

Matthew 27:11-31 Jesus and Pilate
Deuteronomy 21
Psalm 25

October 25, 2015 (Peter)

The image of “washing your hands” of innocent blood is ancient and wide ranging.

Deuteronomy 21 describes the ancient Israelite practice.

When a dead body is found – and it is clear that *someone* murdered him –
the elders of the nearest city are called to “wash their hands” of the crime,
thereby declaring that they are innocent of the murder.

And yet, there is a recognition here that the shedding of blood contaminates the land.

And so they would sacrifice a heifer that had never been yoked,
and they would wash their hands over the sacrifice
asking God to accept atonement for the people.

In Matthew 27, Pilate will “wash his hands” and declare his innocence of Jesus’ death.

Of course, since Pilate is about to sentence Jesus to death
it is a little difficult to take him all that seriously!

But remember what the elders were supposed to say:

“Accept atonement, O LORD, for your people Israel,
whom you have redeemed,
and do not set the guilt of innocent blood in the midst of your people Israel,
so that their blood guilt be atoned for.” (v8)

Jesus will be the atoning sacrifice.

And Pilate washes his hands of his death.

Deuteronomy 21 also includes the curse upon the one who is hanged on a tree.

In this way, Deuteronomy 21 sets up the cross of Jesus beautifully.

Our Psalm of response is Psalm 25 –

a song for those endure betrayal and mockery.

As our Lord Jesus became accursed for us,
he took Psalm 25 upon his lips.

Let us, therefore, join him in singing this song.

Sing Psalm 25

Read Matthew 27:11-31

The darkness deepens.

As Jesus had predicted, all of his disciples have fallen away *because of him*.
Against the power that has risen against him
no mere mortal can stand.

As when Goliath raged against the people of God –

and *only David* could go up against him –
so now *only Jesus* can stand against the powers of this age.

Jesus alone.

Abandoned and betrayed by his friends.

But he knew that this day would come.

Remember what Jesus had said in 20:18-19 –

“the Son of Man will be delivered over to the chief priests and scribes,
and they will condemn him to death and deliver him over to the Gentiles
to be mocked and flogged and crucified,
and he will be raised on the third day.”

Now it comes to pass as he had predicted.

1. Jesus Before Pilate: The Silence of the King (v11-14)

¹¹ *Now Jesus stood before the governor, and the governor asked him, “Are you the King of the Jews?”*

And now Jesus stands before Pilate, the Roman governor.

Pilate normally resided in Caesarea, but during the feasts he would come to Jerusalem
in order to be personally present if trouble erupted.

Brutal repression was his style –

and he was not particularly fond of the Jewish leadership.

Therefore the consultation of the leaders of the Sanhedrin was necessary
in order to devise a strategy that could accomplish their purpose.

As we saw last time, the hearing before the Sanhedrin was not a formal trial
(they had no authority to execute anyone).

Rather it was a hearing to formulate the charges that they would bring before Pilate.

After hearing Jesus claim to be the Christ, the Son of God,

they promptly translate this into a political charge for Pilate.

After all, the *Meshiach* was a political figure – the king who would restore the kingdom of God –
and as such Jesus would be seen as a potential revolutionary in the eyes of Rome.

So it makes sense that Pilate’s first question is

“Are you the King of the Jews?”

If Jesus claims to be the Son of David – the Messiah of Israel –

then he is the King of the Jews, right?

Jesus said, “You have said so.” ¹² *But when he was accused by the chief priests and elders, he gave no answer.*

In front of the Sanhedrin Jesus had openly affirmed that he was the Christ.
But here before Pilate, he has nothing more to say.
In one sense by admitting that he is the Christ
he has already claimed to be King of the Jews.
But before Pilate he has no answer.

I want you to think about what is going on here.
Pilate thinks in terms of “politics as usual.”
If Jesus is a revolutionary,
then maybe he could disrupt the political situation in Judea and Galilee.
If Jesus was the sort of Messiah the Jews were expecting,
then maybe Jesus could have established a petty kingdom
in the borderlands between the Persian and Roman empires.

But Pilate looks at Jesus and doesn't see a real threat.
The only way that Jesus could mobilize Jewish support for his revolution
would be if the priests and elders backed him.
And Pilate hears the accusations of the chief priests and elders –
and he can tell that Jesus has no chance of gaining a hearing from them.

Of course, Pilate himself can't stand the chief priests and elders –
so if Jesus would just *say something* to defend himself, then Pilate could free him!

And so Jesus remains silent.

