

JUNE 30, 2024

Marion weekly update

June 23 sermon— ‘Heroes and Villains : Pontius Pilate’ Matthew 27:11-26

This week our heroes and villains series lands on Pontius Pilate. Most people would instantly label him a villain. This is understandable. Like most of our figures in this series however, it’s more complicated than that.

Pilate was the governor who presided over the Roman portion of the trial of Jesus. How it all played out isn’t consistent in the gospels. The narratives actually get longer the later the writing of a gospel. Mark is the most brief, Matthew and Luke a little longer, and John the longest of the four. It is only in Matthew that Pilate washes his hands of the moment. Mark and John have Jesus flogged. Luke has Jesus sent from Pilate to Herod and back to Pilate. In Matthew, Mark, and Luke Jesus is largely silent as Pilate/Herod question Him. In John there is actually a good amount of dialogue between Pilate and Jesus, and Pilate does this back and forth speaking to Jesus and running back out to speak with the Jewish contingent present. Matthew has Pilate’s wife sending word to not mess around with this whole Jesus situation because of some dreams she’s had.

They agree with one another in the request for the release of Barrabas. They also agree with one another that no one found Jesus truly guilty of anything punishable by death in the Roman world. Herod was nasty and mocked Jesus but he still found Him innocent. Pilate over and over again pronounces that he finds no guilt.

It’s Jesus’ own people who are calling for His execution. This to varying degrees. In Mark it’s still calling for His death, but it’s much quicker. In Matthew the demands are more aggressive and frequent, they say “let His blood be on our hands”, and we are told they were being whipped up into an uproar. A similar scene plays out with Luke and Pilate asks at least three times for them to allow Jesus to be released. John they are also in an angry frenzy and even threatening Pilate. They tell him that if he doesn’t kill Jesus he’s “no friend of Caesar” because “anyone who claims to be king opposes Caesar.” When Pilate asks “shall I crucify your king?” they respond with “we have no king but Caesar.” Incidentally this itself borders on blasphemy if not crossing the line because essentially what they are saying is we follow Caesar above all.

In historical documents there isn’t a ton about Pilate. What there is paints a different picture of the man than this almost sympathetic character who is trying to go soft on Jesus by appeases the crowd. Pilate wasn’t particularly friendly to the Jews. Several times he committed actions appearing almost intentionally to offend them. He wasn’t known for being wishy washy or afraid to make harsh even cruel decisions. As a governor he would have been expected to institute standard Roman punishments, swiftly if necessary. Keep in mind that Rome kept peace by show of force, not by bending the will of a second class group of people throwing a temper tantrum.

We know that officials and soldiers had rules they needed to follow. In Acts Paul is beat and jailed for no good reason. Eventually he plays the card that he’s a Roman citizen and immediately the guys who did it to him were afraid. They changed their tune pretty quickly because to act outside of the boundaries of their rules brought punishment on them. The last thing they wanted was to be ratted out. Pilate also would have had rules to follow. Crucifying someone innocent undermines the entire point of the execution. It was a deterrent to others who might decide to misbehave. And it wasn’t used for every offense. At the end of the day Pilate had to have a reason other than a bunch of rowdy Jewish people.

This is one of the things that we often talk about around this situation. The crowd was getting rowdy and there was fear they might revolt, so give in to keep the peace. Perhaps this was part of the motivation but it couldn’t be the sole reason for crucifixion.

The earlier events of that week give us a reason. In Rome you could shoot your mouth off a good bit without consequence. What brought the heat was when someone added action to it that could be perceived as disruptive to order or traitorous to Rome. On Monday Jesus goes in and flips tables in the Temple. Some see this as a raging Jesus because of what was happening. But does the Jesus we know

allow Himself to be overcome with rage and physically acting out? No.

However if He knew that His time had come, something had to give the Romans a reason to crucify. The Jews couldn't. It was a Roman penalty and it had to be done correctly. Squads of soldiers were trained for just this purpose. Disrupting the order physically of a notoriously rebellious group within the empire fits that bill. Was Jesus making a spiritual point as well? Absolutely. But it makes much more sense to me that this would be a strategic action rather than a loss of emotional control. It's also why we need to be careful when we see or here that expression "when you say what would Jesus do keep in mind that flipping tables is an option." Using this moment to spiritualize violence is not okay.

Don't think that word wouldn't have reached Pilate at some point about this incident.

It also explains the sign on the cross, King of the Jews. The charge for the crucified was often put on their cross so as their bodies hanged there people would know what got them there. This is the deterrent factor. "Don't do this or this is how you will end up." Jesus' crime was claiming to be another King in the realm of Caesar. This is treason. He's acted in a way that is disrupting the Jewish people to the point that a rambunctious crowd is gathered. Pilate has all he needs to crucify Him.

So why do Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John record the events differently from one another? What must be remembered is that the gospels tell not just history but theology as well. They convey events, but how they do it is also communicating spiritual realities as well, and since each gospel writer is conveying different senses they tell the story in a way that adds the theological layer in the process.

The common theme here through them is that there should be no mistaking who put Jesus on that cross. It was His own people. Relentlessly the leadership drove their narrative and put the Messiah on a cross. Prophetically this needed to be clear due to the Old Testament scriptures about the Messiah being rejected and ultimately killed.

