

4.5.2020

PALM SUNDAY: Pontius Pilate

Matthew 27

Tom Hostetler

### **Gathering Chant**

Gathered here in the mystery of this hour. Gathered here in one strong body. Gathered here in the struggle and power. Spirit, draw in.

### **Hosanna**

I see the King of Glory  
Coming on the clouds with fire  
The whole earth shakes, the whole earth shakes, yeah  
I see His love and mercy  
Washing over all our sin  
The people sing, the people sing  
Hosanna, Hosanna  
Hosanna in the highest  
Hosanna, Hosanna  
Hosanna in the highest  
I see a generation  
Rising up to take their place  
With selfless faith, with selfless faith  
I see a near revival  
Stirring as we pray and seek  
We're on our knees, we're on our knees  
Hosanna, Hosanna  
Hosanna in the highest  
Hosanna, Hosanna  
Hosanna in the highest  
Heal my heart and make it clean  
Open up my eyes to the things unseen  
Show me how to love like You have loved me  
Break my heart for what breaks Yours  
Everything I am...

### **Scripture     Luke 19:36-41a**

As he rode along, people kept spreading their cloaks and palms on the road. As he was now approaching the path down from the Mount of Olives, the whole multitude of the disciples began to praise God joyfully with a loud voice for all the deeds of power that they had seen, saying,

    who comes in the name of the Lord!

Peace in heaven,

and glory in the highest heaven!’

**Scripture: Matthew 27:22-26**

“What shall I do, then, with Jesus who is called the Messiah?” Pilate asked.

They all answered, “Crucify him!”

“Why? What crime has he committed?” asked Pilate.

But they shouted all the louder, “Crucify him!”

When Pilate saw that he was getting nowhere, but that instead an uproar was starting, he took water and washed his hands in front of the crowd. “I am innocent of this man’s blood,” he said.

“It is your responsibility!”

All the people answered, “His blood is on us and on our children!”

Then he released Barabbas to them. But he had Jesus flogged, and handed him over to be crucified.

**Sermon - Tom Hostetler**

This is a sermon about politics. It is a sermon about power and propaganda and their use in the political realm. This sermon may be impolite.

I know that some of you do not like politics to invade preaching, so let me tell you what this sermon is not. It is not about particular candidates or policies, it’s not about the separation of church and state. It is not a sermon about the balance of powers between executive, legislative and judicial branches of government. This is not a sermon about the lack of unity in a representative government, or the dangers of autocracy to our democratic norms. In short, this is not a sermon about today.

Unless you hear it that way.

Pontius Pilate was not a good or decent man, nor empathetic, nor particularly bright. He was a powerful man. Pontius Pilate was a political appointee by the Emperor Tiberius to the office of Prefect of the region of Judea; he was appointed about 4 years before Jesus began his ministry; he served about 11 years, until some 4 years after Jesus died.

Pilate lived in and ruled from Caesarea Maritima, the coastal capital of Judea, about 70 miles away from Jerusalem. Caesarea was an engineering marvel, developed from an old fishing port by Herod the Great around the time of Jesus’ birth. It boasted a harbor rivaling Alexandria and Athens in an area with no natural harbor; the harbor was constructed entirely of cement made of quarried lava and lime. Soaring over the harbor was an enormous stadium, and an even more enormous palace, in which the Prefect, Pontius Pilate lived and ruled the region. Someone had to quarry the stone and the lime, build the forms for the cement under water, carry the stone, and someone had to pay for it. Actually many someones did the labor and paid the exorbitant taxes-- the people, the peasants, who lost limb, life, and livelihood to build the infrastructure that maintained a tariff free zone and a peace called *Pax Romana*.

Pilate was incredibly insensitive to the people he ruled. He bumbled his way through Jewish festivities and rituals, offended the Jews by bringing engraved images of the Emperor into the city of Jerusalem at night, and, ordered symbols of Roman power to be erected at the Jerusalem Temple of all things. He said that anyone who did not worship the Emperor would be killed. When the Jews protested, saying they would rather die than desecrate the laws of Moses, Pilate barely averted a crisis by backing down on the death penalty.

