

The Judge

In the name of him whose blood is upon us and our children, dear friends in Christ: We began this series of Lenten meditations on persons who figure prominently in our Lord's passion by looking at two wavering disciples of Jesus: Judas and Peter. Then last week, we turned to Caiaphas the high priest, who was chief of those opposed to Jesus. And what we saw in him was the consummate pragmatist: a man doing what he thought needed to be done to save a nation, and willing to do whatever it took. Illegal bribes, illegal trials, illegal procedures, false witnesses, outright lies, and finally the threat of violent mob action – all to have Jesus condemned and put to death. He knew he was breaking just about every law in the book. What he didn't know was that he was inadvertently performing his high priestly office, naming Jesus the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world and confessing on our Lord's head all the sins of which we are guilty.

This evening we turn our attention to Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor of Judea, who, to me at least, is one of the most tragic figures in the story. At the trial of Jesus, we see him trying to do what's right; but powerful forces much greater than his own to do what he knows he ought to do are driving his every move. Legally, he's in charge. He imagines that he is in control. But the truth is that he is being manipulated by others and ultimately by his own weaknesses.

Not a great deal is known about Pilate, but from the biblical account and several mentions he gets in the writings of first century historians, we can piece together a partial portrait. He was born in Italy and belonged to what was called the equestrian class. To explain: Roman society was very stratified and class conscious. You had on top the Patrician class, maybe five percent of the population, who were the nobles and most powerful families; then the next level down, the equestrians, another ten percent or so, who were semi-noble, and who might serve in mid to high level government offices; then the plebeians, common Roman citizens, another 30 to 40 percent; and then at the bottom were slaves, who comprised about half of the total population. So Pilate's family was near the top – and it seems his ambitions were to go higher.

As fortune would have it, Pilate got a boost up in this when became a protégé of a man named Lucius Sejanus, who initially commanded Emperor Tiberius' palace guard; and who, from that position managed to work his way into Emperor's closest confidence. He became Tiberius' right hand man. And in AD 26, when Tiberius went into semi-retirement on the Island of Capri, Sejanus effectively ruled the empire in Tiberius' name. It was the same year Pontius Pilate was made governor of Judea.

As governor, Pilate developed a reputation for brutality; but that should not strike us as odd. Roman governors by definition ruled over conquered nations. Their job was to keep the peace and ensure that tribute taxes were paid to Rome. And in Judea there were both criminals to deal with and zealots. The latter were Jewish patriots who hated the Roman occupation and did everything they could to disrupt it. To the Romans they were terrorists who murdered soldiers; threatened, kidnapped or killed collaborators; and sabotaged public works. The Romans were faced with roughly the same situation our soldiers are in Afghanistan. You can't tell by looking who's friendly (or at least not hostile), who's a crook, and who's a terrorist. They all look the same, they're all mixed in together, and very often they're the same people. So

you're suspicious of everyone. And sometimes when you respond to an attack, there's a certain amount of collateral damage.

In addition to this, Pilate also suffered from not understanding the Jewish faith and how sensitive the Jews were to what they perceived as offenses to the Lord or to their religious traditions. So it happened in his attempts to do his job, he'd sometimes offend without realizing it. In last Sunday's Gospel, we heard how people told Jesus about an incident in which Pilate mixed the blood of some Galileans with their sacrifices. We have no idea exactly what happened. But obviously it stirred people up. The best guess is that some Galilean pilgrims came to Jerusalem to offer sacrifices at the Temple, and for some unknown reason were they suspected of something illegal. In the ensuing scuffle with Roman guards, several of them were killed. It was probably all a big misunderstanding; but when innocent people are cut down while attending church, it doesn't look good for the guy in charge.

And for Pilate it gets worse. It turns out that back in Rome, his mentor Sejanus, was secretly plotting to stop just playing Emperor, and actually take the title for himself by having Tiberius assassinated. Unfortunately for him, his plot was discovered. Tiberius returned to Rome in fury and Sejanus was executed. And everyone associated with Sejanus came under a dark cloud of suspicion – including Pilate. And now that Tiberius was running the empire again, he was paying attention to things like angry complaints of excessive force from the leaders of Rome's conquered nations. Sejanus was indifferent to such complaints; but Tiberius liked to run a nice, quiet, peaceful empire. He didn't like to hear that his governors were too heavy handed. The stack of complaints about Pilate couldn't have made him happy. So in the eyes of the Emperor, Pilate had two strikes against him.

Pilate realizes this. And so he decides that it would be in his best interests to perform some grand gesture to demonstrate his loyalty to Tiberius. At great personal expense, he has twenty bronze shields cast, on which are inscribed depictions of the Emperor and fanciful bits of Roman mythology. He has some of his elite soldiers parade with these shields through the city of Jerusalem, and then displays them on the parapet of the Antonia castle, a Roman fortress that overlooked the Temple. The Jews went nuts. Here were pagan images – idols – in plain view of the worshippers at the Temple. The religious leaders went to Pilate and demanded that they be removed. Pilate didn't understand what the fuss was about. He told them to get over it. The result was several days of bloody riots fueled by religious zeal. Finally Pilate removed the shields. He had them put inside the fortress, where they couldn't be seen from the Temple. But that wasn't good enough for the Jews. When they discovered that the shields were still there close to the Temple, they went back into riot mode. Many more people died. In the end, Pilate was forced to take the shields back to Caesarea, his coastal capital. His attempt to get into the Emperor's good graces backfired miserably. Instead of earning some brownie points, he got more scathing reports on Tiberius' desk complaining about his brutality and insensitivity to Jewish religious practices – and all this over a transparent attempt to curry favor. Pilate knew all too well that his position as governor was hanging by a thread.

