

PONTIUS PILATE, THE THINKER!
4 Midweek Lenten Service (21 March Anno Domini 2012)



Text: John 19:12

From then on, Pilate tried to set Jesus free, but the Jews kept shouting, "If you let this man go, you are no friend of Caesar. Anyone who claims to be a king opposes Caesar."

We don't often recite a list of the people of the passion. But we do often name one of the villains. Every time we say the Apostles' Creed, we point out that Jesus "suffered under Pontius Pilate."

So, Pontius Pilate, ironically, lives in infamy. I say ironically because Pilate's chief goal was to achieve political greatness in the Roman Empire. He really wanted nothing to do with Jesus of Nazareth.

When Pontius Pilate first took his position as governor of Judea, his political future looked grand. His governorship was to a short step away from a place in the Roman Senate or possibly better for this brilliant, young Roman nobleman. But the shifting political winds changed all of that, and today we know him primarily as the man who ordered the crucifixion of the Jesus.

Pilate's road to success in the Roman government depended ultimately on his success in Judea. Pilate would need to logically plan each step toward his ambitious goal, so we will think of him today as Pontius Pilate, the Thinker.

I. PILATE DID NOT CONSIDER JESUS A THREAT

Because of their religion, the Jews were some of the hardest people for the Romans to rule. Pilate had to keep his finger on the pulse of things. He no doubt did some serious thinking about Jesus of Nazareth long before the Jews brought Him to trial. Any time the leadership of one person attracted such large crowds of followers it could pose a potential threat to Roman rule. Pilate would have known about Jesus and His followers.

But during the three years of Jesus' ministry, Pilate found no reason to move against Him. Jesus was no threat to Pilate. Much of Jesus' activity was in Galilee, outside of Pilate's jurisdiction. When in Judea, Jesus appeared to cause more concern for the Jewish leaders, the priests and Pharisees, than for Rome. Pilate probably liked that. Whatever Pilate had heard of Jesus' teachings, he dismissed them as harmless to the state. The Jesus movement was only of vague curiosity for Pilate, because it did not threaten Rome's security in the region.

Opposition to Jesus came from the Jews, not from the Romans. Pilate had things under control. He had thought it all out; but he did not anticipate the coming events during the Jewish Passover festival. Those fanatical Jews defied all logic and reason.

Quite unexpectedly, the Jewish leaders arrested Jesus during the festival. They ran Jesus through a speedy mock trial on trumped-up charges and finally sentenced him to death for religious, not civil or political, reasons.

II. PILATE TRIED TO DISMISS THE CASE AGAINST JESUS

The next step was to bring Jesus to Pilate, because only the Roman leader could execute a death sentence for treason. Knowing that Pilate would not support their religious notions, the Jews offered Pilate political reasons for Jesus' death. They accused Jesus of subversion to the government, of refusing to pay taxes, of claiming to be a king.

The charges were serious, but Pilate was not going to let the Jews slip anything over on him. Instead of simply confirming the sentence and ordering the execution, Pilate decided to retry the case.

We may wonder why he did so. Quite possibly he thought about how Herod a couple of years earlier had executed John the Baptist, and public sentiment turned against him for killing a prophet. Pilate did not want to be known as a “prophet killer.”

More importantly, Pilate did not trust the Jews. The Jews hated Rome, but now they came accusing one of their own of being a traitor? Jesus, standing there in dignified silence, did not appear to him as the picture of a dangerous leader. Besides, Pilate couldn’t pass up the opportunity to hear Jesus’ story in this unique case. He might even overturn the verdict of the Jewish leaders and gain popularity with the common people.

So Pilate spoke with Jesus, expecting to dismiss the case in short order. But Jesus remained strangely silent. Most prisoners could hardly wait to make a passionate plea to Pilate in their own defense. But Jesus did not.

When Jesus finally answered the question whether He was a king. He said, **“My kingdom is not of this world.”** He said that he came as a king **“to testify to the truth”** (John 18:36,37).

“What is truth?” Pilate scoffed (v. 38), not believing in any absolute truth. But he also concluded that the claims Jesus made as a king were innocent and harmless.

