

Eyewitness to Easter: Pontius Pilate

We continue our Lenten series today looking at a person who is forever linked to the story of Jesus' crucifixion. Somewhere in the world, every day, this person's name is mentioned by Christians as they recite one of the ancient creeds of the church. "I believe in Jesus Christ...conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate." Pilate, the Roman governor of Judea, the man who sentenced Jesus to death by crucifixion. What do we know about him?

Based on the gospel accounts and the historical writings of Flavius Josephus and Philo and others, we can piece together some information. Interestingly, some liberal scholars of the past century argued there was no proof that Pilate was a real historical character, questioning the veracity of Scripture. That is until 1961 at Caesarea where an ancient memorial stone was unearthed that bore the inscription, "Pontius Pilate, Prefect of Judea" and stating he had presented some kind of public structure to the people of Caesarea. We can learn more about Pilate as we examine his relationships.

Pilate and Rome. Pilate was a Roman soldier, appointed by the Emperor Tiberius as a Roman Prefect of Judea. He was essentially the governor of the region with military responsibilities. He ruled as the prefect for ten years, from around 26 to 36 or 37 AD. His was the second longest tenure of any Roman Governor in Israel, suggesting he was a competent administrator and commander although he did run into trouble several times.

It appears there was little love from Pilate toward the Jews. Judea was not exactly ideal duty. It was a politically messy situation with a history of revolts. Rome wanted Israel as a strategic bridge between Egypt and Syria, but its rulers often were at odds with the Jewish people and their unique religious practices. In an effort to maintain peace and order, the Emperor had given Israel some religious autonomy, allowing for a 70 member ruling council, the Sanhedrin to deal with religious and cultural issues and allowing a security force of temple guards. It was a constant battle to maintain balance. For instance, not long after Pilate assumed power in Judea, he ordered Roman soldiers to place large shields bearing the likeness of Caesar in Jerusalem. Pilate was probably trying to impress Caesar but it offended the Jews who were not to make "graven images" and it led to wide Jewish protest. The Jews even followed Pilate to his palace home in Caesarea on the coast to protest. Pilate eventually backed down and removed the shields after a letter of rebuke from the Emperor telling him to transfer the shields to a temple in

Caesarea and to respect the religious and political customs of his subjects. (Pilate lived on the coast where the climate was cooler and then made necessary trips to Jerusalem.) Pilate later used violence to deal with protests. Luke records Roman troops massacred some Galileans while they were worshipping in the temple, their blood mixing with the blood of the sacrifices (Luke 13:1). Pilate could be cruel and vindictive and the result was letters of protest were sent to the Emperor and Pilate was officially reprimanded for his handling of some of these situations. He basically couldn't afford any more bad reports sent to the Emperor in Rome and the Jews knew this.

Pilate and the Jewish religious leaders. We know there was no love lost between them but we also know that Caiphas, the Chief Priest, was appointed by Pilate. They had a strange working relationship. Pilate could keep Caiphas and his pals in office and in power, but if Caiphas and the Sanhedrin complained too loudly about Pilate or threatened unrest because of his decisions, Pilate could be recalled by Rome or worse. How far could they push each other?

Pilate and his wife. She appears only in Matthew's gospel. Tradition says her name was Procula and some suggest she was or became a follower of Christ. Matthew tells us, **“While Pilate was sitting on the judge's seat, his wife sent him this message: ‘Don't have anything to do with that innocent man, for I have suffered a great deal today in a dream because of him.’” Matthew 27:19**

Pilate and Herod. Apparently they were at odds with each other. Remember there were three sons of Herod the Great all named Herod (Archelaus, Philip and Antipas). This was Herod Antipas, the one who had John the Baptist beheaded. Pilate sent Jesus to Herod Antipas because he was the tetrarch or ruler over the region of the Galilee, where Jesus was from. I think Pilate was not only trying to pass the buck, not wanting to sentence Jesus to death because he found no cause to do so, but also as an attempt to make amends to Herod for some past dealings that had not gone well. While Herod sent Jesus back to Pilate without ruling, the gospel tells us, **“That day Herod and Pilate became friends – before this they had been enemies.” Luke 23:12**

Pilate and Jesus. Pilate plays a central role in the narrative as Jesus is brought before him by the Sanhedrin. The Jewish ruling council found Jesus guilty of blasphemy which under their law should result in death by stoning but only Rome had the authority to carry out the death penalty and the High Priest wanted Jesus crucified! It's here, as Jesus stands face to face with Pilate we hear Pilate speak and it is here we learn some important lessons for all of us. (We

don't have time to read all of the passages, but you can read the dialogue between Pilate and Jesus in Matthew 27, Mark 15, Luke 23 and John 18-19.)

