

Series: "Encounter With Christ"
"Jesus and Pilate"

The Jewish leaders had given Jesus a hurry-up trial and had decided He should die. But as a country occupied by the Romans, they were not permitted to carry out the death sentence. To do that they needed a Roman trial, and so they turned to Pontius Pilate for help.

Because of his encounter with Jesus, Pilate's name has been etched into history. Pilate was Procurator of Judea. A "procurator" was a sub-governor, serving under the governor who ruled all of Syria. It wasn't that high a position, but it was looked on as a stepping stone up the political ladder.

Being a ruler of the Jews in Judea wasn't easy. Jews resented their defeat by Rome and their loss of independence. On top of their nationalistic fervor as Israelites was their sometimes fanatical Hebrew religion: they still believed they were God's special people. Judea was a volatile, turbulent area. At any moment some zealous Jew could come out of nowhere and spark an insurrection against Roman authority. Pilate had his hands full.

Secular historians of that period do not present a very flattering portrait of Pilate. From day one he antagonized the Jews. Previous procurators seemed to respect Jewish religion and Jewish scruples; Pilate tended to ignore them. Several times he used unnecessary violence when Jews protested his ill-advised policies. On top of that he once raided the temple treasury to pay for the building of an aqueduct in Jerusalem. The Emperor Tiberius had heard rumors and received complaints about Pilate, and once Tiberius even had to intervene and order Pilate to alter his policies against the Jews. So, the Pilate Jesus confronted was on shaky ground with the Emperor, and resented by the Jews.

And now it was Passover. Jerusalem was packed with visitors there for the Feast of Passover. The noisy crowds, the religious fervor, the intense nationalistic spirit always seemed to make Passover time a setting ripe for revolution. It no doubt made Pilate nervous and extra cautious.

And now, perhaps awakened from sleep during the wee hours of the morning, a problem was dumped on his doorstep: a prisoner named Jesus. "Sir, I'm sorry to have to bother you at this hour, but some of the chief priests are here to see you. They say it's urgent." Still half-asleep, Pilate groans: "Oh no. Not them. Not now!"

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The Gospel of John describes the encounter between Jesus and Pilate in chapters 18 and 19. First, the chief priests won't come into the governor's palace, for this home of a Gentile was off limits. John writes with irony, "they themselves did not enter the headquarters, so as to avoid ritual defilement and to be able to eat the Passover" (John 18:28). Those plotting to execute God's Son were worried about being *ritually impure*!

"So Pilate went out to them and said, 'What accusation do you bring against this man?' They answered, 'If this man were not a criminal, we would not have handed him over to you' (John 18:29-30). They say, if He hadn't done something wrong we wouldn't be here!

The narrative continues: "Pilate said to them, 'Take him yourselves and judge him according to your law.' The Jews replied, 'We are not permitted to put anyone to death'" (Verse 31). Apparently Pilate thinks Jesus has violated one of their religious laws, and hoping to avoid getting involved, he says, "Take care of it yourselves!" We can't put anyone to death, they say. When they mention the death sentence, Pilate realizes that a more serious charge is being leveled.

Pilate goes back inside the palace to Jesus – it's probably the first time they've met. He asks Jesus, "Are you the king of the Jews?" "Jesus answered, 'Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?'" (verse 34). Are you asking this because *you* want to know, or because someone else told you about me?" Listen, Pilate says, "Am I a Jew? Your own nation and the chief priests have handed you over to me. What have you done?" (verse 35). "Jesus answered, 'My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here'" (verse 36). So, you're a king? Pilate responds. "Jesus answered, 'You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice'" (verse 37). "What is truth?" Pilate asks (verse 38). Is this a serious question in Pilate's mind. A deep longing in his soul? Or a cynical, "whatever" response? "Heh...what is truth?"

I can't help but wonder if Pilate must not have felt a growing uneasiness about this man Jesus...an air of superiority about him that was unsettling. Pilate walks out to the Jews: "I find no case against him" (verse 38). But you have a custom of releasing a prisoner at Passover. How about if I release the King of the Jews?" "No! No!" they shout. "Release the other prisoner, Barabbas". Pilate is attempting to free Jesus, but they won't stand for it.

Another thought comes to Pilate's mind. He *scourges* Jesus. The soldiers take a whip laced with pieces of metal and bone and crack it over Jesus' back (some lose consciousness at that point or even succumb to the torture). Part of a thorn bush is shaped into a crown and pushed and twisted onto Jesus' head. Then they throw a robe over Him and begin to call Him "king!" and slap Him in the face and make fun of Him.

Pilate has Him dragged out to the chief priests and their guards – maybe they'll pity Him and be satisfied that this enough punishment. "Look at this man. I don't find him guilty of any crime." But these chief priests are more hostile: Crucify Him! Crucify Him! He claimed to be the Son of God, and our law says because of that, He must die!

Pilate takes Jesus back inside, and by now the Roman procurator is wide awake! Getting more edgy and unglued, he doesn't know what to do. He wants to appease the Jews (as much as he hates them). He doesn't want a riot to break out. But there's just something so unearthly about this man, that he's actually *afraid of Him*.

"Where are you from?" Pilate asks. But Jesus is silent (John 19:9). The Gospel writer John

continues: "Pilate therefore said to him, 'Do you refuse to speak to me? Do you now know that I have power to release you, and power to crucify you?' (John 19:10). Jesus' reply made Pilate's heart pound even more: "Jesus answered him, 'You would have no power over me unless it had been given you from above; therefor the one who handed me over to you is guilty of a greater sin'" (John 19:11).

