

Debby's sermon on Pilate – Luke 23: 1-7 & 13-25

Good morning everyone! And once again, thank you Julie for giving me another episode in our series on “Men and Women of the Bible”. My previous two people, Gideon and Hannah, were from the Old Testament - the Hebrew Scriptures - but today we're on more famous territory, from the New Testament, the Christian Scriptures. He is Pontius Pilate, Governor of Judea for about ten years, including the years of Jesus' public ministry.

I thought I would have a look at Wikipedia's take on Pilate and there is absolutely masses of material there. From the Jewish historian Josephus 2000 years ago, who concentrated on Pilate's brutal putting down of Jewish uprisings by his Roman troops - to quite a lot of early Christian literature which viewed Pilate as a convert to Christianity - and the Ethiopian and Coptic churches who even honour him as a saint. And then there's all the books and artworks and films in which he plays the pivotal role in Jesus' trial. Will the real Pontius Pilate stand up please!!!

And then all of us encounter Pilate whenever we say the Apostles Creed or the Nicene Creed in our services. He is embedded in the story of our salvation, the crucifixion of our Saviour Jesus Christ. He is the only individual named in the Creeds other than Jesus and his mother Mary. Why is that? I think it is because the naming of Pilate embeds the Son of God, our Jesus, firmly in human history. Roman Empire, Jerusalem in the Middle East, between 26-36AD. A particular place and a particular time.

On the principle that God said to me once “Simplify Everything” and that I keep trying to do that, I will concentrate only on what the gospels say about Pilate as we meet him in the Passion story. It also helps that the first three gospels - Matthew, Mark and Luke - have a lot in common and see him from a similar viewpoint. It is Luke's version we have heard read today. But John's Gospel is very different and I will need to talk about it afterwards.

The Jewish assembly - the Sanhedrin - has acted badly in arresting Jesus and holding an unauthorised all-night trial behind locked doors. They want to sentence him to death for blasphemy (for being who he is and showing who he is) but under the rules of the Roman occupation, they cannot put anyone to death. Or certainly not in Jerusalem during the Passover festival. While Jesus was travelling through Galilee with his disciples and the 70 plus other followers teaching and healing and explaining what God's kingly rule looks like, he drew crowds. But that was Galilee and Jesus has come to give up his life and fulfil his destiny in the only place possible - in Jerusalem. He does not need to use words to announce who he is - he rides in on a donkey, as the promised king of Zechariah's prophecy. The crowds go wild for him. He loves and is loved. He teaches and challenges temple traders and religious experts. And the Sanhedrin makes use of Judas (remember David's sermon two weeks ago?) to identify Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane so that he can be captured and brought to their illegal overnight court and sentenced to death for being Messiah.

When the assembly drag Jesus before Pilate, they simply want Jesus dead. But Pilate takes Jesus aside and says “Are you the King of the Jews?” Jesus says “The words are yours”. Pilate is amazed and impressed by Jesus. He recognises the truth when he

sees it. Pilate sends Jesus to Herod and Herod sends him back. Neither of them chooses to execute Jesus. So Pilate throws it back at the Sanhedrin, the Jewish leaders. "Most of the charges you have made against Jesus are lies, trumped-up charges. This is a man of integrity". What is more (according to Matthew's gospel) Pilate's wife has lost sleep over bad dreams about Jesus - she sends her husband the message - "have nothing to do with that just man". By now, Pilate does not want to execute Jesus.

Pilate has one more gambit to play. At the festival a prisoner can be released scot-free as a gift to the people. Pilate suggests another Jesus (the name Jesus means "God saves") The other Jesus - nicknamed "Barabbas" (which just means son of a father)-organised a rebellion and was a murderer. This Jesus - who you and I know is Son of the heavenly Father - brings goodness, beauty, truth, hope and love into people's lives. Pilate says - which of the 2 do you want? You choose. But the crowd has been stirred up by the religious leaders and they choose to release Barabbas. And crucify Jesus.

In Matthew's gospel Pilate does something visually powerful at this point. He washes his hands of the whole business..... *before the crowd, saying, 'I am innocent of this man's blood; see to it yourselves.'*

And some of the saddest words of the bible follow....

The people as a whole answered, 'His blood be on us and on our children!' So Pilate released Barabbas for them; and after flogging Jesus, he handed him over to be crucified.

Because that terrible line has been used down through history to attack Jewish people. Blood feuds, blood libels, pogroms, the holocaust, anti-Semitism all tap into that terrible line "his blood be upon us and on our children". It is only in the last few decades that our church's ancient prayers have been changed to honour "God's ancient people, the Jews".

I want now to go back to hear what happened between Jesus and Pilate behind shut doors - the fullest account of their meeting comes in John's gospel

Then Pilate entered the headquarters again, summoned Jesus, and asked him, 'Are you the King of the Jews?' Jesus answered, 'Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?' Pilate replied, 'I am not a Jew, am I? Your own nation and the chief priests have handed you over to me. What have you done?' Jesus answered, '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.' Pilate asked him, ***'So you are a king?'*** Jesus answered, ***'You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.'*** Pilate asked him, ***'What is truth?'*** He asked Jesus, ***'Where are you from?'*** But Jesus gave him no answer. Pilate therefore said to him, ***'Do you refuse to speak to me? Do you not know that I have power to release you, and power to crucify you?'*** Jesus answered him, ***'You would have no power over me unless it had been given you from above; therefore the one who handed me over to you is guilty of a greater sin.'*** From then on Pilate tried to release him,

In this private conversation, Pilate learns from Jesus that his kingdom is real but not worldly - therefore heavenly. And he is invited by Jesus to be part of that company - "everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice". I think Pilate's response "what is truth?" is not sarcasm but true questioning. Jesus even lets Pilate know that he Jesus has handed his power over and that it is God's doing that Pilate has the responsibility for this death. Pilate is the agent but not the cause of Jesus' death. The Jewish authorities are more to blame but the death of Jesus is Jesus' gift and God's will.

I believe Pilate handed this conversation on to the church. I believe that Jesus answered Pilate's question "what is truth?" because Jesus was and is God in human flesh and God is truth and wisdom and beauty and love and generosity. "What is truth?". You have just met him.

No wonder Pilate tried to release him from then on. Maybe he did become a Christian, maybe even a saint? He retired a few years later so who knows what happened to this tough Roman.

If I take one thing from this Roman governor, it is that living by the truth - a life of integrity - matters. We live in a time when world leaders do not all tell the truth or live by the truth, when conspiracy theories reach millions of people via social media. Fake news is dangerous and widespread. But Jesus lived God's truth and it was transformative. And those who meet Jesus, from Pilate to you and me - through the words of scripture, through the church, through believers who live and pray and imitate Christ - discover that living by the truth, living with integrity, is simply the best way to be. Amen.