

“The Judgment of Pilate”
Pastor John Bronson

John 19:1-13

April 6, 2012
Good Friday Service

Good Friday Service (April 6th, 7:00 pm)

Good Friday

Welcome

Call to Worship: Psalm 22:1-2, 6-11, 14-18

Song or Hymn

John 18:28-32

Song or Hymn or Special Music

John 18:33-40

Song or Hymn or Special Music

John 19:1-16

Song or Hymn

John 19:17-30

Special Music

Message:

Closing Song

Good Friday obviously is the when Jesus died. Let me restate that. Good Friday is the day upon which Jesus was murdered. It was a politically motivated assassination. Those who held the reins of power feared Jesus. They feared He would lead the people into yet another revolt against the authority of the Romans who had conquered the land, and as well against the authority of the ruling council of the Jews, the Sanhedrin, and the local king, Herod. Rome kept both the local king and the council in place in order to control the population. The men who sat on the council and Herod were clever men. They were clever politicians. They knew that neither Jesus nor the people could ever break the power of Rome. That was a fool's hope. Caiaphas was the High Priest and he said it was better for one man to die for the nation to be destroyed. He was a clever man.

We should not doubt the sincerity of most of these men, at least those on the Sanhedrin. They were doing what they believed was best for the nation. That it was also best for them personally simply demonstrated how closely aligned their interests were to those of the nation, at least in their own opinion. That the Roman governor, Pilate, would be cynical regarding such matters as the worship of this or that god and the character or honor of this or that nation or ethnic group is likely. But even in the case of the Romans we would err if we too lightly dismissed their belief in the necessity of Roman power and rule for preserving the peace and order for the good of all. The same would be true of the puppet kings in the provinces, in this case Herod Antipas, who was by the way the grandson of Herod the Great. Generally men who do evil tell themselves they are doing good, and those who believe what is false tell themselves it should be and could be true and will be, given time. In such cases, however, we find that such people survive by the force of their own will rather than goodness and truth being their strength and support, communicating both inner peace and compassion to their hearts. Such men will claim the ends they support justify the means they use. So they will resort to lies, deceptions, coercion, violence and fear to establish what they claim will be good and peaceful and true [or just]. These are not my opinions; they have been demonstrated over and over again in the sad record of human history.

As stated, those in charge were clever men. They went to considerable lengths when you read the gospel to cover their murder with the robes of righteousness and legal due process. They had Jesus arrested, and they had Jesus tried under three judgments, three levels of authority: the supreme religious council, the authority of Herod the puppet king, and Pilate, the Roman governor. Herod judged Jesus a fool because Jesus would not talk to him. Jesus judged Herod a fox, and had nothing to say to a fox. The supreme religious council, the Sanhedrin, said that Jesus was a blasphemer because he claimed to be God. That would be blasphemy, but Jesus would not lie.

Pilate declared Jesus innocent. Isn't that interesting? Even though Pilate knew Jesus was innocent, he was willing to have Him scourged with whips and then crucified to preserve the peace. Pilate was a clever man who knew how to survive.

It was not an easy journey for Pilate. We can gather a false impression from a light or a quick reading of the gospels. Understandably our attention is devoted to Jesus. But because of that we might not necessarily pick up on all the information that is given to us regarding someone as unsavory as Pilate. He was, after all, powerful, and he was rich, and at least presumably he was in charge. He was the man who could make the ultimate decisions. At one point, if you recall the scriptures, verse 10 of chapter 19 [of John's Gospel] Pilate is prompted to point out this very thing to Jesus. This is what he says to Him: *“So Pilate said to him, ‘You will not speak to me? Do you not know that I have authority to crucify you?’* Pilate, however, was smart enough to know that there were severe limitations on his authority. Pilate in fact was constrained

to walk through a narrow gate at the end of a road which he had chosen far earlier in his life. He dearly desired to escape, but there was no escape.

In the reading you might have noticed that at one point Pilate’s wife sent him a note when he was sitting in judgment on Jesus (Matthew 27:19), *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.’* Probably Pilate had talked to his wife about the situation with Jesus. Matthew tells us that Pilate knew that the motivation of Jesus’ accusers was envy. Envy: envy is dangerous. Envy can easily discover dangers and enemies even in the innocent. I have no doubt that Pilate was well acquainted with the dangers and passions of envy; I know a fair amount about the Roman Empire and about the way things worked. Pilate knew envy was something to watch out for, something to fear.

