

Lenten Service March 20, 2013

WHAT SHALL I DO WITH JESUS?

²¹ *The governor again said to them, "Which of the two do you want me to release for you?" And they said, "Barabbas."* ²² *Pilate said to them, "Then what shall I do with Jesus who is called Christ?" They all said, "Let him be crucified!"* ²³ *And he said, "Why, what evil has he done?" But they shouted all the more, "Let him be crucified!"* Mt. 27:21-23

I wonder how much Pontius Pilate had heard about the coming Messiah? I'm certain that he wouldn't have lasted long in the governorship if he hadn't had his ear to the ground and his informants infiltrating into every corner. The prudent governor would have kept tabs on John the Baptist (King Herod did) and then the Christ who came to be baptized by him. It isn't unreasonable to believe so. We know that even at his birth, a different Herod trembled at the news and all Jerusalem with him. Roman governors needed to be concerned about crowds, especially when the eyewitnesses regularly referred to them as "the multitudes". More especially when his underling Jews had their underling officers report "never has a man spoken like this man. He speaks with authority, not as the Scribes and the Pharisees" Pilate, the security conscience procurator that he was, ought to have taken note. Yes, Pilate needed to be concerned when there was talk amongst Caesar's subjects that "Behold, the whole world is going after Him". Wouldn't there have been rumblings through the officer core that reached him that there was a certain centurion who had his servant raised up by the mere word of the Christ.

Then came Maundy Thursday. He would have most certainly been briefed concerning his arrest. I suppose I've always imagined our Lord's arrest a low key affair. But with each reading of Scripture I find myself confronted with details I never contemplated much before. The sacred text says that a cohort was mobilized to arrest Jesus. A cohort! The NASB taking everything into consideration identifies it as a Roman cohort.

Judas then, having received the *Roman cohort* and officers from the chief priests and the Pharisees, *came there with lanterns and torches and weapons.

[John 18:2-4](#)

Now a Roman cohort is like a battalion – 600 men! And then when Jesus comes before Pilate there is that 600 men again! I'm going to be coming back to that detail a little later.

And then to add to Pilate's probable knowledge about the Christ and his character and reputation which surely preceded him I add the detail concerning Pilate's wife. How was it that Pilate's wife had dreams about him? Jesus had mass appeal not just among the poor and disenfranchised which makes him revolutionary but he also attracted attention of the intelligencia and powerful. Just note that certain Nicodemus who came by night and Paul's record in acts concerning those even of Caesar's household who came to faith.

While it remains speculation to say that Pilate had some degree of familiarity with Jesus whose reputation must have preceded him, there is absolutely no speculation concerning the mobilization of the Roman cohort. Pilate as commander in chief would be ultimately responsible for the movements of troops. And there is no speculation concerning who Jesus revealed Himself to be before Pontius Pilate on Good Friday.

He was as always the very Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. And Pilate affirmed such repeatedly. I find no guilt in the man. I spent time the last couple of days first enumerating the separate trials Jesus had beginning with Annas, continuing with Caiaphas, transferred to Pilate, remanded to King Herod and now back to Pilate again. Pilate says in exasperated tones I'm certain. (Luke 23)

¹⁴... "You brought me this man as one who was misleading the people. And after examining him before you, behold, I did not find this man guilty of any of your charges against him. ¹⁵ Neither did Herod, for he sent him back to us. Look, nothing deserving death has been done by him. ¹⁶ I will therefore punish and release him."

Pilate, you did not really need to do this?

" But I did...I did need to do this". I can hear Pilate say.

"I needed to do this in order to retain my place. I needed to do it to gain some currency among the Jews".

Many trade many things in their life away to attain great positions of power. But then they cannot relax and enjoy all the perks of which there were many. They must struggle to retain them. And mind you, it wasn't a democracy or instability of the electorate. Voting or not the people as a mob always posses the power to unseat you whether you operate as a monarchy, oligarchy or democracy.

Pilate played the crowd...and lost. He thought he might turn their will to his. He offered to free Jesus or Barrabbas. It seemed a "no brainer". But the rebellious people choose Barabbas. Releasing Barabbas to them he found himself still holding the hand of the Christ. Pilate had played the crowd and lost. In his next breath he was to play the fool. ...It might sound like an intelligent thing to do "appeal to the people" especially if you say it in Latin "Argumentum ad populum" but it is the most foolish thing to do.

There was a time when most of the adult population smoked cigarettes; believed the world was flat and my favourite from circa 1900 “if you go over 15 mph the human body will explode”. Whether you are talking scientific fact or moral choices the majority is usually in the wrong. It is as Jesus said, “narrow is the path to salvation and few find it”.

May we remember such things as we stand where Pilate stood.

Pilate received the response of a crazed blood-thirsty crowd: “Crucify Him. Crucify Him”.

Remember the 600? Despite all that foolishness of going to the crowd Pilate could have opted to do what was just and right and release the Christ. He was standing beside the Truth incarnate. He had the battalion to enforce his order. He was the governor after all. But Pilate succumbed as we so often succumb even as we end up despising ourselves for doing it. He was worried about what others thought.

“You are no friend of Caesar”.

When Pontius Pilate heard this, we can speculate on his actions. Perhaps he looked down at his hand. Friend of Caesar was just as much a title as a relationship. There was an actual ring given out by the Emperor to those who formed a special class, a knighthood if you will, of those elevated to the club “Friends of Caesar”.

He didn’t want to lose his ring. He handed Jesus over to be crucified. He washed his hands of it.

But experience shows that we can never wash our hands of our sinful decisions. How they haunt us. How responsibility comes back to haunt us. Poets depict Pilate standing in the depths of hell forever washing his hands. His tormenting demons take turns tapping him on the shoulder “the blood won’t come off will it”. “No it doesn’t” replies Pilate.

I have a more open mind concerning Pilate than many of the poets. The only one in Scripture definitely spoken of as ending up in hell that I know of is Judas. Nowhere in Scripture does it give a definite response concerning Pilate. We know his wife Claudia had concern for Jesus and warned her husband. We know that Pilate didn’t waver after the crucifixion. “What I have written I have written” declared the Procurator. Perhaps, just maybe, as some traditions hold, the one who washed his hands in ineffectual water was to later find true cleansing power in blood of Jesus.

We cannot just speculate concerning Pilate this evening. We must take stock of our own actions. What shall we do with Jesus? Do we turn over the most important question in our lives to others or do we take responsibility. Most importantly, when we fail, and failure is part of the human condition, will we seek forgiveness in the blood of Jesus?

May our prayers this evening be focused so this may be so.

Amen.

