

Jason Upchurch - Mark 15:1-15 - The Good News of the King of Kings

We get to one of the most infamous people in all of Church history this morning in the person of Pontius Pilate. He's so infamous that two of the most well known Christian Creeds - the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed - put his name as the one who ordered the crucifixion of Jesus.

Apostles' Creed: [Jesus Christ was] conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate.

Now, to be fair, they do that not so much to lay the blame on Pilate, though he certainly deserves blame, but because Pilate was a real historical figure. Jesus didn't just die and rise again in our imagination. He really died and really rose in space and time and did so while a man named Pontius Pilate was prefect of Judaea.

And this morning I want to spend a little bit of time giving you some background about Pilate. This is going to feel a little bit like a history class for a little bit this morning. Because one of the things that always confused me about Pilate was that he caved to this Jewish mob to sentence Jesus to death. Why did he do that?

Because when you read the story in all four of the gospels it never seems like he's actually convinced that Jesus deserves death. In fact, did you know in the trial and execution of Jesus there is only one person who defends Jesus? It's not the apostles, it's not the crowds who were cheering him as king earlier that week, it's not even Jesus. It's Pontius Pilate. Depending on how you count it in all of the gospels, ten or eleven times Pilate objects to the Jews wanting to kill Jesus.

"What has he done?" "I find no guilt in him." "Trying to get Jesus released instead of Barabbas. Trying to scourge Jesus to see if that would satisfy the Jews rather than kill him.

Why is Pilate so conflicted? He kills people all the time. And if he's so conflicted, why does he order the crucifixion? Why does he cave to the mob? And the only way to understand that is to know the background of Pilate.

Now, obviously this section is the condemnation of Jesus to death, and yet it really is Pilate who is at the forefront of this section. So I think understanding him more is helpful.

By the way, if you want a great book about Pilate there's a book called Pontius Pilate by Paul Meier. It's a history book written as a narrative. It's not historical fiction. It's sort of a biography that reads like a novel and it's excellent.

Earlier in his life, Pilate rose quickly through the ranks as a Roman soldier. He was a very accomplished soldier who was eventually thrust into being the governor of Judea. In the Roman world, one of the least desirable places to govern was Israel. Rome controlled Judea but the Jews were notoriously unruly. But Rome put up with all the trouble because Israel is a very strategic location for travel.

Travel across the Mediterranean Sea was not always possible - especially in the winter months - and so Israel provided a land route from Rome to Africa and the far east. It's an incredibly important piece of real estate just for logistics.

But the Jews despised being in subjection. They were God's people, after all, and the Romans were idolators. The Jews were ruled by people who worshipped a pantheon of gods and had no regard for Yahweh. As you read the book of Acts you'll notice that there are Jewish synagogues and groups throughout the Roman Empire. That's where Paul always begins preaching when he's in a new town. Those outposts were often more relaxed in Roman culture compared to the Jews who lived in Judea.

The Jews who lived in Judea were extremely zealous and Romans had a hard time understanding them and their lack of tolerance to Roman gods and traditions. Insurrections were common - the whole Maccabean revolution was par for the course. So Rome wanted control, but not a war. So really the only thing Rome wanted from governors in Judea was to keep the Jews peaceful and to ensure their armies could easily move through the region. That was it: keep the peace, maintain the roads.

Incidentally, this is why Herod the Great was so renowned. He was able to keep the peace and he built great structures in Israel including the spectacular Temple. He did what Rome wanted him to do. But by this time Herod was long gone and his kingdom had been divided. By the time of Jesus's ministry Pilate had been appointed governor over the land.

And Pilate's reign as governor had problems from the beginning. He had basically 4 strikes against him by the time Jesus was marched in front of him that morning.

Strike 1: Standards controversy. When people were appointed to high offices in Roman times, they would often find some way to honor Caesar for the appointment. That's why there's so many cities called "Caesarea" - it was a way of honoring Caesar. The Lake of Galilee was also called the Sea of Tiberius: named after Tiberius Caesar. You get the idea. You honor the person who gave you the power.