Pilate was known as a harsh ruler, At the end of his reign, Pilate was recalled to Rome by the Emperor for violence against faithful Samaritans. The story goes that Pilate and his people claimed that an archeological relic of Moses had been found at the holy site of Mt. Gerazim – a total fabrication, a lie - and when the faithful flocked to the site for worship, he ordered his military to surround them and slaughter them. For this Emperor Tiberius recalled him to Rome, and he was exiled and ordered to kill himself after his own trial.

But while he was Prefect, Pilate represented the Emperor with all power in the region. He oversaw the collection of taxes, was in charge of a military unit of about 3000 men, and had judiciary power in concerns of the Emperor. He oversaw the trials of traitors—those accused of treason against the Empire. He was the Internal Revenue Service, Governor, and Supreme Court of the land. Although the local Jerusalem court, called the Sanhedrin, was relatively independent of Pontius Pilate, they didn't have much power of their own; and in any case, the High Priest who oversaw the Sanhedrin was appointed by the prefect. The High Priest Caiaphus, who interrogated Jesus just after his arrest and turned him over to Pilate, was appointed by the Prefect who preceded Pilate.

Pilate was prone to be persuaded by propaganda, and Caiaphus played on Pilate's personality and hunger for power. Pilate was in Jerusalem for the Passover festival, the holy day in which Jews celebrated their ancestors overthrowing an oppressive ruler (how ironic is that?). Pilate recognized that Jews could compare the harsh treatment by the ancient Egyptian Pharaoh and the current Roman Emperor. He was not bright, but even he could see that.

Pilate was primed for a fight--predictions of this Passover included violence. He left his tower in Caesarea Maritima, the financial and civic capital, and arrived in Jerusalem, the center of the faith of the people he ruled. He came with his own National Guard to "keep the peace" and squelch any violence aimed at the state, marching into the city in the glory of a military parade, with banners and horses and rows of high stepping saluting men carrying arms.

The next morning, when Pilate awoke, he received the news that there were protestors outside his hotel. The riotous rabble was awaiting a decision about a heretical rabbi who had been arrested overnight. The propaganda continued that the rabbi, named Jesus, had been arrested for calling himself the King of the Jews; he had been questioned for his religious teachings, and he was brought to Pilate not only as a heretic but as a traitor.

Caiaphus, or one of his representatives, whispered this propaganda to the most powerful person in the land. He might just have reminded Pilate that tax evasion was treason, that Jesus had called tax collectors to leave their posts and follow Jesus.

Pilate questioned this rabbi, named Jesus, himself, "Are you the King of the Jews?" Jesus, the smarter of the two, answered in true rabbinical form with another question, "Are you asking this on your own or did someone tell you this about me?" Pilate's answer, that he was not a Jew, implied he did not know that much about Jewish customs and titles. Pilate told Jesus that Jesus was being accused by the High Priest, and then he asked him what he had done that was so bad that his trial was rushed and the case against him had to be heard before Passover festivities could even begin. Jesus said the most political thing he could, "My kingdom doesn't belong to this world."

In a world of Kings and Prefects, "My kingdom doesn't belong to this world," is a political statement. It is a statement of power of governance, of tax collection, of judicial activity. It is a statement delegitimizing the person in power and looking elsewhere for that leadership.

Pilate, at first, didn't get it. Didn't see anything wrong with this statement; it was a local problem not a national one. It was an internal problem within this bizarre faith that didn't worship the emperor, had a silly spiritual law against graven images, and prayed to a God who blessed the poor, the weak, the elderly, the enslaved. Pilate knew that the only god of the realm, the Emperor Tiberius, blessed the wealthy, the powerful, the strong, and those who were loyal to him. Pilate wanted to be blessed by that god. There was one king, Tiberius, and Pilate was his local representative. This "King of the Jews" did not threaten him. This crime did not rise to the level of him.

