

PONTIUS PILATE SPEAKS

Mark 15:1-15

By

Dr. Myron J. Taylor, Minister

Westwood Hills Christian Church, Emeritus

I am Pontius Pilate. After all these years, I come back to you from the Great Beyond—the realm of the dead. I want to tell you my story because it may save you from making it your own. Thus I may suffer a little less from the hell I have made in my own soul.

When Herod the Great died in 4 B.C., he left his eighteen-year-old son, Archelaus, to rule the province of Judea. He turned out to be such a tyrant that the Jews asked the Romans to appoint a Governor over them. I was appointed the fifth Procurator of Judea in 26 A.D. From the moment I set foot on Judean soil, everything goes wrong. It was a tough spot, but if I could do a good job and avoid the errors of my predecessors, my future in Caesar's service would be assured. I didn't know how stubborn those Jews were and how fanatical was their worship of one God and how deep was their hatred of oppression and their secret contempt for the Roman Empire. Especially I hadn't come to terms with Caiaphas, their crafty High Priest. My predecessor appointed him, but I couldn't remove him, because he had cleverly worked his way into the good graces of Caesar. The man actually had more power than I had and was more cunning. He frustrated me at every turn. First I tried a display of power. I ordered my soldiers to carry images of the Emperor into the Jewish temple. Caiaphas immediately ordered two thousand praying Jews to surround my palace for six days and nights until I threatened to massacre them, and then they bared their necks and dared me to do it. Enraged and humiliated, I ordered the images taken down.

Then I tried a benevolent approach. Jerusalem needed a fresh water supply, so I decided to build an aqueduct, which pleased the Jews, but I made the mistake of paying for it out of the temple treasury. They started a riot, my soldiers put it down, several were killed, and I got a scathing rebuke from the Emperor.

On Thursday evening of their Passover week, Caiaphas comes to my official residence in the Tower of Antonio next to the temple and tells me of their plans for one named Jesus and the part he expects me to play in it. By midnight Jesus will be arrested. He will be tried immediately before the Jewish Sanhedrin and most certainly condemned to death. Shortly after dawn, he was to be brought to my palace so that I might examine him and officially pass the death sentence. "Just a formality," said Caiaphas. "I think we understand each other." I understood well enough. I must do what he said or he will send another report to Caesar. Judea has to be the most difficult place in all the world to keep peace.

I ruled for ten years. I sat in judgment on many cases. But I am remembered for just one. It is about that one case that I want to tell you.

You all know about the blot upon my name, the shame of 2000 years. Do you know my motives? Do you understand why? I want to let you inside my mind that you may see how it worked on that fateful day when I faced the question, “What, then, shall I do with Jesus?” Oh, how it still rings in my ears. I can still hear the anger in their voices. I can still see the look on his face. And just to think that I answered the question by washing my hands!

Have you ever had a clear conviction and refused to follow it? I knew what was right. Those Jews had no case against Jesus. I knew it. They were out for blood. I never saw such hatred. But I gave in to them. There were reasons—good reasons. There was my popularity with the people. They didn't like me or trust me. There was my standing with Caesar—my job was to keep the peace. Caesar didn't like rebellion and trouble. There was my desire to get on in the world, to move up in the Empire and get away from that dreaded place. A man has to think about his career. I had the best set of excuses in the world. But, oh, what are they worth now? If you are a lover of excuses, you had better enjoy them now. Some day they will return to haunt you.

“What shall I do with Jesus who is called Christ?” That was my question. How was I to know it would be the most important question I would ever answer? Hundreds of men had stood before me—many of them pretenders. At first I thought this Jesus was just another one of them. Yet, He was different. In the tumult he was calm; in the hatred he was kind; in the shouting he was quiet. I had a conviction—but I did not follow it. But before you pass judgment on me, please remember that I am very much like you. He faces you today just as he faced me then. The centuries have not gotten rid of him.

My wife had a dream—she was always trying to make something out of dreams. She sensed that there was something special about him. She pled with me to have nothing to do with him. You, too, have a wife, a mother, a child who also pleads with you. You feel that you know best, but there are times when you should listen. I beg you, don't do what I did. When faced with my biggest question, my biggest decision, I tried three things.

First, I Tried To Evade The Question.