Jesus before Pilate— an image of the church before the world. There is a striking image of Jesus before Pilate found in John 19. Jesus has been beaten with the cat of nine-tails, this brutal instrument of Roman torture, He has been beaten with fists, the soldiers have twisted a crown of thorns and crushed it down upon his head. They put a purple robe around him to mock him and repeatedly approached him saying “Hail, king of the Jews” then striking him in the face. Broken, bleeding, weak, helpless, powerless Jesus stands before Pilate, the Roman governor in his palatial surroundings with all the trappings of worldly wealth, military and political power and prestige. Frustrated because Jesus doesn't seem afraid or cowed down by Pilate's power, the governor says, **“Do you refuse to speak to me? Don't you realize I have power either to free you or to crucify you?” John 19:10**

I know it looks that way. It looks like power and authority are in the hands of Pilate. It looks like that all over the world today. Putin thinks the power rests with him. Americans think the power rests with whoever is in the Oval Office or whoever has a Congressional majority or who controls the balance of power in the Courts, but Jesus says it's not as it appears because he is the King of a different kind of kingdom and we are citizens of his kingdom. Jesus told Pilate, **“My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jews. But now my kingdom is from another place.” John 18:36**

It's not as it appears. We are the church, the body of Christ in this world. We stand before the world as Jesus stood before Pilate. We need to stand in prophetic witness and say, we are part of another kingdom, we have only one king and he is Jesus. We are here to serve him and obey his commands, we are here to live according to his principles, his standards, his word! Political power won't fix or redeem broken hearts and a broken world. We are the body of Christ in this world and they need to see in us our allegiance to Jesus, a different kind of king with a different kind of power, authority and agenda. We have a king who has come not to be served but to serve, a king who has come not to condemn but to save, to give himself as a ransom for us all. We need to reflect that as his church, standing and speaking truth to the bastions of power and wealth today. We haven't come to capture or exercise earthly power and authority, the weapons of our warfare are not the weapons of this world, we have come in the weakness of Christ to proclaim Jesus crucified and risen. We are in this world but not of it. We are here to

proclaim his truth and no other. Jesus before Pilate is a picture of the church before the world and its systems. Let's pay attention to who wins the battle and how!

Jesus before Pilate – hope for the church. Look again at John 19:10 as Pilate says to Jesus, **“Do you refuse to speak to me? Don't you realize I have power either to free you or to crucify you?”** **John 19:10** As I said, it sure looks like everything is in Pilate's control. Jesus is barely able to stand after the flogging and beating he has endured. It's a wonder he hasn't died from the beating. Appearing powerless by every standard, yet Jesus answers Pilate, **“You would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above.”** **John 19:11**

Pilate had authority, but it was derivative. The truth is Pilate's authority over Jesus is subordinate to God's authority over Pilate. Jesus doesn't fear Pilate, in spite of all that has happened since he was turned over to the Roman Governor, because Jesus knows His Heavenly Father is Sovereign and rules over all. In Acts 4 Peter and John have been threatened and ordered by the Sanhedrin not to preach in the name of Jesus anymore. They returned to the believers and reported what had happened and then began to pray. In their prayer they declared, **“Indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed. They did what your power and will had decided before hand should happen.”** **Acts 4:27-28**

I said the lesson of Jesus before Pilate is a lesson of hope for the church. Why? Because regardless of who stands against us, God is sovereign over all. In the words of a song we often sing, “even when I don't see it you're working”. In the face of all the trouble in this world, at some level, even when we don't see it, He's working. They meant it for evil but God meant it for good. He causes all things to work together for good and he will accomplish his purposes. Pilate and Herod and the people sinned against God by condemning Jesus to the cross, but through their sin, God brought salvation. They did what God had already ordained to happen for us and for our salvation.