Well, when Pilate first came into Jerusalem he also wanted to honor Caesar. And what he realized was that there were no images of Caesar in all of Jerusalem. How can you honor the emperor without statues or images? So Pilate brought in military standards to Jerusalem. A military standard is like a huge flag on a metal pole. And the standard bears likeness of Caesar - it had his picture on the flag.

Well, what's the problem with that? The problem with that is the 2nd commandment: You shall not make for yourself a carved image or any likeness of anything in heaven above or in the earth beneath or in the waters under the earth. Pilate was intentionally committing flagrant idolatry in the most holy city to the Jews.

You remember Jesus clearing out the money changers? The reason there were money changers to begin with was that the Roman coinage had Caesar's depiction on it. And the Jews couldn't stand to have images even on coins in a pocket enter the Temple proper. They traded them out with their own money that had no images.

So when Pilate brought these standards in there was a massive uprising of Jews who actually planned to commit mass suicide if Pilate didn't take the standards out. It was a weird situation. Pilate eventually caved to their request, but the incident became well known throughout the Roman world as a massively foolish move on Pilate's part as the new governor of Judea.

Strike 2: Aqueduct scandal. The second incident with Pilate had to do with water. Jerusalem's greatest weakness is that it lacks water. Even to this day, the largest source of water is the spring that flows through Hezekiah's tunnel into the city. It's never been enough to water the whole population. So Pilate devised a plan to make a massive aqueduct from Bethlehem to Jerusalem. But he didn't have any money to do it and he couldn't risk raising taxes to finance it because it would upset the Jewish countrymen.

But Pilate knew that the Jewish leaders had amassed a massive fortune from the Temple operations. Those money changers? They had made the Jewish leaders a small Fort Knox in riches. And Pilate knew it, but the average Jewish people didn't. If they did know it, they'd be outraged that they were being taken advantage of. That's why Jesus was so mad: he also the truth.

So Pilate made a secret agreement with the Jewish leaders, who knew the city needed water. They would finance the project from their riches, Pilate would keep the source of money secret. Everyone wins. With one condition: if anyone found out that Pilate used the money from the Temple Treasury then the Jews would say Pilate forced them to hand over the money - basically robbing the Jews. The leaders didn't want anyone to know they had that much money.

So Pilate agreed. The aqueduct was built. Three guesses what happened shortly after construction?

People found out that the money came from the Temple and Pilate was thrown under the bus. It got so bad that a riot began in Jerusalem. And since Pilate anticipated the riot he had soldiers dress up as plain clothed citizens. So when the crowd formed and began rioting, he gave a signal and the Jewish people were ambushed by Pilate's soldiers and slaughtered in the streets. It was brutal and cunning.

Strike 3: Bloody sacrifice. **Turn to Luke 13:1-4** for a minute. There's a third incident that we know very little about, but it unsettled the Jews. **Read**

Apparently there had been some smaller uprising that Pilate had to put down. The uprising was apparently orchestrated by Galilean Jews - northerners - within Jerusalem. And not only did Pilate kill them, but apparently he offered their blood on the altar at the Temple as a warning to anyone who might try something similar. He was brutal and in his brutality he also defiled the Temple.

Side: If you think the Middle East is bloody and brutal now, you have to understand it's been this way for time immemorial.

So there was the standards controversy, the aqueduct controversy, the mingling of blood. There was a fourth event which was similar to the first event.

Strike 4: Shields controversy. Since Pilate had been spared removal by Caesar for his first problems, Pilate wanted to honor Caesar again. One way to do that was simply make a plaque to his name. So Pilate made golden shields with a simple inscription on them. No images, no likeness. Just words on a shield: "In honor of Tiberius Caesar from Pontius Pilate."

And put them in the palace in Jerusalem out of sight. And the Jews found out. And they took issue with that. Why? Because Caesar claimed to be a god. And this was an homage to Caesar. They claimed that the shields - like a military shield - was essentially a shrine in Jerusalem. They told Pilate and he refused to remove them.

