

**“He suffered under Pontius Pilate” (Apostles’ Creed)**

Pontius Pilate had a reputation for being crass and brutal. It’s an assessment that came, not so much from the N.T., as from the Jewish historian, Josephus. Josephus tells us of at least two occasions when Pilate managed to alienate the Jewish population while he was Governor of Judah between the years 26 and 36.

It all began to go wrong with his first visit to Jerusalem. Roman soldiers tried to bring military standards, with their pagan symbols, into the holy city. Previous governors, aware of Jewish sensitivities, had always removed the pagan symbols before they and the soldiers entered Jerusalem. But, Pilate was more confrontational and the result was disastrous. Angry Jews pursued the new Governor all the way back to his headquarters in Caesarea whereupon Pilate corralled them into a local amphitheatre and threatened to kill them. In the end, though, Pilate had to climb down and he never really recovered from that disastrous start to his governorship.

And this was not an isolated incident. Some years later Pilate needed money to build an aqueduct and develop the

water supply in Jerusalem. So, in a moment of madness, he raided the temple treasury for a quick buck. As word of what he had done spread, tens of thousands of Jews gathered in the city to protest. Pilate's response was to disguise his troops, send them in among the crowds and attack. Many Jews were killed in the process. Josephus was, of course, writing about all this from a pro-Jewish perspective. But, even Luke, who is more diplomatic about Rome, adds to the negative picture of Pilate in today's gospel. He refers to an occasion when Galileans were on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem and went to the temple to offer sacrifice. Pilate, fearing another riot, sent in the troops and, once again, slaughtered them. The blood of the dead mingled with the blood of sacrifices in the temple courtyard polluting the temple. It is hard to imagine how he could have given greater offence to the Jewish people.

And it is no accident that Luke mentions this incident with Pilate at this point in his gospel. Nor is it an accident that we hear this particular passage halfway through Lent. The mention of Pilate and Jewish deaths is there to remind us that Jesus is heading inexorably towards the city where terrible things are likely to happen. Luke, and the liturgists, are

preparing us for Jesus' entry into Jerusalem where he is going to suffer under Pontius Pilate.

In her famous radio play "The man born to be King" Dorothy Sayers developed this link between Pilate and Jesus in an unusual way. According to the passion account in Matthew's gospel Pilate's wife sent her husband a message warning him to have nothing to do with Jesus because "I have suffered a great deal today in a dream because of him". In her play Dorothy Sayers imagines the content of that dream. This is how she describes it: Pilate's wife, Claudia, is on board a ship and the sky darkens and the sea begins to toss and turn. "Then there came a cry, strange and piercing "Great Pan is dead". And I asked the captain of the ship, "How can God die?" And he answered, "Don't you remember? They crucified him. He suffered under Pontius Pilate"...and then all the people in the ship turned their faces to me and said: "Pontius Pilate....Pontius Pilate...He suffered under Pontius Pilate...sub Pontio Pilato...in all tongues and voices I heard it, even little children with their mothers saying, he suffered under Pontius Pilate".

It is a nightmare scene in which Claudia hears her husband's name sounding down through the centuries. And,

it is true, men, women and children have said in all tongues and languages “he suffered under Pontius Pilate” as they have recited the Apostles’ Creed. So why do we have this focus on Pilate in both gospel and creed? Well, let me give three brief reasons – historical, political and spiritual.

First, the historical: The use of Pilate’s name fixes the crucifixion of Jesus in history. Jesus’ death was an actual event that occurred in an occupied country in the Middle East around the year 33, just before Pilate was recalled to Rome. It is worth stating the obvious because sometimes the church has turned the death of Jesus into a philosophical debate about theories of atonement. The Bible, though, is clearly not primarily a work of philosophy. It reveals God’s interaction with individuals and communities through the course of history. It tells of God’s grace at work in births and deaths, in triumphs and tragedies. And there are implications in all that.

Every year we hold cathedral lectures which are extremely well-attended – people come in their hundreds to be informed, nourished and stimulated intellectually which is obviously right and good. But, lectures by their very nature have an objectivity to them and they can be held at arm’s length, so to speak. And it is a curious and concerning fact

that when we put on a Cathedral Lent course or a Cathedral Quiet day or the Cathedral Retreat we struggle to make the event viable. Take the Cathedral Retreat in May. We have an inspiring leader in Bishop Michael Marshall and a comfortable retreat house with good food. We offer help with travel and assistance for those who struggle to afford it. Yet very few places have been taken. It seems that something that touches mind *and* heart or impinges on the totality of our lives seems to cause fear or reserve. Yet, the reference to Pontius Pilate reminds us that that is where God is to be found – in the fears and facts of actual human lives and histories.

Well, we must move on from the historical to the political. Only two people are mentioned in the Creeds, apart from Jesus. The first is Mary who is young, female, poor, pregnant out of wedlock and Jewish. She was someone socially and religiously suspect for all sorts of reason in her culture. Yet, through her faith God brought life and healing to the world. The other person named in the creed, Pilate, could hardly be more different. He is mature, male, wealthy, Roman and safely wed. Yet, through his administration of government the “author of life” suffered and was crucified. Week by week the Creeds are quietly reminding us what we

have seen again in the Chilcot Inquiry that the exercise of establishment power is fraught with danger. And it is because the decisions of those in office have a profound effect upon the destinies of others for good or ill that St. Paul is so insistent we pray for those who govern us, from local magistrates to the highest government minister.

Then there is the spiritual. Part of the difficulty of governing or administering justice is that often there is no simple choice between good and evil. Certainly Pilate was caught in a dilemma when it came to dealing with Jesus. In theory the Roman law was there to protect the innocent but in practice he might have yet another riot on his hands if he released Jesus. The gospels writers seem to give Pilate the benefit of the doubt here and present us with a man facing a genuine dilemma. And there is the spiritual reason for Pilate's appearance in the creed. One of the church fathers, Origen, saw the human personality as a microcosm, a miniature world in which every type of character is present. On that basis there is something of Pilate in each one of us. There is within us that compromised person who, at some time, has faced an impossible dilemma and ended up choosing the

lesser of evils, or choosing the general good to the cost of one individual.

And yet even so there is hope. Jesus said to Pilate: “You would have no power over me, unless it had been given you from above”. God allowed Jesus to suffer under Pontius Pilate and in doing so he bore the consequences of flawed human decisions. Indeed, Jesus took the whole weight of the world’s failures and compromises that we might be set free.

And that hope is Pilate’s as well as ours, which is why the last word must go to the Abyssinian Church. For there is a tradition in the Abyssinian Church that Pilate became a Christian and they later canonised him. I like that tradition not because I like happy endings but because it points us to the heart of the gospel. Despite our wrong choices, despite our failures and compromises Jesus bears them all and is able to bring us to new life with him, in the glory of the Father.