

Pilate – Truth Decay Psalm 25:1-7 & Mark 15:1-15

A chaplain of the Senate in America was once asked if he prayed for the senators. “No,” came his reply, “I look at the senators – and then I pray for the country!”

Well, before the summer arrives we are going to face a General Election in our country, already this week we have heard how the three main party leaders are going to debate the big issues with each other on live TV, but in the light of the expenses scandal many of the electorate have a deep-seated distrust of politicians, in fact it isn't limited to us, one politician apparently once said of another, “Do you know how you can tell if that gentleman is lying? Watch his lips – if they're moving, he's lying.”

No coincidence perhaps then, that this morning our attention shifts to a politician; Pontius Pilate the procurator, or Roman prefect in Jerusalem who sentenced Jesus to death.

Now, over the last couple of weeks we have looked at Judas and the high priests and in all fairness we have tried to give them the benefit of the doubt, only to find that they have to take full responsibility for their actions. But what about Pilate? After all as you read through the Gospel accounts of him he seems to be in a bit of a jam.

Is Pilate just a weak a character who ends up complying with the wishes of the Jewish leaders against his own better judgement? Does Pilate get a raw deal from the New Testament as the one who sends Jesus to the cross? Is it fair for us to condemn him week after week as we declare in the creed; “For our sake [Jesus] was crucified under Pontius Pilate”?

In short, is Pilate as bad as the Gospels make out?

No – he’s much worse! We don’t know a huge amount about Pilate, but apart from the Gospel writers, the historians Josephus, Tacitus, Eusebius and the Jewish philosopher Philo all tell us a little more.

It would appear that Pilate achieved his position of Prefect – a military title from the man who mentored him; the commander of the Praetorian Guard called Sejanus, who was notoriously anti-Semitic in his attitudes.

Perhaps it shouldn’t surprise us, then, to discover that Pilate arrived in Jerusalem and immediately upset everyone by setting up Roman standards bearing the image of Caesar in the Jewish temple. None of his predecessors had done this out of respect for Jewish belief and abhorrence of images, but Pilate didn’t care and when a delegation of Jews travelled to Caesarea to plead for their removal he almost had them massacred.

Pilate was bullish and thoughtless – he used temple funds to pay for an aqueduct to be built – perhaps he thought that it was a good use for the money which people would appreciate, but he failed to understand or even try to understand the religious sensitivities of the Jews. Now, let’s pause for a moment and consider our potential MP’s and leaders and let’s ask ourselves; when we vote; do we actually ever consider their attitude towards Christianity and Christians?

You see, Pilate thought he knew what made for good government; strong leadership and good facilities for the people, but he had no interest what-so-ever in their religious beliefs, Pilate’s priority was in promoting Rome’s power rather than respecting their worship and he was more interested in grand civic gestures than supporting their right and ability to honour their God. So, when we cast our vote will we have considered at all whether or not the person we put a cross next to will have any idea about the cross we stand next to?

Do we know whether or not they even care about the rights of Christians in their community, or are they going to be more interested (like Pilate) in a secular agenda and marginalise, oppress or even threaten the Christian church during the term of the next government? It really is worth considering, if you take your faith seriously.

Well, Pilate managed to plumb deeper depths than I have already told you about, but we don't have time for that here this morning – ask me later, if you like, but let's move on to the events surrounding Pilate and Jesus. You see, we have established that Pilate was not a great diplomat amongst the Jews and with the rise to power in the Roman empire of Tiberius attitudes towards the Jews changed.

Unlike his predecessor, Tiberius actually wanted to build good relations with the Jews and so Pilate was on the back foot. He hatched a plan to ingratiate himself with Tiberius by bringing shields into Jerusalem (again!) but this time with the name of the emperor on rather than his image, but unsurprisingly it backfired and complaints again reached Tiberius who was displeased with Pilate, rather than impressed.

Pilate may have been a brute and a bully, but he was also now in a weak position with few supporters – he was running out of chances and he couldn't afford another letter of complaint reaching Rome, so when he is faced with Jesus and the demand from Caiaphas to execute him, there is little he can do.

And yet Pilate is the consummate politician; he wriggles and squirms through the whole episode. Actually, it is a little like pantomime; we looked at the passage from Mark this morning, but if you read John's account Pilate goes in and out, and in and out of the palace bouncing between the people and the man set before him – will he, won't he execute this young Galilean?

You see, Pilate is a bit of hung parliament – he has no real power – he’s not in the majority. Because of his recklessness and thoughtlessness in the past he now has no real authority, the Jewish leaders have him over a barrel and expect him to rubberstamp their requests.

But Pilate has no great love for these people and he certainly has no desire to be pushed around by them. Add to that the strange dream his wife has had about which she sends him a message; “Don’t have anything to do with that innocent man, for I have suffered a great deal in a dream today because of him.” (Matt 27:19) and then the questioning of Jesus that Pilate carries out which leads him to conclude “that I find no basis for a charge against him.” (John 19:4) and we can see that Pilate is in a bit of a corner – he really doesn’t see any great need to send him to the cross.

