

“The Trial”

Luke 22:63-23:25

In that hymn we just sang is my favorite line of any hymn (really any song). It's just my personal opinion, but verse two of that hymn is the most profound musical verse ever written: “Many hands were raised to wound Him, None would intervene to save; But the deepest stroke that pierced Him was the stroke that justice gave.” We continue our Lenten journey looking at the Places of the Passion as we read through the Passion account in the Gospel of Luke. Tonight, we find Jesus on trial. To paraphrase the hymn writer, “Many voices were raised to accuse him; none would intervene to save; but the deepest stroke that pierced Him was the stroke that justice gave.”

I know what you are thinking: What about Pilate? Didn't he intervene to save? He repeatedly says, “I have found in Him no guilt deserving of death. I will therefore punish and release him.” As much as I truly have sympathy for Pilate's predicament, he is not a hero in this story. To understand why, you need to understand 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 in 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—who was 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 – a beautiful place. But during Passover week, he needed to be in Jerusalem at a different place. Our theme this Lenten season has been “The Places of the Passion.” The events of that week would secure Pilate's place in history. We have heard about the posse – led by Judas Iscariot – who arrested Jesus on Thursday night in Gethsemane. Jesus is taken from place to place. 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 need to get Pilate's consent and have him yield to their desire for a seemingly unjust judgment. That's his part in the Passion history of Jesus. Famously and for the ages, that's Pilate's role in this story – to allow for an unjust trial so that the ultimate Judge can execute real justice for the salvation of the world.

Luke tells us, “Then the whole company of them arose and brought him before Pilate. (Luke 23:1). 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 accuse Jesus, accuse He who was without sin of a great and terrible sin. They accuse Him of blasphemy against God and treason against Rome. Both are false, unjust claims.

Jesus is God, so He cannot falsely claim to be God. Pilate asks the question, “Are you the King of the Jews?” Now, He is the King of the Jews, as Jesus points out that Pilate has accurately stated, but His kingdom is not of this world.

All through this trial, the false accusations continue and Pilate’s weak attempts to free Jesus without suffering any political cost to himself all fail. Again, I sympathize with Pilate’s predicament. If he does the right thing and treats Jesus with justice and releases him, there will be a riot and Pilate will have to answer to his authority – to Rome.

Pilate does not show compassion to Jesus. Offering a token gesture is not compassion. Washing your hands to show you are innocent as you send an innocent man off to be crucified is not a compassionate gesture. Pilate is no hero on that Friday morning.

There is but one heroic act. There is but one act of compassion. There is only One who was willing to suffer the cost. There was only One real Authority who could hand out Justice.

“The deepest stroke that pierced Him was the stroke that Justice gave.” All of the false accusations of the Pharisees and the crowd were mere annoyances in the ears of our Lord who stands condemned from accusations that matter. Jesus, even pleads to His Father on behalf of the crowd from the cross: “Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.”

The real trial was happening on a cosmic level. The full weight of the accusation of the Law against all sin for all time was bearing down on the shoulders of the man being justly accused by God the Father at the same time that He is being unjustly accused by the crowd. As Paul says, “He who was without sin became sin for us.”

Isaiah tells us, “It was the Lord’s will to crush Him and cause Him to suffer.” There is no justice found in the court of Pilate. That trial was not the trial that mattered. The real trial was when the Son of God stood under the judgment of the Father and He poured out the fullness of his wrath upon the guilt of the sin of all mankind.

Pilate found no guilt in the man Jesus, but he chose to punish Him anyway. Our Father in heaven finds no guilt in you because He has chosen to punish Jesus instead. “He who was without sin became sin for us,” so that you can be washed clean in the blood of the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. Tonight, we once again hear the good news that all of your sins are forgiven “in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” Amen.