

Intro – Easter Next Week

We have been through a variety of enemies of Jesus. Trying to get a better glimpse of him. His homies from Nazareth who tried to throw him off of a cliff. The Pharisees. King Herod. And this weekend, we will tackle two huge conceptual enemies – sin and death. But this morning, we are going to hit one guy that has to be on the parade of bad guys. Pontius Pilate, procurator of Judea.

Pilate's job was to be a governor – the sixth governor assigned to this area. There were two markers of success for a Roman governor. 1) Be sure taxes are collected. 2) Keep the peace. If you did those two things, you did not annoy Caesar. You fly under the radar screen and move to retirement.

Now, being Governor of Judah means that he must have been military for a long time. Promoted through the ranks. This was a reward. But let's be honest, governor of Judea was not a peach of an assignment. It was an obscure corner of the Roman Empire. It wasn't rich or famous. Not great entertainment. No NFL franchise. But their college basketball team did make it to the elite 8... wait, that's Omaha.

Anyway. Pilate lived in Caesarea Maritima. It is **on the coast HERE**. It was the Roman city built by Herod the Great to keep Rome happy. But whenever Passover took place, EVERYBODY travelled to Jerusalem. Including Pilate. Gotta keep the peace when the population swells to 10X its normal size.

Turn to Luke chapter 23 to pick up the story.

23 Then the whole assembly rose and led him off to Pilate.

Who is the whole assembly? It is all of the Sanhedrin – the ruling council of 70 leaders of Jerusalem. A group of religious and political leaders who represent Israel to the roman governor. They showed up for an early morning encounter with Pilate – Rome's government.

7am. There has been an evening trial Thursday – Sanhedrin only. Jesus has been accused of claiming to be God (blasphemy) and locked up. There is no chance of the Jews being able to kill him, although it is a capital offense in Leviticus. Only Rome is allowed to execute capital punishment. So they plan to take Jesus to Pilate first thing in the morning.

They come into Pilate's courtyard and yell at him. They may have woke him up. Imagine the Roman snug in bed with the wifey and there is a clatter outside... not just a clatter, a crowd. Yelling, angry at 7am... and he has not even had his scooters yet.

² And they began to accuse him, saying, "We have found this man subverting our nation. He opposes payment of taxes to Caesar and claims to be Messiah, a king." – Does he actually subvert? Taxes? Claim to be a king?

³ So Pilate asked Jesus, "Are you the king of the Jews?"

"You have said so," Jesus replied.

Now, I want to pause here because it is such an insightful piece of ambiguity. Pilate, to be frank, does not give a rip if Jesus is a religious character. So when he says “king of the Jews”, he is not asking a Messiah question, or a lineage of David question. He just wants to know if Jesus is into politics. Is he going to lead some kind of revolution to take over Rome.

And Jesus is intentionally ambiguous. “you have said so” is a good translation. It is not a yes, and not a no. This is super important! Because **Jesus is denying that he has political aspirations, but not denying there are political implications!** Think about this. If the Buddha was asked this question, the answer is easy “NO”. Not interested in politics of any form. If Muhammed was asked this question, the answer is ‘YES’. I want to take spiritual, social, political, economic and educational control. I want it all. But Jesus’ answer is “You have said so.”

Similar, if Jesus was of a particular sect, he could answer clearly. If he was an Essene, he would say “No. I separate from political institutions.” If he was a Zealot, he would say “Yes. My passion is the overthrow of Rome.” But Jesus just says “you have said so.”

In John’s account of this same event, Jesus says to Pilate “My kingdom is not of this world.” In other words, Pilate, I am not a direct threat to your establishment, but don’t miss the fact that I am a king forever. Actually a bigger deal than you think, but no threat to you at this time.

Christianity would eventually become the dominant influence on the Roman empire, but not because Christians replaced Caesar. True, Constantine converted eventually, but he could already read the way things were moving. His was a response to momentum, not the cause.

So, how did Christianity get so influential? Rodney Stark has written a book that would be on my list of “Great books Christians should read.” **The Rise of Christianity**. In it, he details how Jesus influence spread through the empire subversively. Want a couple of examples?

