

3rd Sunday Lent Year “C”

March 23-24, 2019

Readings: Exodus 3:1-8, 13-15; 1 Cor. 10:1-6, 10-12; Luke 13:1-9

The figure of Pontius Pilate has both intrigued and angered Christians and Jews alike for centuries. He was a complex man with a checkered personal history with the Jews and Romans. He figures in today’s Gospel and is central to the life and death of Jesus. He was prefect of the Roman province of Judea, ruling from the year 26-36 AD.¹

Any prefect would have been trained as a diplomat, serving in postings all throughout the Roman Empire. Pilate reported directly to the emperor. At the time of his appointment in Judea, he was about the same age as Jesus. He was proud, hot tempered, obstinate and aristocratic. His official residence was at the port town of Caesarea on the Mediterranean.

But at major events in the life of the Jews, he would have gone to Jerusalem to keep an eye on things, if not to feign interest in the religious and cultural affairs of the people. At the time of Jesus, he was relatively new to the post and desperately wanted to do a good job. Keeping the peace could mean a promotion to a more desirable post.

Pilate’s wife, known by tradition as Claudia or Procla was highly cultured, sophisticated and sensitive. Matthew’s Gospel relates her dream about Jesus, leading her to say: “Have nothing to do with that righteous man. I suffered much in a dream today because of him.” (Matthew 27:19)

Pilate minted coins that bore pagan symbols and other sacred pagan vessels. To do so in Jewish territory seemed quite provocative towards the Jews, for whom this was offensive. Later, he raided the temple treasury to pay for a roman aqueduct to carry water into Jerusalem.² There was uproar. Pilate sent in the troops and there was bloodshed. News of this uproar reached the highest levels in Rome. He was soundly reprimanded.

¹ Pilate was from the Roman clan of the Pontii, thus his name Pontius. The name Pilate is derived from a word meaning “one armed with a javelin.”

² See the historian Josephus: (*Jewish War* 2:175–77; *Antiquities* 18:60–62).

The other episode is mentioned in today's reading.³ Some Galileans were killed when they were actually offering sacrifice in the Temple. Pilate was recalled to Rome and eventually exiled from Italy. We do not know what happened to him, so imagination filled in the gaps. Pontius Pilate is portrayed differently even among the Gospels, highlighting the truth that Pilate was a complex figure. Eastern Orthodox Christians revere him and his wife as saints, based upon various writings that claim he repented.

One document notes: "condemned to be beheaded, Pilate prays to the Lord asking for pardon. A voice from heaven proclaims him blessed and announces that he will be a witness of the Lord at his second coming."⁴

Saint Luke lays less blame on Pilate than some of the other Gospel accounts. Pilate is portrayed as a judge caught between a rock and a hard place, unable to resist the pressure of the angry crowd. So, he gives into the demands of the Jewish leaders, but not without one final attempt, suggesting the release of a prisoner according to a Passover custom. Not wanting to risk out and out rebellion, he handed over Jesus for execution.

What kind of man was Pilate? History has generally judged him negatively. Could he though, have truly been conflicted about handing over a Jew to be crucified? Absolutely. Among Romans, crucifixion was reserved only for slaves or on persons guilty of the most heinous of crimes, outlawed finally by the emperor Constantine himself.

In reality, there are elements of the life of Pilate to which many of us can relate. How many times in our lives, though surely on a much lesser scale, have we given in and allowed something happen that was against our better judgment? How many of us have stood by while someone was attacked unjustly, and out of fear of our reputation, we stood by and just watched it happen?

³ The slaughter of the Galileans by Pilate is unknown outside Luke; but from what is known about Pilate from the Jewish historian Josephus, such a slaughter would be in keeping with Pilate's character. (NAB)

⁴ R. Trevijano, "Pilate" - Encyclopedia of the Early Church, vol. 1, page 687, referencing the *Paradosis Pilati*.

I can still recall an incident in fifth grade as if it was yesterday, where more than once I saw a classmate teased, yet stood by. One day we were simply informed that he was no longer at our school. Though I never actually teased him myself, neither did I lift a finger to stop it. I simply did nothing at all. I felt the guilt as profoundly as should have any who took part in the behavior. I took no consolation in my non-participation, because even then I knew better. My own silence convicted me.

In today's Gospel, we learn a valuable lesson from the fig tree. The owner had grown impatient with the lack of growth and wanted the gardener to cut it down. The gardener was more reflective and lobbied for more time. The Lord is giving us more time, and He does so in order for our souls to bear fruit. Do not give up, not on your own efforts towards acquiring virtue, but especially on the lives of others whom you love.

We do not know for certain what happened to Pontius Pilate, whether he repented and became a follower of Christ. But our faith teaches us that we hope for the good of all people, and never give up on one another.

As we continue the journey towards Calvary and the divine drama unfolds, can we see ourselves in the midst of these sacred events? Can we see the part that we play? If so, all the more reason for us to recall that our Lord died **for us**, for the sake of **our** sins. In this we find our redemption and also our hope. His death has made our very salvation possible.

Let us never fail to be grateful, even as there is nothing that we can possibly do to repay the debt. Still, we can do all in our power to imitate his life, his self-sacrificing love and his mercy. In this we find the true meaning of our lives.