All this helps us understand what's going on in his head on the morning of Good Friday. The Jewish religious leaders, who are the authors of all those negative reports to the Emperor, now want Pilate to do them a favor. They want their decision to have Jesus executed ratified and carried out by Roman authority. But Pilate isn't inclined to do them any favors. They certainly haven't been doing any for him. I think it's safe to say that Pilate actually enjoys seeing their dilemma: needing his approval, and knowing that they haven't got a case against Jesus that will stand up in his court. He also knows that Jesus is a burr under their saddles –

one he's disinclined to remove. "Take him and judge him according to your own laws." "We can't. We haven't got the authority to condemn a man to death."

But Pilate underestimates both the resolve and the cunning of his adversaries. They've thought about this, and they do have charges against Jesus that Pilate will have to consider. They accuse Jesus of being a rebel who teaches it's wrong to pay taxes to Caesar. These charges are easily falsifiable. But their strongest charge is that in claiming to be the Christ, Jesus has called himself a king. That's treason. Only Caesar has the power to name kings. And you can almost see the gears turning in Pilate's head. He knows that if he dismisses this charge out of hand, in a few weeks there will be another complaint on Tiberius' desk saying that he, Pilate, doesn't take threats against the emperor seriously.

So he takes Jesus into the judgment hall to try him privately. The religious leaders can't go in because it's the home of Gentiles and therefore it's an unclean place. If they enter, they'd be ceremonially defiled and unable to celebrate the Passover. Pilate puts the question to Jesus: "Are you the king of the Jews?" Jesus responds with a question of his own; the gist of it is: "Do you believe that accusation, or are you merely repeating what they're saying?" Pilate knows that this is a matter of the Jewish faith – one he has no business being wrapped up in. He asks, "Do you take me for a Jew?" He means that he's not making the accusation; but he still has to deal with it because the charges are being made by the religious leaders.

Jesus then agrees, yes, he's king; but his kingdom is not of this world. It's a spiritual matter. It's no threat to any earthly government. It's about truth. Pilate asks, "What is truth?" No doubt he's wondering; and it's another irony, for Jesus who is the Truth is standing right before him. But it's as Pilate knew all along: there's no civil charge against Jesus. He takes Jesus back outside and tells the chief priests, "I find no fault in this man."

They erupt with anger, hurling more charges at Jesus, who, like a lamb before its shearers, remains silent. Pilate is stunned that Jesus says nothing in his defense; but he also knows it's not necessary. The accusations have no grounds. Again he pronounces Jesus innocent. And that's where the trial should have ended. Pilate could have used his authority to declare it over. But he's weak. He wants to come out of this looking good. He's got to find a way to satisfy the religious leaders enough that they don't complain to the Emperor *and* at the same time uphold Roman law. He thinks he finds a way out when he discovers that Jesus is Galilean. That's Herod's jurisdiction, and Herod just happens to be in Jerusalem for the Passover.

But in short order Herod sends Jesus right back. Pilate makes two other attempts to release Jesus and save face. First, he tries to divide the religious leaders from their crowd support by offering to release Jesus or Barabbas. The latter is a dangerous criminal and murderer. To Pilate it's unthinkable that the citizens of the city would want him free among them again. He's wrong. The crowd is made up mostly of people gathered by the chief priests. They do what they're told and ask for Barabbas.

Pilate then attempts to placate the bloodlust of Jesus' enemies by having him beaten. It's not legal. There's still no civil charge against Jesus; but it's an attempt at compromise. It fails. Nothing but the death of Jesus will satisfy the religious leaders. And now with the threat of another riot on his hands, Pilate succumbs to their wishes. He makes a show of washing his hands, as if that could absolve him of responsibility. It doesn't. In the end, he sacrificed Jesus to save himself.

It didn't work, by the way: Pilate lasted a few more years as governor; but was then relieved of duty and made to face charges in Rome. He was accused of excessive brutality and being ineffective as governor because he could be so easily manipulated. We're not sure what happened to him. One tradition has him being found guilty and then executed, another says he was exiled to southern Gaul where he committed suicide. Either way, he's remembered chiefly as the man who unjustly sentenced Jesus to death, as the whole Church confesses every time the Creed is recited. The only thing he really got right was the charge against Jesus that was placed above the Lord's head on the cross: *This is the King of the Jews*. Pilate refused to change it because he knew it aggravated his enemies. But it was the absolute truth that Pilate was seeking. Too bad he never came to believe it.

By God's grace we do believe it. And unlike Pilate, we know that no matter how hard we try, there is no saving face. We have no control. All our efforts to justify ourselves must fail. We can't just wash our hands. We know that Jesus died unjustly because of our sins, the innocent One for the guilty many. And the Lord in his wisdom used an unrighteous judge who attempted to save himself to save us all – not by works, but by washing us in his blood and giving us faith in him who is the King and the only Righteous Judge. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!