

“Who is Really On Trial Here?” John 18:28- 19:16 4/7/19

They say you can learn a lot about a person by watching how they react under pressure. As we continue in John’s gospel, we come to the story of Jesus’ trial, a time when he is under enormous pressure. It is a powerful story, with only two main characters- Pontius Pilate and Jesus. And it’s fascinating to compare the two, because their words and actions aren’t what you’d normally expect at all! Before I read the story, a little background on 1st century Israel may be helpful. Israel was under Roman occupation with troops stationed around the country and heavy taxes collected for Rome. Generally, Israelites hated this situation, and several revolts rose up that were brutally suppressed by the Romans.

Yet, at the time of Jesus, Rome still allowed limited self-rule in Israel. The aristocratic chief priests ruled over the temple area with their own police force to enforce religious rules and keep order. Rome had appointed a governor over the region of Judea, a man named Pontius Pilate, who began his term in 26 AD, about 7 years before today’s story. He was known as a brutal governor, an unnecessarily provocative ruler whose actions had added to the always brewing unrest of the region.

One more thing- when John refers to the “Jews” in his gospel, he uses the term in several ways- to refer to all Jewish people, to refer to the residents of Judea, and (most often) to refer to the Jewish leadership,

especially Caiaphas and the other privileged high priests of Jerusalem. They opposed Jesus because he challenged their authority and corrupt management of the temple. With this background, listen now as I read the whole story, paying special attention to Jesus and Pilate.

²⁸Then they took Jesus from Caiaphas to Pilate's headquarters. It was early in the morning. They themselves did not enter the headquarters, so as to avoid ritual defilement and to be able to eat the Passover. ²⁹So Pilate went out to them and said, "What accusation do you bring against this man?" ³⁰They answered, "If this man were not a criminal, we would not have handed him over to you." ³¹Pilate said to them, "Take him yourselves and judge him according to your law." The Jews replied, "We are not permitted to put anyone to death." ³²(This was to fulfill what Jesus had said when he indicated the kind of death he was to die.)³³Then Pilate entered the headquarters again, summoned Jesus, and asked him, "Are you the King of the Jews?" ³⁴Jesus answered, "Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?" ³⁵Pilate replied, "I am not a Jew, am I? Your own nation and the chief priests have handed you over to me. What have you done?" ³⁶Jesus answered, "My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here." ³⁷Pilate asked him, "So you are a king?" Jesus answered, "You say

*that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.”*³⁸*Pilate asked him, “What is truth?” After he had said this, he went out to the Jews again and told them, “I find no case against him.*³⁹*But you have a custom that I release someone for you at the Passover. Do you want me to release for you the King of the Jews?”*⁴⁰*They shouted in reply, “Not this man, but Barabbas!” Now Barabbas was a bandit.*

*19**Then Pilate took Jesus and had him flogged.*²*And the soldiers wove a crown of thorns and put it on his head, and they dressed him in a purple robe.*³*They kept coming up to him, saying, “Hail, King of the Jews!” and striking him on the face.*⁴*Pilate went out again and said to them, “Look, I am bringing him out to you to let you know that I find no case against him.”*⁵*So Jesus came out, wearing the crown of thorns and the purple robe. Pilate said to them, “Here is the man!”*⁶*When the chief priests and the police saw him, they shouted, “Crucify him! Crucify him!” Pilate said to them, “Take him yourselves and crucify him; I find no case against him.”*⁷*The Jews answered him, “We have a law, and according to that law he ought to die because he has claimed to be the Son of God.”*⁸*Now when Pilate heard this, he was more afraid than ever.*⁹*He entered his headquarters again and asked Jesus, “Where are you from?” But Jesus gave him no answer.*¹⁰*Pilate therefore said to him, “Do you refuse to speak*

to me? Do you not know that I have power to release you, and power to crucify you?" ¹¹*Jesus answered him, "You would have no power over me unless it had been given you from above; therefore the one who handed me over to you is guilty of a greater sin."* ¹²*From then on Pilate tried to release him, but the Jews cried out, "If you release this man, you are no friend of the emperor. Everyone who claims to be a king sets himself against the emperor."* ¹³*When Pilate heard these words, he brought Jesus outside and sat on the judge's bench at a place called The Stone Pavement, or in Hebrew Gabbatha.* ¹⁴*Now it was the day of Preparation for the Passover; and it was about noon. He said to the Jews, "Here is your King!"* ¹⁵*They cried out, "Away with him! Away with him! Crucify him!" Pilate asked them, "Shall I crucify your King?" The chief priests answered, "We have no king but the emperor."*

¹⁶*Then he handed him over to them to be crucified. (John 18:28- 19:16a)*

Let's walk through this moving story together. As we begin, the Jewish leaders haul Jesus before Pilate, who is staying at his headquarters in Jerusalem. The Jewish leaders refuse to enter the headquarters of the Gentile governor, for fear that they will incur ritual contamination from associating with a Gentile, meaning they wouldn't be able to participate in the Passover meal. That's why Pilate has to keep moving in and out of his building to speak to them. Did you catch the irony here? These religious

leaders are perfectly willing to railroad an innocent man to his death, but they're not willing to be inconveniently declared "unclean" and miss the Passover meal that night!

