

"PILATE'S TRIAL"

A Sermon By

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106 East 86th Street
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Fifth Sunday in Lent

...t we turn to the account of Jesus
...st Sunday morning we followed Jesus
...ed and where Peter proceeded to deny
...t not only was Jesus on trial, but
...e and let some of its meaning spill

...before Pilate. And, in another
...sus. And again, as was the case
...elves in this trial, too.

...te and what we know about him.
...that he was something of a second-
...ator". The governors of the major
...o we get the impression that Pilate,
...s of government service. To under-
...examine his record in Palestine.

...umanitarian administration of
...colonial policy was to respect
...religious customs of the
...sionately devoted to religion.
...I remember, those of you who
...ents, is "You shall have no graven

Now here comes Pilate, newly appointed procurator of the colony of Palestine and Samaria. His official residence is in the beautiful new Roman city on the sunny Mediterranean called Caesarea. There he has his palace. He makes his first visit to the holy city of Jerusalem marching with a column of Roman soldiers who carry standards at the top of which is the graven image of Caesar.

The Jews are enraged. Previous governors, Pilate's predecessors, had respected the religious sensibilities of the Jewish people by removing those images from the standards of their soldiers. But Pilate, giving evidence of his own neurotic need to feel important...to strengthen his "macho" image, disregarded that tradition, called the Law of the Jews superstitious, and openly violated it, only to get his first introduction into what kind of people he was governing.

Palestine was a land filled with bitter memories of oppression and humiliation by foreign invaders, and therefore filled with thousands of zealots who were determined that it would never happen again. They protested Pilate's entry into the city nearly to the point of a riot. When Pilate returned to his palace in Caesarea, they followed him and demonstrated outside his palace. When Pilate sent soldiers to threaten violence if they did not disperse, these Jews bent over and exposed their necks to the Roman soldiers' swords and challenged them to cut their heads off. With that, Pilate capitulated and ordered that all graven images be removed from the standards of Roman soldiers.

On another occasion he appropriated funds from the Temple treasury to use for the construction of an aqueduct. This time he had a full-blown riot for he had invaded the sacred precincts of the Temple. He reacted to that riot by repressing it violently, and for that he was reported to the Emperor back in Rome,

which is not the happiest circumstance for a career diplomat who wants to move from procurator to proconsul and get out of that hot, volatile land with an unruly people and settle in to some soft, civilized post, like a colony in Greece.

BEHAVIOR AT THE TRIAL OF JESUS

Now, if you understand this background about Pilate, I think you'll understand better his behavior at the trial of Jesus. He's a frightened and scared bureaucrat now. He is on report in Rome. He can't afford another mistake, another good. So he moves cautiously, patiently, expediently. He knows by now he is ruling a people prone to civil disruption...who are looking for another leader in the style of the great Judas Maccabeus who a hundred years before had organized the people to throw out the Macedonians.

Pilate knows this, and so he moves expediently. He's not interested in justice; he's not interested in fairness; he's not interested in truth, which he himself admits in this scene. He's interested in surviving, as a procurator, long enough to catch the next plane to a better post. He'll never make it, incidentally, as far as we can tell. The last we hear of him is in AD 36 - a few years after this incident, when the Emperor Tiberias calls him back to Rome to answer for the mess of things he has made in the other half of his colony, in Samaria.

But now he has before him the man who is accused of making the claim that He is the King of the Jews, and thus, his accusers argue, He is a political threat to Rome. And so Pilate gets right to the point. "Are you the King of the Jews?" he asks. And Jesus answers:

"My Kingdom is not of this world". "Then you are a King, after all" Pilate responds. And Jesus says, "You say that I am a King. For this I was born, and for this I have come into the world - to bear witness to the truth". (John 18: 37)

And with that Jesus loses Pilate. No King has ever talked quite like that. And Pilate may not be the brightest bureaucrat in the administration, but he knows politics. He concludes that this man is no threat, and ends the interrogation with a rhetorical, "What is truth?" "What is truth?"

WHAT ARE WE TO MAKE OF THIS SCENE?

Now that's the scene. What are we to make of it? We have already discovered that in order for the Bible to really speak to us we have to use our imaginations and identify with the various characters whom Jesus confronts.

We did that fairly easily last week with Peter. Bumbling Peter, it's so easy for us to identify with Peter. But how are we to identify with Pilate. In preparation for this sermon I read two or three of the commentaries on this scene that were available and they all hold Pilate up to be the symbol of some indecisiveness and cowardice. They picture Pilate as drawn sympathetically to Jesus, but somewhat intimidated by the crowd that was gathering.

But I am not entirely convinced that was the way it was at all. I don't think the Gospel of John pictures Jesus as one who was that easy to sympathize with. The Gospel of John pictures Jesus as One who comes to judge our way of life. He's a disturber of our complacency. He comes to us, in John's Gospel, in the form of a prophet - certainly not in the form of a therapist.