- In the Roman empire, there were 140 men for every 100 women. The reason? Infanticide. A girl baby was considered a burden of low value. A bad investment. So about 1/3 of them were just left out to die of exposure. Enter the Christians who not only valued all their babies, but they often rescued dying infant girls left out to die.
- Add to this that there was a compelling desire to care for widows. In the Roman world, Caesar decreed that all widows must remarry within 2 years. Why? Caesar thought a woman’s value was only in her ability to be a good wife for a man... and women were scarce. The Christians believed that a woman’s life is inherently valuable. She would be cared for within the community as a command of Jesus.
- So what happened? The Christian world started to have a net surplus of women. And when an outnumbered Roman man wanted to find a wife, he had to go Christian. But these women who have been valued and loved in the Christian community are not about to go pagan. They were passionately ‘in’. So Romans began their marital journey with a spiritual journey. Convert to Jesus or ‘no wife for you.’ Lots of Christian families started that way.
- Christians also had the audacity to care for the poor. So nobody left their community. AND they were just nutty enough to follow a messiah who said they should care for OTHER people’s poor. So, these people at the low point of their life find care and compassion from Christians and say “I want some of that!”

- You can see how, over time, this group of the poor, the women, the outcast and the misfit got more and more healthy in loving unselfish community. They welcomed one more and just kept growing. Was there political power in that? You bet, but it was power through subversion, not power through control. It was grassroots power, not legal power.

Can you see why Jesus answered “You have said so.”? Lets keep rolling

⁴ Then Pilate announced to the chief priests and the crowd, “I find no basis for a charge against this man.”

OK, Pilate does not want to find Jesus guilty. Why? Well romans only kill people who are a threat to Rome. They must be guilty of inciting a mob for insurrection. Crucifixion was not for ordinary crime, it was for trying to take over from Rome. And when you were crucified it was done publicly, often naked. At a crossroads so lots of people could see, so the shame would be magnified, and so that nobody would ever want to cross Rome again.

But Pilate puts together the data on Jesus. Looks like he healed a bunch of people. Taught people to love each other. Freed people from demons. Whoa... fed thousands of hungry people... Not sure he is a threat to Rome.

But, but... the people insist. ⁵ But they insisted, “He stirs up the people all over Judea by his teaching. He started in Galilee and has come all the way here.”

They don’t like that he claims to be God. Now, they have already said that he opposes paying taxes to Caesar, but is that true? Nope. Jesus said “Give unto Caesar what is Caesars.” He is not claiming to be here to take over Rome. Pilate has interviewed a lot of so-called Messiahs. A lot of people starting insurrections. And their agenda is clear. Overthrow Rome. Jesus just didn’t. He said controversial and sometimes crazy things. But one thing that was never on the list was “take up arms and overthrow the roman curs!” “Freedom!!!”

The Jews can’t make that case with Pilate, so they’re like “yeah...he...uh.... Stirs up people. That’s it!” Not just here, but it started in Galilee! And at this point, Pilate sees a potential out!

⁶ On hearing this, Pilate asked if the man was a Galilean. ⁷ When he learned that Jesus was under Herod’s jurisdiction, he sent him to Herod, who was also in Jerusalem at that time.

So, you know this part from our Herod message. Jesus goes to Herod. Herod wants a little magic show. Jesus refuses, Herod mocks him, puts a fancy robe on him and sends him back. Great... Pilates says. And it’s still like 8:30 am. So, skip down to v. 13

¹³ Pilate called together the chief priests, the rulers and the people, ¹⁴ and said to them, “You brought me this man as one who was inciting the people to rebellion. I have examined him in your presence and have found **no basis for your charges** against him. ¹⁵ Neither has Herod, for he sent him back to us; as you can see, he has done nothing to deserve death. ¹⁶ Therefore, I will punish him and then release him.” ^[17] ^[a]

¹⁸ But the whole crowd shouted, “Away with this man! Release Barabbas to us!” ¹⁹ (Barabbas had been thrown into prison for an insurrection in the city, and for murder.)

You might have noticed that I am tracking on the board how many times Pilate is trying to release Jesus. Pilate did not want to kill every person that a crowd hated. Besides, we learn in John that Pilate's wife had a bad dream about him... "Don't kill this guy." She said. And Pilate is HIGHLY resistant. He tries to compromise – "How about if I just beat him up, but don't kill him?" No go.

Again, we find out from another gospel writer that it was Pilate's idea to give the people a choice of who to release for the Passover – Jesus Barabbus or Jesus of Nazareth? And they clearly pick Barabbus.

