

"For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate."

Every Sunday we say recite those words as part of the Nicene Creed.

And every day, if you pray Morning or Evening Prayer, you say the words in the Apostles' Creed:

"He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried."

And so, of all the participants in the Passion, Pontius Pilate probably gets the most mention in the Christian Church. It's no accident that in the musical, *Jesus Christ Superstar*, Pilate relates his dream about Jesus, with the lyrics,

Then I saw thousands of millions

Crying for this man

And then I heard them mentioning my name

And leaving me the blame

A couple weeks ago I mentioned the danger of scapegoating the participants in the Passion. Jesus died for the sins of the world, past, present, and future. He did not just die because of some bad choices made by certain individuals in Jerusalem some 1,985 years ago.

And yet, in the past, Christians have placed much of the blame on the Jewish participants in the Passion. There's been much anti-Semitism in Christian history. Blame has fallen on the Jewish priests and Sanhedrin; on the Jerusalem crowd that says about Jesus, "His blood be on us and our children;" on Judas the Betrayer, whose first name comes from the same root as Jew. Jews in the past have been labeled with the terrible term, "Christ Killers."

In fact, in Europe for centuries, Jewish people knew that it was best to hide behind locked doors every Good Friday. Otherwise "good" Christians who had just been to Good Friday services might take their anger and frustration out on their Jewish neighbors.

So it's always vital to remember that there were other players in the Passion besides Jewish people. And ultimately, it was a Roman governor who ordered Roman soldiers to nail Jesus to a Roman cross.

So who is Pontius Pilate? What do we know about him?

Most of what we know comes from the Gospels themselves. But there is some other information from Jewish and Roman histories.

Pilate was of the Equestrian order, the 2nd highest strata in Rome, the group right below the Senators. Pilate served as the Prefect, or in our terms the Military Governor of Judea from 26 to 36 AD.

This was a part of the territory that used to be ruled by King Herod the Great—the Herod from the Christmas story. When he died, his kingdom was sub-divided into four parts and split amongst 4 of Herod's sons. A couple of those sons were inept. So, by the time Jesus was

an adult, the Romans had taken over direct control of two of those parts and combined them under the rule of one Military Governor.

So Pontius Pilate was a foreign military governor sent to keep control of the southern part of the Jewish territory, the part that included the Jewish capital city of Jerusalem.

Pilate's headquarters was actually about 40 miles away from Jerusalem on the Mediterranean Coast, in a city known as Caesarea, "Caesar's City." But Roman Governors made it a practice to be in Jerusalem every Passover.

Passover was the greatest Jewish religious festival. But it was also a festival of freedom and liberation. It would be like us combining Christmas and Easter with the 4th of July. So Pilate and the Romans were always on the lookout for trouble at Passover time. Given the Jewish nationalistic feelings that Passover would stir up, the Roman Governor would always be on hand in Jerusalem with thousands of soldiers to squelch any trouble or any rebellion before it got out of hand.

In fact, it's quite possible that at the moment when Pontius Pilate was riding his horse into Jerusalem from the northwest along with his column of soldiers, that Jesus might have staged a counter demonstration. But instead of riding a warhorse through the northwest gate like Pilate, Jesus chose to ride a donkey to the east gate of the city.

Pilate was apparently a client of a powerful patron in Rome, Sejanus. If you ever saw the PBS series, *I Claudius*, Sejanus was played by Patrick Stewart. Sejanus was a rising star who worked for Caesar Tiberius, but then became so powerful that he was a threat to Caesar's power.

Sejanus was notoriously anti-Semitic and wanted to keep the Jews in line. It seems like Pilate was running that play-book in the early days of his governorship. Pilate could be very cruel and vicious in his treatment of the Jewish people. And there was often tension between Pilate and the Jewish leaders.

But interestingly, in 31 AD, Sejanus was deposed and executed in Rome. That meant that all of his protégés scattered throughout the Roman Empire found themselves under suspicion. Perhaps that's the reason the Jewish leaders were able to use what was apparently an effective threat to Pilate.¹ It seems they were trying to apply some leverage in getting Pilate to sentence Jesus to death. They said, "If you release this man, you are no friend of Caesar."²

So why had the Jewish leaders brought Jesus to stand trial before the Roman governor?