The lesson for us is, don't be afraid, don't be dismayed by all you see. God is still in control. He has all authority. When the world is staring at you like Pilate stared at Jesus, when it looks like the world or the devil or the powers that be hold all the cards, remember Jesus, remember the crucifixion and don't forget the resurrection. Remember that God is in control. You have no cause for fear, **“If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all – how will he not also, along with him, graciously**

give us all things?...No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.” Romans 8:31-39 Nothing can defeat us, not Pilate, not the powers of Rome, not sickness or demons or death itself. We are more than conquerors through Christ our Lord and therein lies our hope!

Jesus before Pilate – a purpose for the church. When Jesus told Pilate his kingdom was from another world, Pilate said, “You are a king, then!” And Jesus answered, **“You are right in saying I am a King. In fact, for this reason I was born and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me.” John 18:37** Jesus came into the world for this reason, to testify to the truth. To bear witness to truth.

There is an absolute truth. Our culture has made truth questionable, controversial, subjective, relative, anything but absolute. People argue the idea of absolute truth leads to prejudice and intolerance. The ironic cry of today is “We will not tolerate intolerance.” But the truth Jesus is talking about is not a truth we have arrived at or come to by scientific method and analysis, it’s a truth that has come to us, a truth born to us, a truth given for us. This truth is Jesus and the love God showed to us in Christ. This isn’t about tolerance or intolerance, this is an invitation to truth, to come to Jesus and find life. **“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son that whoever believes in him would not perish but have eternal life.”**

John 3:16

Here is our purpose, our reason for being, “to testify to the truth”, to proclaim this truth about Jesus! We know the truth. Has anyone ever loved you like Jesus? Dying in your place, the innocent for the guilty? That is the truth, that’s what he did for us and that is the truth we are to proclaim, to every person, everywhere. It is that truth that will set you free. That truth will bring you eternal life!

After Jesus said he had come to testify to the truth, Pilate responded, **“What is truth?” John 18:38.** He seemed to imply that truth couldn’t really be known. Like many today, perhaps Pilate is saying “whose truth?” I think he was trying to avoid having to face the questions that were beginning to form in his heart. He had never met someone like Jesus. Pilate hoped to sidestep the words of Jesus. Daniel Darling wrote, “Pilate’s response, ‘What is truth?’ is a

common intellectual dodge made by people who don't seem to actually want truth. It's the sad song of every age, as people try to escape the inescapable and avoid the question of Jesus..."

"To ask 'What is truth?' is to make an assertion that nothing can be knowable, that truth is subjective, unfixed, informed by experience. Without a confrontation with the truth, without bowing to the Author of truth, our hearts will be subject to the whims of every age and like Pilate, will yield our consciences to what is most convenient. Jesus knew that this moral relativism is in and of itself a declaration of truth, but an empty one. Deep in Pilate's heart and in every heart is a longing to understand the meaning of life, to know and be known by the One who declares Himself the way, the truth and the life (John 14:6)." ...Daniel Darling

Pilate suspends judgement about Jesus. "Maybe you are a king, maybe you are the Son of God, maybe not, who can know for sure." He attempts to wash his hands of the matter by literally washing his hands before the mob crying for crucifixion. "Let his blood be on your hands." Mark's gospel says, **"Wanting to satisfy the crowd, Pilate...had Jesus flogged and handed him over to be crucified."** **Mark 15:15.** Pilate couldn't risk another protest or uprising with the report of it reaching Rome. He surrenders to the will of the crowd.

Pilate said "what is truth?" and like much of the world today, Pilate asked that question with truth standing right in front of him! Listen to me, there is a truth you can know that is found in knowing Jesus Christ. There is a life of truth you can live by surrendering your heart to Jesus. He is standing in front of you. Don't try to dodge it, don't try to sidestep him, turn to him, embrace him and find the life you've been searching for in him. **"In him was life, and that life was the light of men."** **John 1:4** Jesus has come to bring light into your darkness, to bring hope into your despair, to bring life into a heart that seems lifeless and dead.

We don't know what happened to Pilate. He was recalled to Rome. Some think he was forced to commit suicide or simply allowed to retire on some island somewhere. But some church traditions say he later became a follower of Jesus. The invitation to find truth and life extends to all of us, even Pilate, even to you. Interested in knowing Truth? He is standing right in front of you. His name is Jesus.