

ALL FOR A JOB

I've been thinking a lot about Pontius Pilate this week. Tonight, at Saugatuck's 7:30 Good Friday Service, I'll be portraying him in a dramatic monologue, and he's really gotten under my skin. All-in-all, I've decided, he's a pretty despicable character. Certainly history testifies to that reality. Ancient Jewish and Roman writers like Josephus, Tacitus and Philo paint him as, to quote one scholar, "a mean-spirited and hard ruler." (Gail R. O'Day, *New Interpreter's Bible*, IX: 815) He ruled over Judea for ten years, from 26-36 CE, and it was by all accounts a rocky time. He hated the Jews, and they distrusted him—for good reason.

The earlier, older gospels, trying to curry Roman favor, describe him in a more flattering light. When it comes to Jesus' crucifixion he is said to be manipulated by others, even free of any guilt in the matter. But John paints him as a sarcastic and spiteful man. In John's account, when Pilate mocks Jesus, he is also mocking the Jews.

You can just hear him sneer: "Are you the King of the Jews?"

He allows the soldiers to play dress-up with Jesus, and cram a fake crown, one made of thorns, on his head. They drape a dirty old purple robe across his shoulders. He looks pathetic. He is in Pilate's mind, the kind of king the Jews deserve. A pathetic king for a pathetic people.

How know they can't crucify him only Rome has that power. Yet he taunts them: "Take him yourselves and crucify him!"

In the end, though, Pilate recognizes in Jesus a potential threat. He might upset the carefully balanced cart of apples Pilate has maintained in Jerusalem. Rome always permitted the locals to observe their own rituals and customs, so long as they didn't go against Roman rule. And Pilate had managed to keep things in line. But this Jesus business could get out of hand. Pilate is not afraid of Jesus or the Jews. But he is afraid. As Gail O'Day writes, "Pilate is afraid because he recognizes that the situation in which he finds himself may place his political future in jeopardy." (*Ibid*, 820)

And so, in the end, lest he be accused of being too lax, too lenient, he had him crucified. John writes, "he [Pilate] handed him over to them [the Jewish leaders] to be crucified." (John 19:16a) But they couldn't crucify Jesus. Only Pilate had such authority. John's bias against the Jews is all over the text, and here he is just plain wrong. It is, in the end, the Roman governor, Pilate, who orders Jesus' death. It is Pilate who makes it happen. It is Roman soldiers who force him up Golgotha. And it is Roman executioners who string him up to die.

All because Pilate was afraid of the repercussions. All because he was concerned about his own future. As William Barclay writes: “[Pilate] crucified Jesus in order to keep his job.” (*Daily Study Bible, The Gospel of John, II: 280*)

Over the centuries there has been much debate about who was responsible for the death of Jesus. Unfortunately it has often led to virulent anti-semitism. But the historical truth is clear: the Romans crucified Jesus—and Pilate ordered it done.

But there is another truth at play in all this. For in one very real way, each one of us runs the risk of crucifying the Christ. Oh, we may not think of it quite that way. We don’t hold iron spikes against his feet. We don’t swing the wooden mallet like executioners. We don’t prod him up the hill with swords and spears like soldiers. We don’t even order his death like Pilate. But we can—and sometimes do—participate in his crucifixion.

Every time we ignore the poor; every time we strike out at a friend or family member; every time we lie to save face; every time we disregard an unfair business practice; everytime we treat another human being as if they were an object . . . every time it as if we were driving in yet another spike. It is as if we were thrusting the spear or giving the order.

And why, why do we do such things? Because, like Pilate, we are afraid. Afraid of losing status or privilege. Afraid of losing face. Afraid of confronting our own inadequacies. Afraid of losing power and control. And so we do whatever we can to protect ourselves—even if it means ignoring the values and moral convictions that lie at the very heart of our faith.

Living with Pilate this past week has given me a new sense of who he was. But more significantly, it ahs caused me to pause and examine my own soul. It has caused me to question my own culpability in Jesus’ death.

It has also given me a newfound sense of gratitude that God, in the name of grace, forgave Pilate so long ago, and today forgives you and me. And in that there is a measure of comfort.

Still, on this day, on this Good Friday, I must pause and reflect.

Pilate crucified Jesus to save his job.

What’s my excuse?

What’s yours? What’s yours?

Amen

John H. Danner