As I discussed last week, there was a Jewish trial of Jesus in front of all or part of the Jewish ruling council, or Sanhedrin. The first charge against Jesus was that he would destroy the

¹ The two candidates for "best dates" for the Passion (with Passover starting on a Friday) were 30 and 33 AD—if the latter, the Sejanus situation may have played a large role in Pilate's attitude

² John 19:12

Temple. They couldn't prove that charge. But they did convict him for blasphemy, for claiming equality with God. And they sentenced him to die.

But they didn't have strict power to carry out a capital sentence. Yes, they could have incited a lynch mob and had Jesus stoned to death. They will later do that very thing in executing the Deacon Stephen, the first Christian martyr.³

But over and over again in the Gospels, the Jewish leaders seem to be afraid of the people. That's why they arrest Jesus at night instead of in the Temple where he has been teaching. And that's probably why they decide to take Jesus to the Governor. That way the Jewish people can blame the Romans, and not their own leaders.

So, Jesus is brought to Pilate to be put on trial for a second round. A Roman military governor won't care about any sort of religious charge of blasphemy. So, they accuse him of a different kind of crime. Not religious, but military and political. Being a revolutionary. Claiming to be a king. Fomenting insurrection and revolt.

So, in all 4 Gospels, Pilate asks Jesus the question, "Are you the king of the Jews?"⁴ But in all 4 Gospels, Pilate seems doubtful of the charge against Jesus. I don't think this is because Pilate is especially righteous. He had people killed for much more minor reasons. I suspect a large part of Pilate's reluctance is that he doesn't like the Jewish leaders, and simply doesn't want to do what they want him to do.

And in Luke, Pilate even tries to turf Jesus off to Herod Antipas, the ruler of Galilee who was in Jerusalem that week. This is one of the sons of the Herod from the Christmas story. Herod Antipas is the one who had John the Baptist beheaded.

Luke says that when Pilate sent Jesus to Herod, Herod was excited. In Luke's words, "When Herod saw Jesus, he was very glad, for he had been wanting to see him for a long time, because he had heard about him and was hoping to see him perform some sign."⁵

But Jesus won't be some sort of a performing monkey, to do miracles on demand for Herod. And eventually Herod tires of him and sends him back Pilate.

Pilate offers the crowd a choice, he can release Jesus or release another criminal in custody named Barabbas. The crowd asks for Barabbas. I'll say more about Barabbas and about the crowd next week.

Eventually Pilate caves in. He responds to pressure. Perhaps he is afraid of his tenuous political situation with Caesar back in Rome. Or perhaps he figures that one more execution won't make any real difference in the scheme of things. And so he orders that Jesus be crucified. And he sends Jesus off with a detachment of Roman soldiers who will carry out the execution.

³ Acts 7:58ff

⁴ Matthew 27:11, Mark 15:2, Luke 23:3, John 18:33

⁵ Luke 23:8

It won't ultimately save his job. Pilate will be thrown out of office a few years later for being too cruel in another situation.

In Matthew's Gospel, Pilate makes a big deal of washing his hands to try to symbolically say that he is innocent of having Jesus executed.⁶ Nice try. But the responsibility is ultimately his. He is the Roman Military Governor and is ultimately in charge of executing justice in Judea. The buck stops with him. And instead of executing justice, he executes Jesus.

What we've seen this past few weeks in the Passion accounts is people making bad choices for bad reasons.

Judas. Maybe he was in it for the money. Or maybe he was trying to force Jesus' hand.

Caiaphas the High Priest and the Jewish council. On one level they probably thought they were defending God's holiness and God's honor. But on the other hand, they were also defending their own self-interests in preserving the Temple and the status quo.

And Pilate. The man charged with enforcing justice who sends an innocent man to his execution.

So on the one hand, we see flawed human beings making bad choices. At some levels the worst that we humans can do is on display here.

But on the other hand, the Passion of Jesus is not just us at our worst. In a way, it is us at our best.

Of all the religious systems throughout the world and throughout history up until the time of Jesus, the finest one was Judaism. And of all the legal systems in the history of the world up until that point, the finest system of justice was Roman law. And yet, these pinnacles of human accomplishment ended up combining to have the Lord of Life put to death.

All sin and fall short of the glory of God. Even at our best, we fall short of what God would have us do and be.

But the good news of the Passion, the good news of the cross, is that God does for us what we cannot do for ourselves.

The cross is God's answer to us at our worst.

The cross is God's answer to us at our best.

The cross is God's love put on full display. God so loved the world that he gave his only Son. And on that cross that Son prays,

⁶ Matthew 27:24

"Father forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing."⁷

We adore you, O Christ, and we bless you, because by your holy cross you have redeemed the world.

⁷ Luke 23:34