

“Pilate”

Matthew 27:11-54

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The Christian Church has historically celebrated the fifth Sunday of Lent as Passion Sunday. With the new lectionary in the 1990's, the sixth Sunday has been designated as Palm or Passion Sunday. In our worship today, we move from the celebratory entrance into Jerusalem toward the cross. We now turn toward scripture and music which places us squarely in the face of Christ's passion and death.

Who is this man, Pilate?

We come upon him at his country estate. It's been a long week, a lot of headaches. The crowds march into Jerusalem for the annual Jewish festival. The Governor is relaxing, lounging by the pool. The cell phone rings. Who could be calling? He'd better answer it. Even though dealing with a crisis is the last thing he feels like doing.

Though he'd only been in Judea for a short time, he'd had just about enough of this godforsaken state, enough of his self-serving boss, the Emperor, enough mopping up, enough taking care of Tiberius' dirty work. He had half a mind to switch off the cell phone and let the voice mail pick up.

His hand, however, hesitates, and he answers the phone. “Pilate”, he says, irritated. It is high priest Caiaphas, the head honcho of the Jewish Sanhedrin, and boy, is he agitated. Caiaphas is talking so fast Pilate can't even make sense of what he is saying. “Slow down!”

Caiaphas sucks in his breath. He and his council have condemned the man Jesus, for blasphemy. Pilate knew the story; he'd seen it coming. Caiaphas and his crew had been trying for a while to figure out how to entrap Jesus, but it looks as though this Jesus has dug his own grave. Claiming he will be seated at the right hand of power. . .

Caiaphas telephones Pilate to fill him in. “We've got this madman claiming to be God, who knows what he's going to do next? Who knows how he's going to try to undercut Roman power, your power? The man must be executed, plain and simple. Write the order, Pilate. It's your jurisdiction. It's out of my hands.” Caiaphas hangs up.

Pilate knows this Jesus is not just one crazy man. It's much bigger. Little does he know *just how much* bigger. There's Caiaphas, God knows he's tough to pin down. Then there's the Sanhedrin, then there's

the crowd. There's keeping people under control during these ridiculous Passover celebrations. Pilate shakes his head, switches his phone to silent, and motions to his wife. "Pack my bag, Claudia. I've got to go into town. I don't know when I'll be back."

Who is this man, Pilate? His very name connotes power. Governor. Procurator. Pilate's power is a violent power. One time, he silenced a protest by calling in troops. His soldiers bludgeoned several to death.

Pilate. A politician trying to weasel out of something, a person who might bend the rules to fit the desired outcome. Pilate. The man whom the early church held responsible for the death of Jesus.

How easy it is to blame Pilate. He *deserves* the blame. He had a reputation as corrupt and ruthless. Maybe he was trying to save Jesus, trying to sway the crowd, but things didn't turn out like he planned.

Who is this man, Pilate? Are we really so different from him? Most of us will never walk the corridors of power, but how many of us always toe the line of truth? Most of us will never be elected to office, but how many of us can say we have never elected to do the wrong thing? Most of us have never murdered, but how many of us can say we haven't killed others' hopes or ideas? Most of us will never be in charge of legions, but how legion are our sins?

Who is this man, Pilate? Pilate's shoes fit us, better than we thought they might. We look into the mirror that is scripture and we see Pilate's mannerisms, Pilate's scheming, Pilate's choices staring us right back.

When the homeless woman rang the doorbell Wednesday afternoon and I thought, "I don't have time for this, I could just ignore her," I knew I wasn't so far from Pilate. When we turn our heads from problems and needs and look the other way, we sit very close to Pilate. When we fail to exercise the power we do have in order to do good, we are not so far from Pilate. When we fail to give back to our community because there's nothing in it for us, Pilate begins to look awfully familiar.

When a teacher allows a student to "borrow" someone else's ideas, we see Pilate in action. When students admire celebrities more than their devoted teachers, Pilate is near.

In a world where might makes right, where money buys power, where power corrupts, we are not so far from Pilate. When the group in power quashes those weaker, when entire groups of people are murdered

in the name of ethnic cleansing, we are not so far from Pilate. When Israeli parents grieve the loss of their children in suicide bombings, when Afghan children are shot at military checkpoints, we are not so far from Pilate.

We call it the exercise of power. We could call it “Pilate.”

“What can I do? I am just one person.” As Christians, we are called not only to love, but to do justice. The Lord of the universe was a victim of the judicial justice system. To do nothing in the face of injustice, to not take a stance, means we choose to stand with the powerful.

Pilate is not without sympathy. His job was on the line. Many lives were on the line. Pilate was taking a gamble with this man Jesus. Pilate probably figured he outfoxed this rumbling crowd. He misjudged them. He really couldn't believe they would want to kill this mute man who looked so pitiful. Pilate caved in. Pilate gave them what they wanted.

Pilate could have overpowered the crowds. He had the soldiers. He could have dealt with riots or complaints. But he chose not to. He washes his hands in a lame gesture of denial.

“Let his blood be upon us and our children,” the crowds cry out.

We are not so far from Pilate. In so many of life's decisions, we poise on the edge of that slippery slope of rejecting Jesus. Do we follow Jesus, or do we follow our own devices and desires? Do we stand for what is just, or for what is easy?

Then, finally, there is the end of this story, the end which culminates in the cross, the mark of execution. The instrument of the most cruel and horrible torture.

When we think of the cross in the context of Christ's passion and death, we are accustomed to seeing the crucified Jesus, his crown of thorns, his five gaping wounds, his limp body hanging on the cross. But high on the wall in the Chapel of Saint Augustine at the College of Preachers in Washington, D. C. hangs a different sort of cross. I have seen a lot of crosses, but I had never seen one like this before.

In the small gothic chapel, suspended above the table, lit by a single spotlight, is a bronze sculpture on a wooden cross. But this is not a solitary figure. This Jesus is not alone. On this cross, Jesus embraces

someone. This image of Jesus on the cross is an image of the forgiving Christ, an image the artist called “Welcome Home.”¹

This is a modern bronze sculpture. The figures are, as you can see, vague, ambiguous, hard to identify. Jesus holds someone in his arms in a healing embrace. You can’t tell who this figure is. You can’t even tell whether it’s a man or a woman. I am not a betting person, but if I were, I think it might be someone whom we have come to know, someone whom we sit very close to.

I think it just *might* be. . . Pilate.

¹ Rev. Gurdon Brewster designed this beautiful, haunting, wood and bronze sculpture for the chapel in the College of Preachers. Brewster remembered his reconciliation with his daughter as he designed this unusual cross.