Tense and sweating, Pilate goes back out to the Jews. "I'm going to let this man go." "You do that and you're not Caesar's friend! Everyone who claims to be a king sets himself against Caesar" (John 19:12). *That remark* stabbed Pilate like a knife! Pilate's career aspirations were already teetering and tottering. If word got back to Emperor Tiberias that Pilate had released a prisoner accused of *treason*, it was curtains for his career.

Still torn, Pilate almost pleads: "Here's your king! Shall I execute your King?" Then one of the strangest sentences to ever come from the mouth of a Jew – let alone the chief priests: "We have no king but the emperor!" (John 19:15). The Hebrews? Israel? No king but the *Roman emperor*? Then those fateful words recorded by John – "Then he handed him over to them to be crucified" (John 19:16a).

Pontius Pilate's name has been etched into history because of his encounter with Jesus. In one sense he was a one-of-a-kind figure, thrust upon the spotlight of history in having to decide the earthly fate of God's Son. But in another way, Pilate is no different from us as we encounter Jesus.

Like Pilate, each of us has to decide whether or not the claims of Jesus are true. Pilate was confronted eyeball to eyeball with Jesus! Is He really a king? Is He the ultimate truth He talks about? Every one of us who has ever been confronted with the claims of Jesus has to decide if He's telling the truth or not. Is He God? Is He *the* way, *the* truth, *the* life, as He said? Can He forgive sins? Is He the bread of life that nourishes our souls forever? Did He rise from the dead, and if so, does that mean He can enable us to do that too? There are many people who regard Jesus as a great teacher, a moral example, a prophet, a wise man, but don't believe He is God, or the world's only Savior.

C. S. Lewis, in his classic book, *Mere Christianity*, wrote: "A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things that Jesus said wouldn't be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic on the level with a man who says he's a poached egg – or else he would be the devil of hell; you must make your choice. Either this was, and is the Son of God, or else a madman or something worse. You can shut Him up for a demon; or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God. But don't come up with any patronizing nonsense about His being a great moral teacher. He hasn't left that alternative to us."

Likewise, just ignoring Him doesn't get us off the hook! There are many people today who have no axe to grind with Jesus. They're not against Him. They just kind of assume He's "our Savior and Lord". But it's from afar. He has no effect on their lives - either positively or negatively. It's like the greatest event in human history has taken place, and it's just sort of trivialized, or

completely overlooked. In a way, that's worse than checking Jesus out, and rejecting Him!

Is Jesus what He claimed to be? King. God's Son. The world's only Savior. If we say "yes", then we've got to make Him Lord and King of our life! Am I going to put Jesus at the center of my life, or am I going to put myself there? Will I be in the driver's seat, or will He be in the driver's seat? A World War II pilot wrote a book called, *God Is My Copilot*. He described how he felt God was with him during those days of battle. For a while, that became a popular saying: "God is my copilot." More recently, someone has quipped: "If God is your copilot, you better change seats!"

I want Jesus to be the *Pilot* of my life! To guide me. To lead me in His will. Honestly, sometimes it's a struggle. I want to do what I want to do. But maturing spiritually means I come more and more to the place where I can say in every situation, "Your will be done, not mine." Like Pontius Pilate, each of us has to decide whether the claims of Jesus are true.

*Pilate also had to make the moral choice whether to do the thing that was **convenient**, or the thing that was **right**.* Can we not appreciate the pickle Pilate was in! The Jews were pressuring him to have Jesus executed. His relationship with the emperor and his career were on the line. In his own conscience he thought Jesus was innocent. And, remember, his wife had a dream about Jesus and sent word to Pilate to let that innocent man go! That might have outweighed all the other pressures put together! Unfortunately, Pilate chose the route of self-interest – of trying to protect his career, and save his own hide!

All of us have moral choices to make, don't we? I remember talking to someone having a lot of stress at work. The person didn't agree with company policy. But to go against it might mean losing their job, creating a major upheaval for the family (including a probable relocation). It was a terrible moral struggle for this individual. We all have moral choices to make. Should I tell the truth, or not? Should I give in to that illicit attraction, or be faithful to my spouse? Should I buy that thing I don't even need, or give that money to some charity?

While some moral choices are weighty, and even life-changing, most of the time we are made or broken by the little moral choices that confront us every day. Oscar Wilde was a playwright in the 19th century, something of a cynic and a hedonist. He once said, "The gods had given me almost everything. But I let myself be lured into long spells of senseless and sensual ease...tired of being on the heights, I deliberately went to the depths in search for new sensation...I grew careless of the lives of others. I took pleasure where it pleased me, and passed on. I forgot that every little action of the common day makes or unmakes character, and that therefore what one has done in the secret chamber, one has some day to cry aloud from the housetop...I allowed pleasure to dominate me. I ended in horrible disgrace."

Yes, there are times when, just like Pilate, we're faced with a huge moral choice that becomes a defining moment of life. But most of the times what determines the direction of our life are those day-to-day choices we make for good or bad. May God give us courage and strength in those moments of decision!

Whatever happened to Pontius Pilate? We don't know for sure. All kinds of traditions and legends abound. According to the Jewish historian Josephus, in 36 A.D. (perhaps 3 years after sentencing Jesus) he was called to Rome to answer complaints about him, and his governorship ended. The early church historian Eusebius says Pilate was banished to the city of Vienne in Gaul (modern France), where he eventually committed suicide.

Whatever happened, one might ask: What did Pilate's compromise gain him? He took the easy way out, the moral low road, but what did it gain him in the end?

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