Those Jewish leaders! How I abhorred them! You have never seen such tenacious troublemakers! They came to the palace early, and then refused to enter lest they be ceremonially defiled by being in the house of a Gentile on Passover. All the while, they were clamoring for a man's blood. You talk about straining at gnats and swallowing camels; keeping forms and forgetting about justice and mercy and faith. In every detail, they were outwardly correct, but they were inwardly corrupt. As a Roman, I am much more impressed with a good life than with a good creed. They are hypocrites of the worst sort. I knew what they really wanted. That Jesus was a real threat to them. But, I had to face the fact, my job was to keep peace with those rabble rousers. I went out to the crowd and in the presence of all I asked, “What accusation do you bring against this man?” They answered with their own infallible opinion—“If this man were not an evildoer, we would not have handed him over to you” (John 18:29,30). Their attitude was defiant—How

dare you to question us! Here was my chance. So I suggested, “Take him yourselves, and judge him by your own law” (John 18:31). That would let me out. But they would have none of it. They were after his blood, and the Roman law forbade them passing the death sentence. They were quick to answer, “It is not lawful for us to put any man to death” (John 18:31). I thought I could get him off my hands and prevent them from killing him at the same time. But they would have none of it.

I made a second effort to evade the issue. As soon as I talked to him, I knew He was innocent. So, I decided to release him. I stepped out before the crowd again and announced my decision, “I find no fault (crime) in him” (John 18:38). The crowd was in a surly mood, and they roared their disapproval. Then I heard a man cry out, “He stirs up the people, teaching throughout all Judea beginning from Galilee even unto this place” (Luke 23:5). Galilee! That's the word! Herod ruled in Galilee! And Herod just happened to be in Jerusalem on that day. Let Herod try him! I watched the crowd move off. The prisoner was in chains. The soldiers surrounded him. The mob was at his heels. I went into the palace and breathed a sigh of relief. There wasn't much relief because my conscience was like a boiling sea.

About an hour, later the mob was again at my window. The prisoner was with them. Herod found nothing worthy of death in him and sent him back to me. My plan had failed. How can I get rid of him? What can I do?

I got a bright idea. It was customary at the Passover Feast to release a prisoner to please the Jews. In the prison was a tough one—a rebel, a robber, a revolutionary, and a murderer—whose name was Jesus Barabbas. I will put him beside Jesus and let the crowd decide. Surely the contrast will be so great that the crowd will choose to release Jesus. There they stood on the Portico—Jesus Barabbas scowling, and Jesus of Nazareth calm and serene. “Whom will you that I release unto you, Jesus Barabbas or Jesus who is called Christ?” The angry mob led by their leaders screamed, “Barabbas, Barabbas, Jesus must be crucified.” I could hardly believe my eyes and my ears. I am a tough procurator and I have seen it all, but this scene will never leave my mind. How long will the world continue to cry, “Give us Barabbas”? Give us money, give us power, give us pleasure, give us our own way! Let Jesus be crucified!

My third attempt to evade the issue failed. I have come back from the world of tortured spirits to tell you that you cannot avoid this question, “What shall I do with Jesus...?” Some questions demand an answer. Refuse to decide, and time will decide for you. Faith is a forced decision. You cannot escape the truth. Say “yes,” and the truth will lead you to a fullness you cannot imagine. Say “no,” and it will hang on your neck with the weight of a great chain forever. Delay will bring you to the end at last where the only appropriate symbol for your gravestone will be not a cross, not a crown, but a question mark!

Having Failed to Evade The Question, I Decided to Try to Compromise.

Politics is the Art of Compromise, you know. I found no fault in Jesus; Herod found no fault in him; yet, these angry Jews persisted! “I will therefore chastise him and release

him” —I will give him a good whipping to satisfy their rage and let him go. It is a half-way course, but perhaps it will work.

I sent him inside the palace. There he was stripped to the waist and made to bend over and hold his ankles, while a guard laid forty stripes with a whip on his back. Soldiers plaited a crown of thorns and pressed it into his brow. I remember how the blood ran down his face. In mockery, they placed an old purple robe on him, put a cattail in his hand, and mocked him as a King. They struck him and spat upon him in derision. He could hardly stand upon his feet.

Then I took him back to the crowd. I led the way. How pathetic he was—so weak, so pale, so bloody. Surely hate will give way to pity now. The crowd screams ever more loudly, “Crucify him, Crucify him.” The Chief Priests and the Elders were leading the mob in their chants. My compromise had failed. I put my question squarely up to them—“What, then, shall I do with Jesus who is called Christ?” They all said, “Let him be crucified.”

My justice would not condemn him. My courage would not champion him. I tried to straddle the issue. There are many yet today who will not deny him. They say they believe and yet they will not confess him. They give him space in their show windows but not in their hearts.

All compromisers hear me—listen to me carefully—if I had my life to live over, I would confess him to be God or I would condemn him as a demon. The way of compromise is bitter. You never get rid of Jesus. He is still standing there looking deep into your eyes after your compromise has failed.