Furthermore, I don't think Pilate was a coward. I don't think he was weak or vacillating. His past history shows him to be a blunderer and doing some dumb things, but he never vacillated about it. He just moved right ahead and did dumb things boldly, like we do on occasion.

So what is happening here is that Pilate is trying hard to do the right thing and for Pilate the right thing to do is what is right for Rome and for his own career. That's what he is getting paid to do, and that's what he will be rewarded for doing, and finally - that's what he does. He sentences Jesus to death because it is the best thing for Rome.

Not only did he not sympathize with Jesus, I'm not even sure he understood Him. They lived in different worlds as Jesus pointed out to him, saying, "My Kingdom is not of this world" which means, "It's not like yours, Pilate..." And with that the story comes to where you and I live.

SOME REFLECTIONS Jesus is not of our world, either. He wouldn't fit any better now than He did then. The point John is trying to make in relating this scene from the Gospel is that if you have trouble believing in Jesus as "the way, the truth and the life"...if you feel that what Jesus taught and said is irrelevant to the life you have to live, then maybe you are beginning to understand who He really is. Let me explain further...

Go back to the first chapter of the Gospel of John, to the prologue, where John sets the theme for the entire Gospel. The purpose of a prologue is to let the reader know what's coming, what's going to happen and John says:

"The true light that enlightens every man was coming into the world. He was in the world and the world was made through Him."

In other words, Jesus is the way the world should be. Jesus is the way that you and I should be. But then this sentence, "Yet the world knew Him not". And Pilate and all the others in the Gospel of John who judged Jesus are there as evidence that "the world knew Him not". Yet, He is the way the world should be.

Then jump to the third chapter to this very revealing passage where John says:

"And this is the judgement - that the Light has come into the world, and men chose darkness rather than the light..."

The point that John is trying to get across is that the judgement is not what Pilate is doing to Jesus. The judgement is that the Saviour of the world is here, and we shrug our shoulders and say, "What has He to do with me?"

So, if you have trouble believing in Jesus - take heart. You may be beginning to understand what He is and who He is.

John says that Jesus did not come into this world to bless the way we are. He came into the world to change us so we would be like Him. And sometimes I think that's the hardest thing for us to understand - that Jesus came into the world to change it. We prefer to have Him come into the world to bless it. He came into the world to change it. So...if we find Him old-fashioned, out of date, irrelevant, impractical....then maybe we're beginning to get the point.

I remember a story told about Billy Sunday. He went into a town to preach and he got a lot of people upset. The city fathers came to him and said, "Billy, you're rubbing the fur the wrong way". Billy Sunday said, "Tell the cats to turn around."

GIVE BECAUSE WE HAVE RECEIVED

Or, let me illustrate it this way. We think that Jesus taught us that we should give, which He did, but He also said we should give...because we have received. So what Jesus really taught us is that we should receive, and that's the hardest part for many of us. We are to look upon our lives, He said, as a gift that is given to us every day - as a gift from God and of God - and therefore rejoice in the day and live our lives in gratitude.

Well, try doing that. I don't know how it is with you but when I get up in the morning what I have to do so often determines what there is going to be in that day for which I shall be joyful. When I have a chore to do, something I don't particularly want to do - that's not my idea of a good day.

If I have to face pain again tomorrow, the same one I had to face yesterday and it looks like it's not going to go away, that's not my idea of having something to rejoice about. If I have to endure sorrow, if the world is not the way I want it to be, that's not my idea of a reason for being grateful. But Jesus said over and over again - in parable, in beatitude, in his sayings, and in the example of His own life - that we are to live this life as if God were the Giver and we are the receivers and "rejoice" and "be glad in it"...in the gift that God has given us.

But...that may offend us. It's a bit of an affront to our pride. We have trouble giving, most of us, because we aren't really that sure that we have received.

CLOSING When Pilate heard Jesus say, "Pilate, I don't fit into your world". Pilate said, "You sure don't", and shrugged Him off as irrelevant.

If you've discovered that Jesus doesn't fit into the world that you live in, then take heart. The Gospel is beginning to work. You're edging forward in your understanding of who He really is. He has come to judge the world, but the story doesn't end there.

Just as in Peter's story we turned to the last chapter of the Gospel of John to hear the Good News, in Pilate's story we turn to the third chapter to a verse we all learned in Sunday School. John 3: 16. "God so loved the world

"God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, what whosoever believes in Him should not perish, but have eternal life."

And then the 17th verse which is the conclusion of that proclamation,

"For God sent His Son into the world - not to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved."

So Jesus came to judge - not to condemn. To judge our life with His life, so we would choose His life and know eternal life. But we judged Him, condemned Him and crucified Him, and then He rose again so He would always stand before us and say:

"I have come into the world to bear witness
to the truth".

And stand there...waiting for our judgement, stand there..waiting for our
decision. To accept Him or to reject Him?