Actually, if you think about the account, for Pilate fears gathered around this trial of Jesus like carrion fowl around a carcass. Faced with the insistence of the shouting crowd and the accusing members of the supreme religious council, Pilate tried to divest himself of responsibility. Verse 6 of chapter 19 [of John’s Gospel], *“Pilate said to them, ‘take him yourselves and crucify him, for I find no guilt in him.’”* The attempt failed and came back on Pilate with even greater intensity, verses 7 and 8: *“The Jews answered him, ‘We have a law, and according to that law he ought to die because he has made himself the Son of God.’”* Then I want you to notice this next sentence. *“When Pilate heard this statement, he was even more afraid.”* Pilate, the man in the judgment seat, the man representing the virtually irresistible power of Rome, the man who held the power of life and death over anyone who came before him, sat in that seat; he was afraid. Then, when confronted with the deeper issue of Jesus’ true identity, John tells us Pilate was even more afraid. It was this fear, John tells us, which prompted Pilate to get a better handle on who this was who stood before him. John writes in verses 9-12, *“He entered his headquarters again and said to Jesus, ‘Where are you from?’ But Jesus gave him no answer. So Pilate said to him, ‘you will not speak to me? Do you not know that I have authority to release you and authority to crucify you?’ Jesus answered him, ‘You would have no authority over me at all unless it had been given you from above. Therefore he who delivered me to you has the greater sin.’”* And then we are told, *“From then on Pilate sought to release him...”*

It is not obvious what it is that Pilate feared, because it is not obvious what he understood what Jesus meant in His allusion to a higher source of authority from which Pilate gained his authority. Did Jesus have in mind the Roman Senate or the Emperor? In other words, was Jesus blaming the empire and the Emperor for his troubles? [That was] not very likely; but then fear easily moves beyond reason. Did Jesus mean to place blame on the Sanhedrin? After all, it was the supreme religious council which had delivered Jesus into Pilate’s hands. The trouble is Jesus had spoken of Pilate’s authority being given from above. Surely Jesus knew the Roman governor was above the Jewish supreme religious council. Surely He knew he was above any local king. Surely Jesus knew that only the Senate and the Emperor than the local governor! Of course He could have been referring to one of the gods. Did Jesus perhaps have some deity in mind? In thinking about Pilate we should never confuse his cynicism regarding truth with a lack of belief in gods and goddesses. Indeed a belief in gods and goddesses, in supernatural powers and principalities who were capable of interfering in the affairs of men is a very common accompaniment to those who do not know the Living God. Pilate had many things to fear.

As we knew, Jesus’ strange words brought a new infusion of fear to trouble Pilate’s heart. So he tries to escape for responsibility for deciding the fate of Jesus, but he fails. We are told exactly how he fails in verses 12-13 of chapter 19: *“From then on Pilate sought to release him, but the Jews cried out, ‘If you*

release this man, you are not Caesar's friend.” End of story. The matter now was clear to Pilate. His survival as the governor, as a servant of the Empire and the Emperor and a member of the Roman elite enjoying all the privileges of wealth and status which come with being closely aligned with the ruling power: these are far more important than the guilt or innocence of a prophet or miracle worker from the Jewish countryside. It is time for action. We are told that Pilate sits down in the seat and he says, let Him be crucified.

Pilate, the man of power, the governor, representative of irresistible Rome, the man who has the power to crucify Jesus, is trapped. He cannot escape. He knows Jesus is innocent, and he kills Him. The road has narrowed and he must pass through the terrible gates defined by fear. But though fear was the instrument by which Pilate was driven on, we know that that fear was wielded by the hand of God. We are told that. If you have your scriptures look at Acts 4:25-28. These verses ask us to drop in on a little prayer meeting being held by some of the Apostles. This is what we read beginning at 4:25-28, *“Why did the Gentiles rage, and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers were gathered together, against the Lord and against his Anointed’—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. . .”* Now here is the end of the statement and this is the part that you need to listen to: *“...to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place.”* That is the ruling power of God. Those words were lifted up at a prayer meeting by the apostles and first disciples after the resurrection of Jesus and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit led to the creation of the church. They were praying to the Lord for comfort and strength in the face of persecution by the same religious authorities who had orchestrated the crucifixion of Jesus. Those were common men. I could pick out eleven men from this congregation and they would be exactly the same. None of them were the Son of God, but all of them were chosen by God to know Jesus as the Savior and Lord. They now knew God's love for them through Christ. They knew they were forgiven the guilt of their sin and they knew they were accepted by God the Father, and they knew they were forgiven. They knew they were filled with the Holy Spirit. Because of the crucifixion and the resurrection of Jesus they could appeal to heaven and find strength and wisdom in Christ to stand fast in the face of those who tried to silence their witness and to destroy their joy in the Lord. They knew the same God who had directed the lives of those who crucified Jesus and would direct the lives of those who sought to silence them. Consequently they were not afraid.

Are we? That is the question. All of this recounting of the drama of Pilate as he wrestles, trying to wield his power, trying to be a decision maker in opposition to God and finding that he is incapable of resisting the flow of events that led him to make the most horrific possible decision in violation of his knowledge and conscience: all of that is posed the question to us. Jesus said we must die to ourselves if we would live to God. We cannot be trapped like Pilate, continually attempting by our own means to save our own skin. We either accept that Jesus has saved our skin, or we are lost. So the question is, are we afraid? As we reflect upon the sheer wonder of God's grace in Jesus Christ, and as we anticipate the glorious worship that will be ours on Sunday morning, let us take counsel in the Holy Spirit to give thanks to Him and to reflect deeply and to let the light of His grace and truth to shine deeply into our hearts and minds to determine the question, “Am I afraid of men?”