decided the disposition of Jesus. He had also caved to Jewish demands. He wasn't sure exactly how to handle this troublesome race.

I'm amazed as I read Jesus' encounters with Pilate. I learn so many things.

First, Pilate appears conscientious. He is in Jerusalem to prevent riots; and all four gospels reveal Pilate examining Jesus to discover whether the charges are accurate. All four

reveal reluctance to shed innocent blood. I get the feeling that Pilate's previous behavior, cruel and violent, was somehow just in his mind. How many of our words and deeds are not as just as we think?

Second, Pilate is clever. He does not want to do wrong, nor does he want to fail in his mission to quell Jerusalem. According to Luke, Pilate found a legal loophole so that he could send Jesus to Herod Agrippa. It might prevent a riot if another Jew defied Jewish leaders.

Third, God spoke to Pilate. It was God speaking when Jesus told Pilate:

You would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above. (John 19:11, NIV)

For this reason I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me. (John 18:37, NIV)

God's voice was piercing into Pilate's world, so that he could grip reality if he chose. When Pilate responded, "What is truth," was his question earnest or skeptical? Was he down his path too far to entertain another view of the world? God was speaking to him. God continued. How else do you explain the message Pilate received from his wife:

Don't have anything to do with that innocent man, for I have suffered a great deal today in a dream because of him. (Matthew 27:19, NIV)

Do you recognize the hand of God on you? Do you hear the voice of God reaching out to you? Are you aware of his very personal call to you?

Fourth, Pilate did not want to kill Jesus. He murdered others, but he wanted to spare Jesus. He argued with the people on behalf of Jesus. He then bargained for Jesus with Barabbas. John reveals that Pilate flogged Jesus in attempt to appease the crowd. Nothing appeased the crowd.

Finally, Pilate acted to preserve himself. To preserve his career, he handed Jesus over to be crucified. To preserve his soul, he took a bowl of water and washed his hands and declared

his innocence. To preserve his independent authority, he irritated Jewish leaders by having a sign that identified Jesus as the king of the Jews.

How many of us find ourselves stuck in traffic like Pilate? We are bothered by what happens in the office, at home, or with our friends and literally even by the lawlessness on the highway. We feel compromised by it. We try to escape responsibility by deferring the decision to others. We seek to appease others but keep our integrity. We give in, but engage in little protests to separate ourselves from the guilt we feel. This is the road to destruction. Jesus said:

What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul? (Mark 8:36-37, NIV)

Jesus also said:

Wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction (Matthew 7:13, NIV)

Pilate's response crucified Christ. Our sins do that as well. Pilate lived in the deception of artificial innocence. He rejected the gift of God's visit to him. History tells us that a few years later he was relieved of his responsibilities and charged with the massacre of Samaritan worshipers. A careful historian in the time of Constantine shared evidence that Pilate ended up in France where he, like Judas, took his own life.

You and I walk a path in traffic with entertainers, politicians, journalists and writers, friends, family, associates, and countrymen. There is no artificial innocence. There is no little protest that separates us from guilt and destruction. There is a cross upon which our guilt lies, and there is a truth, a grip on reality that we either receive or reject. There is a Spirit that resides wherever repentance and faith welcomes him. It is the Spirit of the Lord Jesus Christ. He says, ***"I am with you always."*** Moreover, Jesus says, ***"For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them."*** Indeed, Jesus says, ***"I am the way."***