Here's where it gets bad: The Jewish leaders were clever. They knew Pilate was already on thin ice. So they actually appealed to Caesar himself. They knew Caesar was tired of dealing with the controversies. And in response Caesar sent a message to Pilate to remove the very shields that were meant to honor Caesar. Caesar sided with the Jews. This was utterly embarrassing and humiliating for Pilate and the Jews knew it. They knew Pilate now really had no power and they could basically dictate what they wanted.

If Pilate were to mess up again, he would likely be removed or killed. Pilate was now beholden to the Jewish leaders to do whatever they wanted.

Politically, that's where Pilate was when he we fast forward to Good Friday **back in Mark 15**. Pilate is woken up early in the morning to a mob of Jewish leaders screaming about this man named Jesus. **Read 1**

This is how Pilate wakes up. Mark's version is the quick and dirty, so we miss a lot of the details. But remember the Jews show up with Jesus and demand his execution. Pilate asks for the charges. "What has he done?" You remember what they say? "We wouldn't have brought him here if he didn't deserve death." They're not trying to make a case, they're just trying to get Jesus on the cross.

Now, here's why they bring him to Pilate: legally speaking, Rome did not allow the Jews to actually execute anyone. That had to be done by the Roman state. And there was a long process. And especially If you were a Roman citizen, you could appear to Caesar and stand before him.

But there were only a few crimes that would warrant the death penalty. If you remember from last time, the one the Jews were trying to get to stick was that Jesus was an insurrectionist. He claimed to be the divine Messiah which for them was blasphemy. But it also had the added benefit of claiming to be the Jewish King, which would be considered a serious threat to Rome and Rome had no problem putting them to death.

Mark skips the back and forth and gets right to Pilate's examination. **Read 2-5**

Are you King of the Jews? That's the real question. What Pilate is asking is whether or not Jesus is trying to take Pilate's position. Is he trying to mount a coup? Pilate is the King of the Jews. Yeah, there's Caesar over Pilate, but for that region, he's the king.

Remember when Jesus was born? The wisemen came and asked Herod that they were looking for someone. Do you remember who? The one born King of the Jews. Herod was upset because he was king of the Jews; he was King Herod.

That's Pilate's role now. He's king. And the Jews are claiming he wants to usurp his role. What's Jesus say?

Read 2

Amazingly he says yes! Yes, I am in fact the king of the Jews. The word used comes off as a little odd in English. But he's affirming the exact charge that Pilate is leveling. Yes, it's exactly as you say it is.

And on top of that, the Jewish leaders continue to charge Jesus with even more things. The leaders are getting crazy. They're going nuts over Jesus. This is the last thing Pilate wants. He can't have another riot. He can't have another bad decision.

And all the weight is in the favor of the Jews. It's the holy day: Passover. The city is packed. If they start a riot now, it'll be absolutely out of control. And all the blame will be placed on him. He couldn't keep the peace on the most important day of the year.

And so he's looking for ways help Jesus out. Are you the king of the Jews? Yes. Are you going to answer the charges they're making against you? No. In fact, Pilate is astounded by Jesus's non-response. **Read 5**

This is the same word as the disciples in the boat when the waves stop. This is the same word when Jesus heals the masses.

Here's Jesus, on trial for his life, he's admitted to the main charge of being a king, he's completely in his right mind, and he refuses to respond to the slander.

This puts all the weight on Pilate to make the decision. And he's only got 2 bad options. He can kill Jesus who appears to be innocent which makes the crowd happy. Or release Jesus and probably cause a riot and lose his job or even his life.

But wait, maybe there's a way out. Pilate thinks he's got a loophole. **Read 6-9**

So Pilate remembers that there's this tradition on Passover. Release a prisoner back to the crowd. It's like Jubilee - away to make the crowd happy. So while the chief priests and religious leaders are demanding the death of Jesus, it seems there's another crowd showing up to see who Pilate is going to release.

And he tries to get the new crowd to play off the religious leaders. And in a stroke of genius Pilate decides that he'll give the crowd an option. Jesus, who Pilate no doubt knows is extremely popular and Barabbas. Mark says Barabbas was a murderer and an insurrectionist. He apparently was guilty of murder and actually guilty of trying to overthrow the government.

