

“Pilate”

According to a Latin inscription found in 1961 at Caesarea, Pontius Pilate was the Roman governor of Judea for ten years—from 26-36 AD. Pilate was from the middle-class of nobility. Pontius Pilate served the Roman army in Germany. One year, while on leave in Rome, he married an upper-class Roman woman named Claudia Procula. Claudia was the granddaughter of Caesar Augustus—the Roman emperor at the time of the birth of Christ. Pilate was in! Because of this connection, and through his close relationship with Sejanus who was a favorite of Tiberius Caesar (the Emperor at the time of Christ’s death), Pontius Pilate got the position of Governor of Judea.

Pilate’s main residence was at Caesarea, on the Mediterranean coast. But during Passover week, he needed to be in Jerusalem. The events of that week would secure his name in the annals of history. The posse—led by Judas Iscariot—arrests Jesus on Thursday night. Jesus then stands trial before Annas, Caiaphas, and finally before the Sanhedrin – the Council of Elders.

They accuse Jesus of blasphemy because blasphemy was punishable by death under Jewish Law. There’s one problem, though. The Jews can condemn a man to death, but they can’t legally carry it out. Rome does not allow that authority. Before Jesus can be executed, the Jews must get Pilate’s consent. That’s his part in the Passion history of Jesus. Famously and for the ages, that’s Pilate’s part!

John tells us, “Then they led Jesus from the house of Caiaphas to the governor’s headquarters. It was early morning” (John 18:28). They brought Jesus to the Roman fortress Antonia. It’s about 6:00 a.m. And they’re all there – the chief priests, the scribes, the Pharisees, all of them. And they have Jesus right where they want Him. Soon they will have Pilate right where they want him.

Pilate asks a few routine questions—such as “What has this man done wrong?” The Jews don’t answer directly. Why? Because there’s no Roman law against blasphemy. The Jews can’t say, “This man claims to be the Messiah,” because Pilate would just wave his hand and that would be that. After all, Roman history tells us that Pilate didn’t like the Jews. And Pilate didn’t waste his time in religious debates with the Jews!

The chief priests want Pilate to think that Jesus is a revolutionary leader, and thus a threat to Rome. It doesn’t work, because Jesus tells Pilate, “My kingdom is not of this world” (John 18:36).

Pilate has Jesus scourged – it can be assumed that the Roman soldiers whipped Him brutally. There is a reason that Jesus was too weak to carry His own cross and He lasted only a few hours on the cross before dying. But the Jewish leaders want more than Jesus being brutally whipped. They need Jesus dead.

If Jesus announces Himself as the Christ, the Messiah, there is no good outcome for the chief priests. If Jesus is the real Messiah, and is able to lead a successful rebellion against Rome and take His rightful place as the heir to the throne of David, the chief priests will lose their power and may not be able to keep their money-making schemes going as they abuse their influence over the Temple.

And if Jesus is not the real Messiah, and He attempts to rebel against Rome, Rome has a history of crushing any city or nation which rebels – which Rome will do to Jerusalem when the Jews rebel in 70 AD.

Jesus has to die. They are in an unwinnable position if Jesus lives. And so the Jews play their trump card and put Pilate into an unwinnable position if Jesus lives. They say to Pilate, “If you release this man, you are not Caesar’s friend” (John 19:12). Pilate knows exactly what they mean. Tiberius Caesar was always suspicious and often violent. Suetonius—a Roman historian—tells us that Tiberius could turn on his underlings and be a savage. Sejanus, the favorite of Tiberius who most likely helped Pilate get this position as governor, is arrested, killed, and dragged through the streets of Rome when he was found to have poisoned the heir apparent to the throne and sought to marry the wife of the heir – the wife was most likely in on it by the way. (That happened two years before Jesus stands before Pilate).

Tiberius would not like getting news about a riot in Judea. There have been too many already. Three weeks ago, in our Gospel reading, we heard “about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices” [Luke 13:1]. In 36 AD, Pilate gets removed from his post as governor because of a Samaritan rebellion and was to stand trial before Tiberius. Tiberius dies before Pilate makes it back to Rome. There are stories written about Pilate in the centuries to come (everything from him becoming a Christian to him being exiled and committing suicide. The facts have been lost to history. He most likely had a fairly comfortable retirement (he was married to the granddaughter of Caesar Augustus after all).

He was not having a comfortable Friday morning as the Jews were blackmailing Pilate into crucifying Jesus. And it works. If the choice had been between Jesus and the Jews, Pilate would let Jesus go. But that’s not how the Jewish leaders frame the issue. Their blackmail makes it a choice between Jesus and Rome. This is Pilate’s predicament. Pilate is in an unwinnable position if Jesus lives.

Pilate asks, “Shall I crucify your King?” (John 19:15). The chief priests answer, “We have no king but Caesar” (John 19:15). Things are getting out of hand. A Jewish riot would end Pilate’s political career (or worse, he could be dragged through the streets of Rome like his friend Sejanus). Pilate is in an unwinnable position, so he has Jesus crucified. An innocent man needed to be nailed to a cross by His hands and feet, lifted up to hang, suspended between heaven and earth, so that Pilate could avoid being punished.

Ironically, as we look upon the events of that week, like the Jewish leaders, and like Pontius Pilate, we recognize that we are in an unwinnable position if Jesus lives. Jesus has to die. The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world must be offered as a sacrifice on the altar of the cross.

Each week we come together and remember this horrifying event and joyfully confess our faith in the crucified and resurrected Lord who was “crucified also *for us* under Pontius Pilate.” He was crucified *for us*. He was pierced for our transgressions and wounded for our iniquity – our guilt.

This does not exonerate Pilate or “wash the blood off of his hands,” but he was put into an unwinnable position so that we could be rescued from our unwinnable position as the children of Adam guilty of sin and deserving to die eternally.

Christ our Lord was “crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate” so that the guilt of our sin has been removed, so that the words of the Absolution are sure: “I forgive you all of your sins, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.” Amen.