As time progressed the rift between Christians and Jews grew. Once a sect within the Jewish people they diverged and became their own faith. A faith at odds with the Romans and Jews alike which layered persecution on persecution. In that regard, the rejection of Jesus by His own people took a much more centered place in cementing Christian theology. Which is likely why we see the gospels becoming more assertive in making this point as they tell the story of Jesus' trial and crucifixion.

Sadly this has been mishandled through the ages and bred too much antisemitic sentiment. Literally about 25 years ago I heard a preacher make the statement that the Holocaust was God's judgment on the Jews for the crucifixion of Jesus. That kind of ignorance, particularly when there's nothing Biblical that can be referenced to support such a statement, has no place in Christianity.

There's another question however that isn't often asked. What ever happened to Pontius Pilate after all this?

No one is entirely sure, but there are traditions that developed about this very thing. Some say he retired soon after and lived a normal retired life until he passed. Some say he was exiled and took his own life. Some say he was executed by the emperor Nero. Some say he spent years sleepless, racked by guilt for what he'd done and seeking some relief.

The humdinger tradition is that he, possibly in large part persuaded by his wife Claudia, converted to Christianity. There is a story that his conversion was strong enough that he even tried to convert the emperor Tiberius.

Did he? Who knows? At least prominent figures in the early faith like Tertullian, Augustine, and Irenaeus suggested that he had. On top of that the opinion of Pilate was drastically different between the Eastern Roman Church and the Western Roman Church. The East came to view Pontius Pilate very favorably while the West saw him very villainous.

And believe it or not, in the East Pilate was even sainted. The Ethiopian and Coptic Churches especially venerated him.

We tend to see him in an only negative light, which bring us to our first takeaway

Tradition. Our tradition originated with the Western Church, who would have painted Pilate is a villain, and so often do we as a result. Tradition is a powerful thing that should be handled with

care. Traditions aren't necessarily written verbatim in scripture. Someone or a group of people extract something from the Bible, run with it, and it catches on. If it catches on significantly enough it can become a core belief of the church. There is nothing wrong with this...if the tradition is correct. If it isn't entire veins of theology can be warped away from God's intent. There is nothing wrong with questioning tradition and even letting it go if found to be incorrect. Just like there is nothing wrong with letting tradition strengthen our faith if we find it to be accurate. An example of an incorrect tradition would be that if an unbaptized baby passes that child is damned. Yet there are many who still cling to this as if it's a scriptural truth.

Be careful about judging someone based on a snapshot of their life. Most of us have judged Pilate on this one morning in his life. Certainly knowing more about him historically we might surmise he really wasn't a peach of a guy. Still, there was more to be done after our brief glimpse of him in scripture. What if he really did become a faithful and devout Christian? What if this leopard did change his spots? What if he was bold enough to evangelize the emperor? If we can be favorable to Paul who had a dramatic turnaround after being devoted to hateful, malicious actions why not Pilate?

All of us are works in progress and hope that we will be seen for who we are, not who we were. For our efforts and strides and not stuck in our mistakes. Often how someone is viewed can have a profound impact on whether they grow or stay stuck. Find the grace and humility to forgive and when transformation happens, celebrate it. We know God and the angels do.

All of us are seen differently depending on who is telling our story. The Eastern and Western Churches told Pontius Pilate's story differently. Entire generations of Christians' attitudes towards him were shaped as a result. People in our lives talk about us. The ones they talk to if they don't know us form their opinions based on what they hear. Some will paint us negative some positive. It's just the reality of it. Keeping this in mind I offer a couple thoughts. First, be careful how we talk about others. I'm not saying lie, but as John Wesley put it "seek to do no harm". And that doesn't count masking rumors and falsities with "I'm just saying this out of concern for brother or sister so and sos soul". The other is to follow the old adage to "live in such a way that if anyone talked bad about you no one would believe it."

Everyone is someone's heretic. When Christians disagree, especially passionately, they can see one another as being outside the grace of Christ, a heretic. Keep in mind that whomever we think that of, they may think the same of us. It doesn't mean we accept everything one another says and believes. It does mean we need to be very cautious about climbing on our high horse as if we're better than or superior. They may be wrong about some of their beliefs but we are about some of our own as well. Humility brings people together to hopefully, faithfully, discern what the true will of God is.

Pontius Pilate the hero or the villain? Depends on who you ask.

Am I a hero or villain? Depends on who you ask.

Maybe we learn more from the traditions around his later life than the trial of Jesus when it comes to Pontius Pilate.

Tradition is a powerful force. It is both fundamental and fallible. Be careful to discern what traditions are which.

Give the grace we want from others as we move beyond our mistakes to become more who God wants us to be. This is where we all find the freedom, support, and strength to keep becoming.

And accept that people will disagree with us sharply. That may be. Let it drive us to deeper study and trying to understanding the mind of God so we can be confident in what we believe even if others don't see eye to eye. And so that where we have room to understand better and with greater clarity we open up to do so.

All of this serves to not only build up our own faith, but to continue to create a strong foundation for future Christians to build from with integrity and the ability to continue changing our world.