All the things the religious leaders were trying to pin on Jesus were actually true of Barabbas. So Pilate comes up with this genius plan on the fly to make the crowd decide between a real hardened criminal or Jesus who is very popular.

If the crowd chooses Jesus to be released then Pilate can just shrug his shoulders and say "Yep, Jesus is guilty but you guys asked for his release." Jesus gets off totally free and Pilate isn't liable for the decision. It's a great plan. The problem was it didn't work. **Read 10-11**

The crowd is easily influenced by the religious leaders and they ask for Barabbas. Which means that not only is Pilate still stuck, he's got a genuine murderer and insurrectionist on the loose. His plan totally backfired. **Read 12-15**

He knows what they want to do, but he's hoping they're satisfied by the release of Barabbas. No chance. They want him dead.

Again he asks for the charges. What wrong has he done? They don't care, they want him dead. So then he has Jesus scourged. **Read 15**

Now this is going to sound weird, but the flogging of Jesus is actually another way in which Pilate is trying to satisfy the crowd. **Turn to John 19:1-16**

John gives us a little more detail. Barabbas was just released. What to do with Jesus? **Read 1-6**

See, Pilate was hoping the flogging would satisfy the crowd. They call him king so dress him up like a king and beat him. This flogging by the way was absolutely brutal. I don't recommend watching it more than once, but if you've ever seen the Passion of the Christ that movie does a pretty good depiction of the flogging. This isn't just a simple beating or punching.

They would lay the victim over and bring out the cat of 9 tails which was basically a whip with 9 leather straps and at the end of the straps there were chunks of metal or bone and whip the victim. The metal would often get lodged in the skin so when they drew back for another strike chunks of flesh would come off the person. It was absolutely brutal.

This alone could possibly kill the victim. But notice that Pilate does this in hopes that it satisfies the crowd. **Read 5-12**

Pilate is trying to get Jesus off the hook. That was the whole point. And Jesus, in his bloody glory, gives Pilate no room to sidestep his role in this whole thing. Pilate has authority? No, Jesus has authority.

The craziness of the disciples won't stop his crucifixion. The bumbling inability of the Sanhedrin to get a true conviction won't stop it. And neither will Pilate trying to flex his political muscle. And Pilate defends Jesus again. **Read 13-16**

Shall I crucify your king? He's putting the guilt on them. And notice all of a sudden they become Roman loyalists. We have no king but Caesar. Really?

Remember they bring Jesus to Pilate early in the morning. It's now noon or so. This mob has been going on for hours and they're not giving up. Pilate's out of options, he can't risk another riot. So he gives the command for Jesus to be crucified.

Can you imagine?

I want to make one simple observation. There's a lot of people in the world like Pilate. They like Jesus. They like the Bible and they like the being around it. Maybe they even know Jesus is king. But they won't take a stand against the crowd when it matters the most. When the crowd comes they're done with Jesus.

Jesus is good to follow in their heart or in secret. But the cost of actually serving Jesus as Lord is too high. They might lose friends or popularity or family or their life. They're like Pilate. They're like Peter. When the crowd is scary, they fold to the crowd like Pilate folded.

Pilate knew who Jesus was. He knew he was an innocent man. And get this, Pilate had Jesus killed so that he could live.

But, if you think about it, that's kind of all of us, isn't it? That's why we come here every Sunday is because we believe that Jesus died to save our life. We worship and sing songs because Jesus - the innocent one - died in our place. We're no different than Pilate, we have the same need.

Can I give you a glimmer of hope with Pilate? The Coptic Church - which is sort of an off-shoot of the Orthodox Church in Egypt declares that Pilate and his wife Claudia Procula later became Christians. They

believe this so much so that June 25th is Saint Pilate's day and October 27th is Saint Procula's day. Now, I'm not into making people saints and having days and all that, nor am I commending Coptic theology.

But if Jesus could die for Peter, who denied him.

And if Jesus could pray for forgiveness for the Roman soldier who pounded the nails into his hands.

And if Jesus could die for us, who've sinned against him.

There's a good chance Pilate eventually bowed the knee to the true King of the Jews, Jesus Christ.

Pray