Now I was frantic. I tried to evade the issue, and that failed. I tried to compromise with the Jews, and that failed. What could I do? My one last effort was to try to transfer responsibility.

In my palace, Jesus and I stood facing each other, as though we were the only two men in the whole world. I was not religious, but I was superstitious, and there was definitely something different about him. His calmness of spirit shook my troubled soul, his fearlessness made me feel like a cringing dog. His kingliness reduced me to the status of a slave. I had the insane desire to stand up and salute him. I asked myself, “Is he on trial before you, or are you on trial before him?” I asked him who he was, and at first he refused to speak to me. I told him I had the authority to release him and I had the authority to crucify him. With almost an expression of pity on his face, he said to me: “You would have no authority at all over me, if it had not been granted to you from above; and therefore the deeper guilt lies with the man who handed me over to you.” That’s it! Now I knew that I must release him or I could never respect myself again. I marched out bravely to the people, and before I can open my mouth, they shout, “If you let this man go, you are no friend to Caesar; any man who claims to be a king is defying Caesar.” I was beaten and I knew it. Those clever priests had backed me into a corner

again. I couldn't administer justice without seeming to be guilty of treason. That is a risk I could not take. And the people are growing so restless that they soon will burst forth in a riot. When I saw that the worst was coming, I called for a basin of water and in front of all the people I washed my hands, saying, "I am innocent of this man's blood; see to it yourselves" (Matthew 27:24). The angry mob shouted, "His blood be on us and on our children." But deep in my heart I knew that act did not take care of my responsibility. I washed my hands in expediency when I should have lifted them up in his behalf. One lesson you had better learn—blood does not come off easily. Lady MacBeth was to learn that many centuries later when after committing murder she cried: "Out, out, damned spot. There is the smell of blood still. All the perfumes of Arabia cannot sweeten the smell of these little hands."

Please learn from me that you cannot escape responsibility for what you do and what you are. You may want to blame environment. You may want to blame heredity. You are not responsible for all the conditions of your life, nor all the inner tendencies of your nature—but you are responsible for the way you use these things. You may wash your hands, but you cannot remove the stains. I thought Jesus was on trial that day, and it turned out I was the one who was on trial. I failed.

I soon must go, back to the shades of night, back to that eternal hell of always washing my hands. It is very difficult for me to help you see how it really is. It all happened in just one day. All of this has come to me because of one decision. I know now that life is not measured by days and months and years but by crises and decisions. It is not our time (chronos) but God's time (kairos) that really counts. A person can live more in one day than in ten years. One deci-decision may be more important than all the rest of life. I can tell you life is not made by its chances, but by its choices.

You may not know at the time how important your choice is. I did not. How was I to know that my eternal destiny was hang-ing on one question? Hundreds of questions I had settled among the Jews—How was I to know this was it? One wrong answer can ruin all, one right answer can save all. The question always is, "What, then, shall I do with Jesus who is called Christ?" You cannot evade it. You cannot compromise it. You cannot transfer responsibility for it. I didn't begin to know how important it was. Rome was the greatest thing in my life. There were two realities in my world—a dying Empire that looked to the past and a newborn faith that looked to the future. There are two realities in your world—a sick civilization that will surely die and a company of the committed that contains the seed of new life. Take your stand with Jesus—he is the hope of the world. The final victory over every evil power is with Him. I took my stand with Rome—I was wrong. The future was on the side of Jesus. Your future lies with him, too. Rome was so powerful, so big, so invincible. Jesus was so weak, so small, so vulnerable. Yet, Rome has been gone for centuries, and Christ holds sway over more hearts than ever before. He is more important than any State, any party, any cause, any institution in all the world. The clue to the meaning of history is Jesus Christ. The key to the meaning of the universe is Jesus Christ. The way to peace and forgiveness and power and purpose in your life is Jesus Christ. The secret to where you will spend eternity is Jesus Christ. He is the most important person who ever lived. Give him first place in your mind, your heart, your will.

Now I must go—to wash my hands some more—and more and more and evermore. I wanted to speak to you because this was once my question—“What, then, shall I do with Jesus who is called Christ?”—but now it is your question. I know how significant that question is. Take it seriously. Answer it carefully.

What will you do with Jesus?
Neutral you cannot be.
Someday your heart will be asking,
What will He do with me?

Come to him. Confess him. Obey him. Follow him. Serve him. Reign with him. Jesus is still on trial. Decide today.

©1985 Myron J. Taylor
R. 5-99