

The Ultimate Question
John 18:28-19:42
April 2, 2021, Good Friday

It was nine o'clock in the morning when they crucified him. The inscription of the charge against him read, "**The King of the Jews.**" And with him they crucified two bandits, one on his right and one on his left. They taunted him: *Let the Messiah, the King of Israel, come down from the cross now, so that we may see and believe.* Those who were crucified with him also taunted him.

Jesus was crucified by the empire's judgment under Pontius Pilate. He is an interesting and central character in this story of Holy Week. Not much remains of Pilate in the historical record. But since 1961 we at least have proof that he actually existed. When we were on our tour of Israel, the first day actually, we went to the famous ruins at Caesarea. And there in the ruins of a sports stadium, beside the sea, was the block of limestone on which his name is inscribed. The stone reads: ***To the Divine Augusti (this) Tiberieum, ... Pontius Pilate, ... prefect of Judea***

We know that he served as the prefect of Judaea from 26 to 36 A.D. As such he was granted the power of a supreme judge. His duties as a prefect included such mundane tasks as tax collection and managing construction projects. But, perhaps his most crucial responsibility was that of maintaining law and order. Pontius Pilate attempted to do so by any means necessarily. What he couldn't negotiate he is said to have accomplished through brute force. He was, by any standard, a brutal ruler.

Faced with Jesus, Pilate challenged Jesus to tell him the truth about his kingdom: **Are you the King of the Jews?** Jesus doesn't respond to this direct question. Instead, he responds: **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.** Back and forth it goes with Jesus refusing to state clearly whether he is king or not. Exasperated, Pilate goes back to the Jews and says he finds no case against Jesus. Who should I release: Jesus or Barabbas? The crowd scream for Barabbas. After

flogging Jesus, the crowd shout for his crucifixion. Pilate says: **Take him yourselves and crucify him; I find no case against him.** And this marks the end of this sham trial.

Do we have here a collision between religion and politics? This seems to be what John says. The Jews and Pilate seek to solve their problem with this so-called Messiah. These were unlikely friends, but Jesus for this brief moment brought them together to read from the same page. This is not a story about Jesus being brought to death by atheism. No, the forces of law and order, allied with religion, executed him. This is always a deadly mix. As Barbara Brown Taylor says:

Beware of those who cannot tell God's will from their own. Temple police are always a bad sign. When chaplains start wearing guns and hanging out at the sheriff's office, watch out. Someone is about to have no king but Caesar.

Pilate asks the question, what is truth? Do you wonder what the tone might have been? Is he a man deeply unhappy about his situation in this dust bowl of the empire? We can't know for sure. But he did have that troubling message from his wife that must have unsettled him. She tells him: **Have nothing to do with that innocent man, for today I have suffered a great deal because of a dream about him. (Matthew 27:19).**

He knows that life can be unpredictable and harsh, especially in Roman politics. Truth was not probably in great supply in the complex web of Roman political intrigue and ambition. But the response is silence. It may be the longest silence Pilate has ever endured. It must have shaken Pilate to the core, both Jesus' silence and Pilate's wife's warning. Jesus doesn't try to defend himself by explaining his mission and God's call to him. He remains quiet and serene.

But perhaps Pilate is just like us! He wants to know the truth about this so-called king. Is there a deeper truth to be found in him? Perhaps Pilate is asking what we all ask at one time or another: is there life and truth outside the realm of my everyday experience? Is there a god beside the emperor? Do his wife's dreams about Jesus only deepen his unease? What should I do here? What is the

purpose of all this? Is there really another kingdom invisible to this empire? We all ask these questions like these.

But all he got was silence. We are told many stories about Pilate's life. Some traditions say he was called back to Rome in 36AD where he fell out with Emperor Caligula and was sentenced to death in 39AD. Others say he was sent into exile where he committed suicide. Some have even argued that it was his conversion to Christianity that lies behind his tragic end. In fact, the Ethiopian Church canonized him as a saint. Perhaps his wife influenced him after this crisis. Perhaps he was moved to pursue the truth about Jesus. We don't know.

But today we don't sit in silence! We have the good news in Jesus. We have a long, beautiful story of God's rescue plan that stretches from the Garden in Genesis through to the final scenes in the Book of Revelation where God creates a new heaven and earth. It is finished cries Jesus on the cross. The long, winding story has reached its end with Jesus dying a criminal's death so that we can find the way back to God.

Yes, the forces of politics and religion were what brought Jesus to Good Friday, but ultimately it was God who wrote the ending to the story before time began. So yes, for his followers it seemed like a tragedy, the end of their dreams. We will stay there at the cross today and try to get some sense of the magnitude of our Saviour's suffering for us. Earlier in John we read these words: **When I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw all people to myself. (John 12:32)**

Let us sit for a moment in the silence and try to get some sense of the silence that engulfed Pilate. He received no answer to his question. But we have. In the silence treasure that gift. Here on a hillside, a lonely figure hangs between two others, his body weakened by torture and abuse, his head slumped. Is this but one more Roman cross, one more victim of the empire's brutality? Our text says that Jesus' final words, "It is finished", denote a surprising twist to the usual story of death. What is finished?

The Gospel answers with a bold and unexpected response. This is no lonely, helpless victim of Roman injustice and brutality. This is rather

God's provision for our sins. This is God's response to our rebellion. While we were yet sinners, Paul says, Christ died for us is the consistent message of the New Testament. But it also affirms that death remains the last enemy. There on that cross death is led a merry dance and once and for all emptied of its menace. It is in this silence we sit today, not without hope, not without an answer to our deepest questions, but in reverence and love.

Amen