Now, don’t think for one moment that Pilate likes Jesus, or particularly wants to save him, he’s a politician; Jesus becomes for him a pawn, something to make a point with. Pilate doesn’t actually care about the truth, listen to the conversation he has with Jesus in John 18:37-38;

“You are a king then!” Said Pilate.

Jesus answered, “You are right in saying I am a king. In fact for this reason I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me.”

“What is truth?” Pilate asked.”

And out he goes again to the people.

Now, that is a very telling and a very contemporary question for a politician – “What is truth?” How many politicians have you listened to who seem to have no regard for the truth, they only seem to be interested in advancing their own position, or defending it. We live in a relativistic society, in other words, one which claims that truth is relative; what’s true for you isn’t necessarily true for me.

But truth cannot be relative – if I poke you in the eye the truth is that it will hurt and so neither can the truth of Jesus be relative, remember that Jesus declares “I am the way, the truth and the life, no one comes to the Father except by me”.

You can't arrogantly ask, “What is truth?” about that and then go on to say, “Well, that may be true for you, but not for me, I'll get to heaven by being good.” The essential quality of truth is that it is, well, true.

So as we approach a General Election we need to consider how our candidates and parties handle the truth – are they strong enough to deal with difficult truths? Ask yourself, what should Pilate's reaction have been?

And what did he actually do? Well, he had the incredible privilege of meeting Jesus face to face, but he dismissed him. His wife warned him, but he ignored her. He tried to pass the problem over to Herod, but he passed it back. He tried to get the people to make his decision for him, but they wouldn't.

Pilate's position was precarious and when the crowd challenge him in John 19 that if he didn't execute Jesus he was no friend of Caesar's, Pilate hears quite clearly the thinly veiled threat of another damning letter to Tiberius.

So, because Pilate didn't care about Jesus, but only cared about his own status and authority and position, because he wanted to score points, but in the end he lost, he was forced to rubber stamp the request of the high priests. But even as he did so he still tried to distance himself from the truth. Matthew tells us in chapter 27:24, “When [Pilate] saw that he was getting nowhere, but that instead an uproar was starting, he took water and washed his hands in front of the crowd, “I am innocent of this man's blood,” he said. “It is your responsibility.”

No, no, no. Pilate is totally guilty of Jesus' blood – he signed the death warrant, he sent Jesus to the cross, he turned his back on the truth and saved his own neck. Speaking of the danger of the Nazi's in the 1930's Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, "All that evil needs to triumph is for good men to do nothing" and regardless of whether or not Pilate was a good man, in the end he stood by and did nothing whilst Jesus was led off to the horrors of the cross.

So when we vote in the General Election, what kind of man or woman or party are we going to vote for? What will our Member of Parliament be like? Will they stand up for the truth no matter uncomfortable for them it might be? Are they just going to tow the party line, even if means sacrificing the truth for a lie? Are they more concerned with their career and all its perks than they are for the innocent and the defenceless? All these are questions that we need to be asking ourselves, not just blindly voting for a party or individual because we always have.

Neither can we allow ourselves the luxury of not voting, because by doing nothing we allow evil to triumph.

Pilate sacrificed the truth for his career just as much as he sacrificed Jesus, but to no avail – shortly after these events he was recalled to Rome in disgrace on the orders of Vitellius, the Prefect of Syria and tradition holds that Pilate was required to fall on his own sword. Without the truth of the Gospel there is only the despair of death and Pilate was not prepared to see past his own vain ambition to worship the Son of God who stood before him.

Instead it was Pilate's sin, just like ours, which caused Jesus' death and which Jesus paid for. As the hymn puts it;
"Oh, to see the dawn, of the darkest day:
Christ on the road to Calvary.

Tried by sinful men, torn and beaten, then nailed to a cross of wood.

This, the power of the cross: Christ became sin for us. Took the blame, bore the wrath - we stand forgiven at the cross."

But sadly, even after Jesus' death and resurrection Pilate still refused to accept the truth and know God's forgiveness in Christ.

In his first letter Peter instructs us to respect and submit to our rulers and to have the same attitude towards them as Jesus did; humble submission. But at the same time leaders and rulers are reminded in God's Word that they serve only under God's authority and we read in Revelation that one day they will have to lay their crowns down before his throne.

So, without being aggressive in our questioning, can I urge you to attend hustings, read literature, visit websites, watch broadcasts and ask questions during the coming election and seek out individuals and parties who will honour God, stand up for Christians, care for the innocent and the defenceless and above all do so because they are prepared to accept the truth that Jesus is the great king above all kings; Parties and individuals who know that the most important cross is not the one by their name, but the one on which Jesus died so that they could be forgiven their sins and instead, through faith in Jesus, have their name written in the Lamb's book of life.

Then we will have politicians who love the truth and serve God and his people.

Vote wisely. Amen.