Have you ever thought of why? Well for the Jews, a Barabbus is highly controllable. He might inspire another skirmish against the Romans. But these things get squashed all the time. Barabbus will either reform or get killed. But Jesus is not tame or predictable. No telling where his claims to be God would take people... already the pharisees and saducees were being undermined. This could result in a whole new sect! And they did not want the competition.

²⁰ Wanting to release Jesus, Pilate appealed to them again. ²¹ But they kept shouting, "Crucify him! Crucify him!"

- I can't do this by myself. I need a little group participation here. Can you help me out and be the crowd? I want you to shout "Crucify him, Crucify him."
- Not good enough. Try again, but raise a fist.
- Still not enough. I want you to make the mean face. Really screw it up. Angry dude. Raise the fist and call it out.
- One more. Stand up. Raise a fist. Mess up your face and say it four times. Go!

Silence.... Then quiet

Did you feel it? Could you feel the crowds anger? And that's - that's against our Jesus. Our pure and perfect sinless son of God. Our healer. Our hero. And the crowds were chanting for his torture... Can you imagine?

You can be seated.

²² For the third time he spoke to them: "Why? What crime has this man committed? I have found in him no grounds for the death penalty. Therefore I will have him punished and then release him."

²³ But with loud shouts they insistently demanded that he be crucified, and their shouts prevailed. ²⁴ So Pilate decided to grant their demand. ²⁵ He released the man who had been thrown into prison for insurrection and murder, the one they asked for, and surrendered Jesus to their will.

Six times. Maybe more depending on how you count. Pilate tried to release Jesus six times. Pilate was not just convinced that Jesus had not done anything worthy of the death penalty. I think Pilate knew there was something utterly different about this man.

- Maybe it was his wife's dream. Sometimes a powerful man actually listens to his wife.
- Maybe it was his confidence. "You said it" ... or in other places "My kingdom is not of this world." "You would have no power unless my Father gave it to you." Not arrogant, just like he's walking around with this special knowledge.

- Maybe it was his reputation. Maybe Pilate did a little research and found out all of the good this guy did. Maybe Pilate was on his own spiritual journey and just wondered if maybe, just maybe, this guy WAS special.

We can't get inside of Pilate's brain, but we know that he finally gave in. Why? Keeping the peace was his job. Better to let one good man die than risk a riot that could kill hundreds. And risk word getting back to Rome that it was all his fault.

And so. Jesus, the God-Man, was sent to die. And those of you who know the Jesus story know that Jesus never resisted. It was his destiny to die. Why? He died as a substitute for you and for me... and for the Pilate, if he would take him. And for the Pharisees, if they would turn to Jesus. We know that Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea did. His innocence was sparkling. His death was unjust.

But that was the point. There was a swapping – the innocent for the guilty. And unjust death that allowed us to escape our just death. We deserved to die – we were under the sentence of guilt. Well, because humans are by nature guilty of sin and lots of it.

Music Begins

Which makes me ask a question. Who do you relate to in this story? Jesus? The Sanhedrin crying crucify him? Pilate – caught between a rock and a hard place?

You know who I relate to? Barabbus.

He was the guilty one. Sitting in a prison cell. And the door swings open. "You are free to go, slimedog." The guard says. You got picked to go free on Passover, while that guy is going to die." Barabbus did not ask questions, he just took off. Did he ever research who this guy is? Was he there on Pentecost day? Did he become a part of the New Testament community? We don't know.... And I think that is on purpose. Because we all have the Barabbus decision to make.

Do you know what Bar-abbus means? Bar means 'son of', Abba is Father. Barabbus is simply "Son of a Father" How poetic that THE Son of THE Father was his substitute. THE Son of THE Father was given in exchange for some son of some father. The perfect for the fallen. The righteous for the condemned.

This is why I relate to Barabbus. I need a sub. Especially wne it comes to death, paying for sins and facing horrible torture. To be honest, I am glad someone else will take that on. We don't know how Bar-abbus responded, it is your choice for how you will respond Barabbus junior. Will you accept the substitution? Will you trust the swap? Will you bust out of your prison doors to freedom? Will you show up to worship him and thank him all the days of your life.

Let's stand together. Pray.

I'll take it!