Pilate went out and told the Jews that he found no guilt in Jesus. Ordinarily that would have been the end of the matter. But the Jews resisted. They would not be satisfied with less than the death sentence on Jesus. They would force Pilate’s hand.

Pilate hesitated. He was strangely conflicted. He had no particular compunctions against condemning an innocent man. Yet he found himself alone in defending Jesus. He had the power to declare Jesus innocent and then free him on the spot. But he would need to get him released without a hostile response from the Jewish leaders.

Pilate tried all the angles he could think of to get Jesus released without incident. He repeated that he found no fault in Jesus. But the crowd—primarily employees of the temple—insisted that he condemn Jesus. He encouraged Jesus to speak up in His own defense and give him something to go on. But Jesus kept silent.

He learned that Jesus was a native of Galilee. So in a masterstroke he put Jesus in the custody of Herod, the ruler over Galilee. But Herod sent Jesus back to Pilate.

He had Jesus whipped and mocked to satisfy the bloodthirsty mob and evoke sympathy for Jesus. But the crowd only grew louder in their blood lust.

Pilate had yet another ploy: Invoking the custom of releasing one prisoner during the Passover, he paired Jesus with a heartless hardened criminal and murderer named Barabbas. But the fanatical Jews insisted on Barabbas release rather than Jesus release.

III. PILATE CAVED IN FOR POLITICAL REASONS

, Pilate washed his hands of the innocent blood of Jesus. But the mob cried for His blood to be on them and their children. To the bitter end, Pilate presented Jesus, though cruelly tortured and abused,

as innocent. But there was no one there to sympathize or to listen. So, he confirmed the verdict: “***Stor-ratee-to’ Stauretheto!***” he declared. “Let him be crucified.”

We may wonder why Pilate gave in as he did. But we need to know that his political standing with Rome was on shaky ground at this time. During the trial he had to weigh his actions against his own political welfare. In fact, what clinched the matter and made it impossible for Pilate to act independently and free Jesus, was the threat by the Jews to appeal to Caesar. “***If you let Jesus go, you’re not Caesar’s friend.***”

That was a damning charge. Pilate, you see, wore a gold ring with the image of Caesar on it that marked him as a member of the inner circle of friends of Caesar. He was part of an elite fraternity of high-ranking officials of Rome who enjoyed the favor of the emperor. If the Jews went over Pilate’s head to Caesar, they might convince him that Pilate was not a friend. They could tell Caesar that Pilate released a man who claimed to be a king. Pilate’s position was on the line. In his mind it came down to a choice between Jesus or himself. He made his choice.

So, what became of Pilate? His political career did falter and fail. His wife, Claudia, reportedly became a Christian. And most surely, he thought long and often about the trial and execution—and rumored resurrection—of Jesus.

What do you suppose this thinking man would think of Christians and Christianity today? Might he express surprise at how much like him we can be? We find ourselves doing something wrong, and we make excuses for it. How many times do we Christians say, “I know it’s wrong, but . . .”?

“I know it’s wrong to steal or cheat, but in business that’s expected, do unto others before they do it unto you. It’s the only way to get ahead.” “I know it’s wrong to indulge myself in some kinds of entertainment, but I don’t want to be a ‘stick in the mud.’ ” “I know I should be strong and say what I believe, but I can’t. People will think I am a fanatic and I’ll lose friends.” “I know it’s wrong, but . . .” That’s all that Pilate really said at Jesus’ trial.

And might Pilate also think of why his wife stayed and others like us stay with Jesus? Did Pilate learn, for example, how Jesus had predicted His own death and resurrection? How he forgave all people’s sins by His death, even the sins we still commit? And how He rose from the dead?

He certainly heard about the ceaseless love of God and that Jesus was the Son of God and that He shall return one day. But did he ever believe? Or did this “man of reason” only wish at times that he could have believed?

We do not know, but we can thank God that by His Holy Spirit we believe and are saved. You have Jesus word on it. In Jesus name, Amen and amen.

*The peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.
AMEN*