¹³ Then Pilate said to him, “Do you not hear how many things they testify against you?” ¹⁴ But he gave him no answer, not even to a single charge, so that the governor was greatly amazed.

Undoubtedly that is why Jesus remained silent.
He does not want to be acquitted!
He does not wish to be vindicated by the Roman governor.

Pilate is amazed by this.

Isaiah 52:14-15 had said that many would be astonished at him –
the same word from the LXX is used here of Pilate –
as Pilate is amazed by his silence.

Jesus is not interested in being acquitted – so he will not try to answer their claims.
But what could he have said?
While he is not the sort of king that Pilate fears,
the truth does not make him less dangerous!

After all, if he goes to the cross he will overthrow all that Rome stands for!
Because Jesus *is* a King.

Pilate hears the phrase “king of the Jews” –
and he thinks “petty king who might challenge Herod
- if everything went just right.”

It would never have crossed Pilate’s mind to think that Jesus would challenge Rome!

And Jesus knows full well that Pilate is inclined to acquit him.
So he will do nothing to help his own case.

Pilate is already suspicious of the motives of the priests,
If Jesus gives Pilate any excuse for releasing him,
Pilate is likely to do so.

And that is what we see in the second part of our narrative –
as Pilate engages in a public reflection on the question,
“What shall I do with Jesus, who is called ‘Christ’?”

Pilate’s question is for you, as well!
What will you do with Jesus, who is called “Christ”?

2. Pilate Before the Crowds: “What Shall I Do with Jesus Who Is Called Christ?” (v15-26) **a. Placating the Crowd – Pilate’s Custom (v15-18)**

¹⁵ *Now at the feast the governor was accustomed to release for the crowd any one prisoner whom they wanted.*

Amnesty for prisoners was a common practice in the ancient world.
Pilate would have the final say as to who would be released,
but the crowd was given a voice
(as in the gladiatorial decision as to whether a combatant would live or die).

So Pilate decides to offer them “a notorious prisoner called Barabbas.”

¹⁶ *And they had then a notorious prisoner called Barabbas.* ¹⁷ *So when they had gathered, Pilate said to them, “Whom do you want me to release for you: Barabbas, or Jesus who is called Christ?”* ¹⁸ *For he knew that it was out of envy that they had delivered him up.*

Pilate seems to think that Jesus will be the obvious choice.
Barabbas, Mark tells us, had participated in “the insurrection.”
There were many insurrections in the first century,
so we cannot be certain which one he joined.
Pilate seems to think that Barabbas would be more objectionable –
since he was a violent threat to society!

Jesus, on the other hand, would appear to Pilate as a harmless prophet.

But in verse 19, we have a sudden interjection:

b. “Have Nothing to Do with That Righteous Man” – Pilate’s Wife (v19)

¹⁹ *Besides, while he was sitting on the judgment seat, his wife sent word to him, “Have nothing to do with that righteous man, for I have suffered much because of him today in a dream.”*

I wish we had more information about Pilate’s wife and her dream!

But given Matthew’s use of the Old Testament,
I am inclined to see here a connection to the “wise woman” theme
seen in much of the OT –
the wife who sees more clearly than her husband!

Pilate already has been impressed by Jesus.

He is suspicious of the motives of the chief priests and elders.
And his wife has warned him not to get involved in this case.

So, if *you* were Pilate, what would you do with Jesus?

You can see that he is innocent.
You don’t like the people who are accusing him.
And your wife has a bad feeling about this.

What would you do?

c. “Let Him Be Crucified” – The Decision of the Crowd (v20-23)

²⁰ *Now the chief priests and the elders persuaded the crowd to ask for Barabbas and destroy Jesus.*

You need to understand that there is *nothing* spontaneous about this crowd.

Just as Jesus “planned” the triumphal entry
and the crowds that gathered were stirred up by Jesus’ disciples –
so also the crowds that suddenly “appear” at Pilate’s residence
are there with a mission.

They have come at the instigation of the Sanhedrin.
There is no uncertainty about what they will say.

Commentators often talk about the “fickle” crowds that turn against Jesus during his passion.

It is certainly possible that there was some overlap in personnel in the two crowds –
I can easily imagine how a participant in the hubbub a few days before
might have become disillusioned and concluded that Jesus was no Messiah.

But it was a Galilean crowd – a pilgrim crowd –
that had proclaimed Jesus king in the triumphal entry –
while this crowd definitely appears to be more of a local mob,
so it is unlikely that there was much overlap.

