

Pilate: The Artful Dodger

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The Community Church of Sebastopol
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Matthew 27:20-25

The late great teacher and preacher, Halford Luccock, was wondering what thoughts Pilate might have been having following the arrest, trial and crucifixion of Jesus. He imagined a letter Pilate might have sent to a friend in Rome, a letter sounding something like this:

To The Most Noble Tertius Quartus,

Your Excellency: You may have heard of the disturbance in Jerusalem last spring over the trial and execution of one Christus. It was quite a nuisance. But then, everything in this miserable province is a nuisance. But it passed off all right, and we will never hear of this Christus again.

I actually rather liked the man. He was what these Jews called a prophet, from upcountry, unsophisticated, of course. But compared to the rabble yelling their heads off, and the priests pushing their flimsy charges with no evidence at all that would hold in a Roman court, he was dignified and attractive. I told them, plainly and courageously, that I found no fault in him. But they kept yelling 'crucify him!', so I washed my hands of the whole affair.

My reasons were sound. To have let this Christus go free would have meant a riot and disorder and, no doubt, complaints to Rome. And you know that could be a lot of trouble. A procurator must keep order above all things. Besides, it was none of my business, really. The man had committed no crime, but after all it was not my affair to mix into the squabbles of these fanatical Jews. It was their business, not mine.

And it just happened to be a lucky chance to get solid backing from two groups usually opposed to me – the priests and the populace. I couldn't let that slip. It will mean a lot to my prestige and career here, and I hope in Rome too. So if you hear any different reports, dismiss them.

*With high esteem,
Pontius Pilate*

Too much trouble – not my business – might advance my career. And there, according to Halford Luccock, you have the motivation, the thought process, of Pontius Pilate. But, I suspect, not only him.

Outside of the Gospels there really is very little mention of Pilate. The ancient historian, Josephus, has three references to him. It seems that Pilate's soldiers entered Jerusalem with banners bearing the image of the emperor on them, the emperor who was considered to be a god. When these banners were placed in the city, it created a huge uproar, with an angry crowd gathering outside Pilate's residence to protest this affront to the God of the Jews and to the Jewish people. Pilate ordered heavily armed Roman legions to surround the crowd, but finally backed down and removed the banners rather than risk civic disorder which would not please Rome.

Another time, when there was a need to repair a failing aqueduct, Pilate decided to use funds from the Temple treasury to pay for the repairs. Again the Jews were furious.

A third incident involved the Samaritans following the death of Jesus. There was rioting and conflict over possession of some sacred items dating to the time of Moses. Pilate sent troops to restore order and later executed some leading and notable Samaritans. Apparently he tried to keep this information from reaching Rome, but Samaritan complaints eventually reached the capital city and Pilate was removed from office. After that, he was never heard from again.

So we really do not know much about this man who, according to the Gospel records, sentenced Jesus to his death. What is most likely is that in our Gospel accounts, we have an historical kernel of truth – certainly there was a Pilate, the Roman overseer of Palestine - coated with a thick layer of legend. Indeed, I suspect the fanciful letter imagined by Halford Luccock might not be far from the truth of just who this Pilate was.

But no matter what Pilate's historical significance may or may not have been, there is no denying his major role in the story of the last week of Jesus' life. What do we learn about him, and perhaps about ourselves, in these Gospel accounts? There is an old legend from which Mt. Pilatus in Switzerland takes its name. They say that the waters of Lake Lucerne, which is at the foot of that mountain, are often troubled on a moonlit night. And if you look carefully, you will see the ghost of Pontius Pilate forever washing his hands, and moaning that they will not come clean.

Rather reminds me of Jean Baptiste Clamence, a main character in Albert Camus' haunting novel, *The Fall*. You may recall him. Clamence was a respected Paris lawyer, who was living a comfortable and satisfying life. Until one defining moment changed everything. Late one night, walking home by the river, he noticed a young woman leaning over a bridge railing staring into the dark water. He continued for some distance, then heard her body strike the water. He heard her repeated cries for help as she was swept downstream.

He hesitated, debated what he should do, calculated the danger to himself, and concluded, finally, that it was too late to do anything to help her. So he simply walked away. But not really. The remainder of the novel centers around the fact that he was never able to walk away – from that night, from his conscience, from haunting wonderment over what happened to that young woman.

Back to Pilate. As I read the scant amount we know about him, I think we get a sense of the kind of man he was. He was a good functionary, sought to keep the peace, looked out for himself and his welfare. And when things would go wrong, it seems he was pretty adept at fixing the blame on someone else. He knew how to “wash his hands” of responsibility. Blame it on the Jews, or the Samaritans, or the angry crowds, or his superiors in Rome. Not my fault, not my responsibility. He was, in a name coined by Charles Dickens, ‘the artful dodger’. (never liked those Dodgers!)

And as much as we may dislike Pilate, it is so very tempting to follow his example, when problems are so complex, when there are so many of them, and the people we elect to grapple with them seem lost in trivialities. We are tempted to ask, why bother...what difference can I make? But as Jean Baptiste Clamence painfully learned, we humans are not at our best when we try to avoid responsibility, blame someone else, refuse to get involved, walk away. We just cannot wash our hands of human caring.

Not long ago I came across this parody of words of Jesus: “I was hungry and you formed a discussion group to talk about my hunger. I was naked and you debated the morality of my appearance. I was homeless and you preached to me of God's heavenly home.” Ah, the paralysis of analysis. So easy to wash our hands and do nothing.

I once heard this said about Franklin Roosevelt: “One thing marked President Roosevelt: he never wanted to be a spectator. Even when he could not walk, he yearned to be where the action was. You may fault his policies or find flaws in his personal life, but you cannot fault this: he did not sit around wringing his hands or giving excuses why he did not act...he took action!”

Pilate - washing his hands and walking away...not my problem. Jesus – always calling us to care and serve, refusing to walk away, but always engaging ever deeper with life. Jesus – wherever he went touching women and men with the notion: you are not worthless, God cares for you and has great hopes for you. God has given you gifts no one else has in quite the same way and expects you to make something of yourself and do something with your gifts. It may be in some simple volunteer task, here in the church or in the school or in our wider community. It may be providing a shoulder to cry on or a listening ear. But there is some way, large or small, for us to do something, to make a difference.

I recall the story of the bird who used to lie on its back with its wings outspread. Other curious birds would pause in flight to say, “Silly bird, I suppose you think that in that position you are holding up the whole sky?” And the bird would always reply, “One does what one can!” But isn't that all God asks of any of us? God does not insist we all accomplish heroic deeds, but God does insist that we be human. And, again, we humans are never at our best when we suppose we can wash our hands of responsibility for our world or for each other. Nor when we presume that if we cannot do everything, we might as well do nothing. As we heard this morning, clearly, at age 6, Tamar understands this better than many adults I know.

It is always easier, as Pilate clearly knew, to turn aside and walk by on the other side of the road. But that has never been the way of Jesus. Life is so much more – so much more - than simply being the artful dodger.