

March 29, 2015

THE GOVERNOR

PALM SUNDAY

Matthew 27:11-26

Pilate may not have been the best diplomat, but he was able to see through the falseness of the Chief Priests and the Elders who brought Jesus before him. He saw their character well enough for it to have become an historical statement that, concerning Jesus, *“he realized that it was out of jealousy that they had handed Him over.”* (27:18) He realized that Jesus was just a pawn in their power games. Pilate must have heard enough about Jesus to know that He was very popular. It is very likely that he had heard about Jesus’ healing work. Maybe he had even heard about some of what Jesus had taught.

Likewise, Pilate’s wife was conscious of who Jesus was. Or, at least, she was aware of whom others said Jesus was. The Palm Sunday triumphal entry into Jerusalem would not have gone unnoticed by the powers-that-be. There may have been some serious speculation about Jesus as well as about Barabbas in the Governor’s court. A primary assumption about Pilate is that his number one purpose was to rein in any irritating troubles, any discontent, any activities that might have been a threat to the Pax Romana – the Roman Peace. Even though it was peace under oppression, order under tyranny; it was unholy to the Jews, because the Romans were pagan idol-worshippers. Theirs was the power of conquest, and, control by threat of crucifixion. And they were hated by the Jews for all of this, not to mention the burdensome Roman taxes.

King Herod was a puppet king, the High Priest secured his position by purchasing it from the Roman Governor, and a tolerance for Roman troops in every town was given only at the threat of severe punishment. And here, in this episode subsequent to Jesus’ crucifixion, the Jewish leaders only concern themselves with Pilate in order to get him to order Jesus’ execution.

Pilate’s first question to Jesus had to do with the issue of power. *“Are you the king of the Jews?”* Are you guilty of sedition against the empire? Again, the question states the fact. It wouldn’t be asked if it couldn’t be true. *“‘You say so,’ said Jesus.”* This was just as He had responded to Caiaphas when he demanded to know if Jesus was the Messiah. (Matthew 26:63)

The Jewish leaders began to enumerate their accusations. But Jesus was, again, silent. Pilate wondered at Jesus’ lack of defense against their charges. He was probably used to seeing people squirm, especially before the threat of being crucified. Pilate couldn’t understand the posture of one surrendered to a purpose greater than this life, greater than this world.

We too need to be surrendered to our purpose in Christ.

Pilate saw the absurdity of these Jewish leaders in their determination to have Jesus done away with. He gave them an option. It was actually an extremely poor attempt at diplomacy. Barabbas was, without a doubt, a criminal. Pilate would release him in order to preserve Jesus’ life, because he didn’t think Jesus was a real threat to the empire. At best, he might have thought Him to be delusional. Barabbas, on the other hand, was an actual threat. Even Pilate’s wife sensed Jesus’ innocence. She may have only had a dream that told her so, and it caused her some serious anguish, but she appealed to Pilate through a messenger to *“have nothing to do with that innocent man!”* (v. 19)

Too late. Meanwhile, some of *“the Chief Priests and Elders persuaded the crowds to ask for Barabbas and to have Jesus killed.”* (20) The crowds – people were gathering, not at the court of the Governor, but on their way to the courts of the Temple, not far from where Pilate would ask for their decision. The praetorium, Pilate’s headquarters, was Pilate’s official residence in Jerusalem. Scholars

locate it in the western corner of the wall of the city, not far from the Temple. But, many people were on their way there for worship, and the worship experience would have lasted a better part of the day.

Pilate sat on a “*bench at the place called The Stone Pavement,*” (John 19:13), where he would pronounce judgment. This spot overlooked a sort of plaza where many people could gather. “*The Governor again said to them, ‘Which of the two do you want me to release for you?’ And they said, ‘Barabbas.’ Pilate then said to them, ‘Then what should I do with Jesus who is called the Christ? All of them said, ‘Let Him be crucified!’*” (21-22) All of them!? Had the Chief Priests and Elders done such a good job at convincing the people to “*ask for Barabbas and have Jesus killed?*” Were they *that* complicit with the Jewish leaders? Or, were they confused? Were they really even aware of what was going on? Did they see in Pilate’s question an example of generous magnanimity? What happened? Didn’t they realize that this was Jesus whom crowds, maybe very different people by now, had welcomed into Jerusalem with palms and ‘Hosannas?’ Scholars have suggested that, yes, it was a different crowd. Those gathering were more likely to have been more recently-arrived pilgrims, not from Jerusalem or its environs, but from a greater distance away. Perhaps they were from different countries, and their language was different. The sound of the name *Barabbas* might indicate to them the “son of the father.” These people may not have felt the hypocrisy of the Jewish leaders as much as the locals had, so they might have been more easily persuaded by their “leaders.” Either way, this needed to happen in order to fulfill the prophecies about Christ, and the purpose of redemption. “*Let Him be crucified!*”

But then Pilate asked the best question of all, “*Why, what evil has he done?*” (23) Yes! What evil? Certainly nothing deserving death...from (Pilate’s point of view). But, there was no answer. “*They shouted all the more, ‘Let Him be crucified!’*” (23b)

“*So when Pilate saw that he could do nothing...*” (24a) What? Pilate was the one in control, wasn’t he? No. God was. Pilate had, in effect, generated a riot. But to show contempt, he ritualistically washed his hands of the whole thing, and said, “*I am innocent of this man’s blood, see to it yourselves.*” (24) “*See to it yourselves!*” ??? Isn’t that what the Jewish leaders had said to Judas? “*See to it yourself!*”

“I’m not responsible, he’s saying, you are. “*Then the people, as a whole, answered, ‘His blood be on us and on our children!’*” “You’re relieved of the matter.... You don’t have to answer for this execution. We will.”

Ultimately, it was God’s plan that Jesus would suffer for humanity’s guilt and die for humanity’s sin. But as much as Judas was only a tool for the Chief Priests and the Elders in the arrest of Jesus, so were the Chief Priests and the Elders only a tool for God in bringing about Jesus’ execution.

We are all tools being used by God to bring about His purposes. We are the instruments of a divine purpose. We are here to serve God’s design. Or, if not, we will serve either our own purpose, or, Satan’s. But, the difference will be made by our legacy, which can be how we, or those who might reflect on our lives, will be able to answer Pilate’s most relevant question: What evil have you done?

Pilate released Barabbas for them, and then, just to reclaim some control of the situation, he had Jesus flogged. Finally, he gave them what they wanted. *He handed Jesus over to be crucified.* (26) But that’s what we all *should* want. We need a savior. We may not want to think about how Jesus was crucified, nor *how* we are saved, but His death is what saves us. It had to happen in the world. So it happened in a very worldly way, with very human instruments, and very horrible experiences. But... as we accept it, it makes a difference in our lives. We are saved!