If this is a local crowd – it also helps explain why they are so willing to choose Barabbas:
while many might deplore the violent tactics of the revolutionaries,

he is still “one of their own” – while Jesus is a Galilean.

But why would the chief priests wish to have Barabbas loose again?
Why do they prefer an insurrectionist to Jesus of Nazareth?

Plainly they perceive that Jesus has challenged the entire standing order.
Barabbas would shuffle the cards and redistribute power somewhat.
Jesus would overthrow all that the priests stand for.

His cleansing of the temple and his suggestion that he would destroy the temple
are of an epoch-changing magnitude.

A little home-grown rebellion is okay compared to that!

Plainly the chief priests have understood *something* of what Jesus stands for!

²¹ *The governor again said to them, “Which of the two do you want me to release for you?” And they said, “Barabbas.”*

Pilate seems perplexed.
Isn’t anyone going to speak up for Jesus?

²² *Pilate said to them, “Then what shall I do with Jesus who is called Christ?”*

Pilate seems to think that Jesus does not pose a threat to Roman security.
So what shall I do with your Messiah?

They all said, “Let him be crucified!”

We started with Deuteronomy 21.
Cursed is anyone who is hanged on a tree.
We saw last time that the chief priests were angling for crucifixion –
because they knew that no one cursed by God could possibly be a martyr!

The reason why the Romans used crucifixion against the Jews
was because the Jews believed that those hanged on a tree were cursed by God.

What shall I do with Jesus who is called Christ?!
Crucify him.
For it is not possible that the Christ would be cursed by God!

At least – that’s what they thought!

But they had not paid attention to the scriptures!
There is a pattern to the scriptures.
Isaac, the beloved son,
is called to be sacrificed.

Moses, the faithful servant of the LORD,
must die so that Israel may enter the land.
David, the King after God's own heart,
must be banished into exile by his own son!

There is no way to glory *except* by the cross!

Isaiah had said it:

All we like sheep have gone astray;
we have turned – every one – to his own way;
and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

But Pilate is not convinced.

²³ *And he said, "Why, what evil has he done?" But they shouted all the more, "Let him be crucified!"*

Pilate knows that Jesus is innocent.

But he also realizes that *this time* they have out-maneuvered him!

d. "His Blood Be on Us and on Our Children" – Pilate Washes His Hands (v24-26)

²⁴ *So when Pilate saw that he was gaining nothing, but rather that a riot was beginning, he took water and washed his hands before the crowd, saying, "I am innocent of this man's blood;^[b] see to it yourselves."*

No one was able to answer Pilate's question:

"what evil has he done?"

But it no longer matters.

Pilate is not concerned about the death of an innocent man.

After all, if he placates the crowd by killing Jesus,

he can avoid a riot!

And surely, a riot would result in more innocent deaths.

What is the death of one man – compared to the death of many?!

But Pilate wants to make clear who bears the blame for this!

"I am innocent of this man's blood."

"See to it yourselves."

This is what the chief priests had said to Judas!

When Judas said "I have betrayed an innocent man,"

they scoffed, "what is that to us? See to it yourself!"

Now they hear Pilate throwing back their own words!

Up until this point Matthew has spoken of the "crowd."

The crowd had called for Jesus' death.
The crowd had cried out "let him be crucified."
It was "before the crowd" that Pilate washed his hands.

But now:

²⁵ *And all the people answered,*

The crowd might be a bunch of hooligans –
riff-raff gathered to riot and cause mayhem.

But "all the people" is the way that the Jews spoke of the whole house of Israel.

Matthew switches to this phrase "all the people"
in order to make clear that all Israel is responsible for the crucifixion of Jesus.

All the people will join together to crucify their Messiah.

"His blood be on us and on our children!"

Never were more potent words spoken!
His blood be on us and on our children!

They are claiming responsibility for the death of Jesus.
And so they invoke a curse upon themselves – and upon their children.

Jesus had warned in Matthew 23:35,
"so that on you may come all the righteous blood shed on earth,
from the blood of innocent Abel to the blood of Zechariah the son of Barachiah,
whom you murdered between the sanctuary and the altar."

Now "all the people" willingly accept responsibility for the death of Jesus!

But Pilate cannot duck responsibility so easily!
After all, there is no way for Jesus to go to the cross
unless the *Roman governor* signs off on his death warrant.

Who killed Jesus?

Was it the Jews? Pilate?

As Luke will put it in Acts 4:27-28,

"for truly in this city there were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus,
whom you anointed,
both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel
to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place."