In their first encounter, Pilate questions Jesus about whether he claims to be "King of the Jews." This is a valid question, because there is no king in Judea, only the Roman governor, and a claim to be king could be seen as treason. Jesus assures Pilate that his kingdom is of no threat to Rome, because it is not of this world. Jesus' basis of authority is not political; It's that he tells the truth. Pilate's comment, "What is truth?" seems terribly cynical.

Pilate then goes out to the priests to say that he finds no reason to put Jesus to death and in his first effort to placate them, offers to release Jesus or Barabbas (someone who is a real threat to public order). They won't be deterred and choose Barabbas.

Pilate then has Jesus flogged or scourged, a punishment so savage that it sometimes resulted in death due to blood loss and shock. His soldiers mock Jesus as a fake king, further beating and humiliating him, as Gentiles now join the conspiracy against Jesus. Pilate brings the badly beaten, humiliated Jesus out to the crowd, hoping that the sight of the pitiful Jesus would be enough for them, as he again states he finds nothing

against him. It doesn't work. The priests offer a new charge: Jesus has claimed to be the Son of God.

This leads to the second encounter between Jesus and Pilate. Ironically, it is Pilate who is afraid, not Jesus, who has every reason to be terrified. Now Pilate is not a religious man, but apparently senses something holy in Jesus and it scares him. When Jesus declines to answer the question about his origins, Pilate reminds him that he has the power to release him or crucify him. Jesus replies that Pilate wouldn't have power to do either of these things if God had not given it to him! I continue to be astounded by Jesus' courage through this ordeal.

Pilate, perhaps spooked even more by the possibility that Jesus does have some kind of divine power, works even harder to release Jesus. But the chief priests have one final card to play. *"If you release this man, you are no friend of the emperor,"* they say. *"Everyone who claims to be a king sets himself against the emperor."* (John 19:12) Pilate's status as governor is precarious because of some previous miscalculations. The chief priests are threatening to go to the Emperor Tiberias over this issue and have Pilate removed from office. This clinches Jesus' fate, as Pilate, still knowing that Jesus has done no wrong, nevertheless folds, and pronounces a death sentence by crucifixion. The priests deny both their

own faith and their country by proclaiming, “*We have no king but the emperor.*”

By normal reckoning, we would expect Pontius Pilate to be the most remembered person from this story. After all, he had the power of the most powerful empire on the earth fully behind him. He built important buildings and made decisions that affected tens of thousands of people. But he is largely forgotten.

In fact in 1961 a stone was unearthed in Israel that had Pilate’s name on it, apparently a dedication stone from a building he had built. But it was found as a re-purposed stone in a different building! In other words, it was recycled trash! In fact, if the references to Pontius Pilate in the New Testament and Apostles Creed weren’t there, he would be long-forgotten. Pilate had an important position, but as a man, he lacked a moral compass, which can be seen in his derisive comment, “What is truth?”, as well as his willingness to condemn an innocent man to a horrible death to save his own position. He is a reminder that unless powerful government and other leaders have a good moral compass, they cannot be counted on to do the right thing.

Jesus, on the other hand, had no earthly power or wealth. His close, ragtag band of followers had abandoned him, as had the crowds of casual

followers. A betting person would have wagered that he would soon be forgotten. But his close connection to his Heavenly Father gave him courage and authority, even in this chaotic, dangerous situation. John points out how several times Pilate and others refer to Jesus as king. Even though they do so in a mocking way, they are speaking the truth- Jesus is king! Of everyone and everything! And Jesus, as opposed to Pilate, has over a billion followers this very day, 2000 years later. And not on Facebook! His followers have changed the world, in societies on six continents, throughout history, until the present time.

As we prepare to eat the Lord's Supper together, it's good to remember the tremendous sacrifice that Jesus endured for the forgiveness of our sins, and to thank him for that. And it's good to continue to examine ourselves this Lent, to be sure nothing of Pontius Pilate is creeping into our hearts.