It was when Jesus said, "I was born into this world to tell about the truth," that Pilate began to wonder about the propaganda he had been fed. He wondered What was true? What was news? What was fake news? So he asked, "What is the truth?"

Boy, there's a question worth wrestling with. Truth. In an age of fake news, outright lies on a daily basis, conspiracy theories, media disinformation, making stuff up, interference by outside sources... how does anybody know where truth ends and fiction begins? (I'm still talking about Pilate.)

Pilate began to wonder if Caiaphus had an agenda. Perhaps Pilate pondered whether he had been played. Who had the truth, this humble rabbi or Caiaphus?

You remember, Caiaphus and the other chief priests called for Jesus to be killed on the cross for claiming to be the King of the Jews. The crowd, stirred up by the propaganda of Caiaphus also joined in the cry to put Jesus to death and release Barabbas - dangled before the crowd to distract them.

Pilate asked the people how he should decide. He sent out short statements, and small questions, and if he had had a Twitter account, these short bursts would have fit in the 140 characters. . 3 times in Luke 23 Pilate contends that Jesus is undeserving of the death penalty. The crowd, in their mob mentality, took responsibility for Jesus' death, and Pilate... washed his hands of the affair. . "I am innocent of this man's blood," he said. "It is your responsibility!"

It's always someone else's fault. "I didn't do anything wrong... Don't blame me... it's not my fault." Ever know anybody like that?

This is the problem with playing fast and loose with the truth. What Pilate thought was a loophole of escape became a noose around his neck. It's always like that for people who refuse to live by the guidance of a moral conscience.

One of my favorite quotes is from [Martin Luther King, Jr.](#) who wrote:  
"Cowardice asks the question, is it safe? Expediency asks the question, is it politic? Vanity asks the question, is it popular? But conscience asks the question, is it right? And there comes a time when one must take a position that is neither safe, nor politic, nor popular, but one must take it because it is right."

From the vantage point of 2,000 years, it is hard not to feel sorry for Pilate. He never asked for this terrible situation, in a way. He never meant to set a murderer free. In his mind, he knows Jesus is innocent. He knows it. His wife had a dream about it, has given him God's message. But the people have asked for the murderer, Barabbas. One more time he tries. "What shall I do, then, with Jesus?" It is the act of a desperate man. He knows what he should do but is afraid to do it.

Fundamentally, it came down to this: Pilate wanted to release Jesus but without any cost to him personally. He wanted to let him go, but without having to take a personal stand. He admired Jesus in a way, but not enough to believe in him. He yielded finally to private blackmail and public pressure. And so he sentenced Jesus to die.

Jesus had said, "My kingdom is not of this world." His kingdom, his political realm, is a place where life, not death, is truth. His kingdom was not focused on wealth and power and violence, but, rather, his political realm blessed the poor, the powerless, and the peacemakers. His kingdom did not rely on propaganda or fake news; it relied on relationships that built on the truth of love. Jesus' political statement was that this Kingdom from another realm, built on love, not the kingdom of politics and propaganda and power, is the truth.

Claiming, as you and I do, to be citizens of that kingdom, rather than a party to the power and propaganda of this world, is a political action. May God protect all peoples who take the political stance of their faith, and may God protect peoples everywhere from propaganda, unexamined political power, and people like Pontius Pilate. Joy to the world, the Savior reigns. Amen.

### **Joy to the World**

Joy to the world! The Lord is come:  
let earth receive her King;  
let ev'ry heart prepare him room,  
and heav'n and nature sing,

and heav'n and nature sing,  
and heav'n, and heav'n and nature sing.

Joy to the earth! The Savior reigns:  
let men their songs employ;  
while fields and floods, rocks, hills, and plains  
repeat the sounding joy,  
repeat the sounding joy,  
repeat, repeat the sounding joy.

He rules the world with truth and grace,  
and makes the nations prove  
the glories of his righteousness  
and wonders of his love,  
and wonders of his love,  
and wonders, wonders of his love.