Jew and Gentile working seamlessly together in one common purpose –

and yet, that diabolical purpose winds up fulfilling God's own glorious plan!

“his blood be on us and on our children.”

As Stanley Hauerwas puts it,

“Jesus must be killed because Jesus is the Son of God.

Jesus must be killed because Jesus has called into existence a new people
who constitute a challenge to the world order based on lies and deceit.

Jesus must be killed because he is a threat
to all who rule in the name of safety and comfort.

Jesus must be killed because we do not desire to have our deepest desires exposed.

Jesus must be killed because we do not want our loves governed by his love.

Jesus must be killed because we refuse to forgive our enemies.” (p235)

I know that “all the people” only intended that line as accepting responsibility for his death.

But Matthew has spent too much time teaching us how to interpret all the scriptures.

Here at the end of his gospel he very rarely gives us explicit direction.

He expects that by now we have learned how to see the connections for ourselves!

In the very curse invoked upon Israel – we hear the beginning of our hope!

“His blood be on us and on our children”!

for if the blood of Jesus is *not* on us and on our children,
then we die!

²⁶ *Then he released for them Barabbas, and having scourged^[c] Jesus, delivered him to be crucified.*

By oppression and judgment he was taken away...

although he had done no violence,
and there was no deceit in his mouth.

3. Jesus Before the Mockers: “Hail, King of the Jews!” (v27-31)

²⁷ *Then the soldiers of the governor took Jesus into the governor's headquarters,^[d] and they gathered the whole battalion^[e] before him. ²⁸ *And they stripped him and put a scarlet robe on him,**

If you are going to kill a human being –
especially an innocent human being,
you need to start by dehumanizing him.

The mockery by the Roman battalion begins this process.

Jesus is clothed in a royal robe – a scarlet cloak –
ironically demonstrating his royal claim.

²⁹ *and twisting together a crown of thorns, they put it on his head and put a reed in his right hand.*

Cyril of Jerusalem says well,

“When they clothed him in purple, it was in mockery,
yet ironically it was a fulfillment of prophecy, for he indeed was a king,
so even their parody indirectly served divine revelation.
Even though they did it in a spirit of derision, still they did it,
and his regal dignity was by that symbolically heralded.
So, likewise, though it was with thorns they crowned him,
it was still a crown!”

Remember Joseph.

It was through his brothers’ persecution and mockery –
it was through their stripping him and sending him into death –
that he would bring life to his people.
Even so it is through his descent into hell
that he will be raised up to the right hand of the Majesty,
and become the King, not only of the Jews,
but of all nations – even as Joseph did.

But now,

And kneeling before him, they mocked him, saying, “Hail, King of the Jews!”³⁰ And they spit on him and took the reed and struck him on the head.

Now the soldiers take up the title that the chief priests had given him –
the mocking title that Pilate had echoed.

But he was wounded for our transgressions;
he was crushed for our iniquities;
upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace,
and with his stripes we are healed.

But they tire of their game –
after all, they have an innocent man to crucify...

³¹ *And when they had mocked him, they stripped him of the robe and put his own clothes on him and led him away to crucify him.*

Please, brothers and sisters,
hear from Cyprian how the world is turned upside down!

“He who has given the food of heaven was fed with gall;
he who has offered us the cup of salvation was given vinegar to drink.

He the innocent, he the just,
nay rather, innocence itself and justice itself!
is counted among criminals,
and truth is concealed by false testimonies.

He who is to judge is judged and the Word of God, silent, is led to the cross.” (226)

The one through whom the heavens and the earth were created
is now led to the cross.

He was despised and rejected by men;
a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief;
and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised,
and we esteemed him not.

“His blood be upon us, and on our children!”

The blood of Jesus *will* be upon you.
One way or the other!

We are all guilty of sending Jesus to the cross.
As Bernard of Clairvaux said so well:

“O sacred Head, now wounded, with grief and shame weighed down,
now scornfully surrounded, with thorns thy only crown,
O sacred Head, what glory, what bliss till now was thine!
Yet, though despised and gory, I joy to call thee mine.
What thou, my Lord, hast suffered was all for sinners' gain:
mine, mine was the transgression, but thine the deadly pain.
Lo, here I fall, my Savior! 'Tis I deserve thy place;
look on me with thy favor, vouchsafe to me thy grace.
What language shall I borrow to thank thee, dearest Friend,
for this, thy dying sorrow, thy pity without end?
O make me thine forever; and should I fainting be,
Lord, let me never, never outlive my love to thee.”

“His blood be upon us, and on our children!”