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St. John's Lutheran Church – Kimball, NE (dual parish w/Immanuel, Burns, WY)

Good Friday

March 30, 2018

Text: The Passion according to St. John 18–19: Pilate

Grace be to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

It has long been noted that the only human persons mentioned in the Apostles' Creeds are the Lord Jesus Christ, the Virgin Mary, and Pontus Pilate. None of the apostles are mentioned nor is Joseph, Mary's husband. Notable disciples such as Joseph of Arimathea, Nicodemus, and Mary Magdalene, are not listed. It makes sense to make mention of the Virgin Mary, of whom Jesus was born. After all, God became flesh in her womb! But why Pontus Pilate, a pagan, political operative of the Roman Empire?

We know that Pilate was called to Judea around 26 A.D. He was to serve as the Roman governor over a strange and troublesome province. Judea was far away from Rome, about a full month of travel over the Mediterranean Sea. Judea was a strange place in the Romans' eyes. The climate was different. Their customs and habits were foreign in a most bewildering way. Then there was their religion. The Jews worshipped one God (that was weird in itself for a Roman): the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Their religion was filled with strange rituals and obligations. And those Jews were so stubborn about their religion. Most Jews didn't like the Romans and longed for the days of a new King, one like unto David of old. Such hopes were nourished by their sacred Scriptures. Judea was a hotbed of religious and political zealotry. Be that as it may, the Romans respected old, ancient things. And the Jewish nation and faith were old, predating even the founding of Rome.

But it seems Pilate didn't want to have anything to do with this most recent, Jewish problem: Jesus, the miracle-worker from Nazareth. The Jewish leaders went to Pilate's gubernatorial headquarters early in the morning, well before normal business hours. They brought Jesus to Pilate for the purposes of interrogation and execution. This is no trial. In the mind of the Jews, Jesus is worthy of death. They want Pilate to rubber stamp what they've already decided.

By the way, did you notice how stubborn the Jews were about their religious scruples? "They themselves did not enter the governor's headquarters, so that they would not be defiled, but could eat the Passover." They won't go into Pilate's headquarters lest he

defile their ritual purity. Pilate is a Gentile, an unclean dog in their eyes. But they have no problem with seeking the death of an innocent man. Hypocrisy at its worst.

Pilate is a shrewd politician, however. He can see through a set-up. By my reckoning of John's Passion account, Pilate tries to let Jesus go at least 4 times. This whole situation smells fishy and sounds more like some dispute over Jewish religious sensibilities. But the Jews are trying to make Jesus out to be a political criminal.

“Are you the king of the Jews?” asked Pilate. That's what the Jews accused Jesus of claiming to be. Our Lord answers, “My kingdom is not of this world...For this purpose I was born and for this purpose I have come into the world—to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice.”

It's rather strange, what's taking place during Jesus' interrogation with Pilate. One wonders who's questioning whom? “Everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice,” says Jesus. In other words, Pilate, are you able to discern the truth being spoken by My voice? Or are you being deceived by the Jewish leadership who are presenting false charges against Me?

When it comes to Jesus, there's no ambiguous, middle ground. Apathy and indecision aren't allowed. You either hear His word of truth and believe it or you hear the word of deceit and believe it. Our Lord Himself declared that “Whoever is not with me is against me” (Matt. 12:30). Pilate, do you hear My words as truth and believe them? Dear 21<sup>st</sup> century American, do you hear Jesus' words and believe them? Do you hold that Jesus “suffered under Pontus Pilate, was crucified, died and was buried” for the salvation of the world? Do you hold that to be the truth upon which you place your present and eternal hope? Pilate's response was his famous or, maybe infamous, “What is truth?”

Jesus is a king! That is the truth of the matter. But not the kind of king that was seeking to overthrow Roman power and authority. This Jesus is the King of kings and Lord of lords. His kingdom is not of this world with its corruptions, intrigues, failures, and deceptions. The Lord Jesus came to this earth to win for Himself an eternal kingdom established in His righteousness, forgiveness, and steadfast love. Pilate could not have known that he was being used by God the Father as an instrument to establish the righteous rule of His Son, Jesus. The prophet Isaiah (52:13) told us this truth when he wrote, “Behold, my servant shall act wisely; he shall be high and lifted up, and shall be exalted.” That's reason enough for Pilate to be mentioned in the Creed.

Pilate tried to release Jesus. Surely, the Jewish people would rather keep a miracle-working carpenter alive rather than a seditious murderer like Barabbas. As shrewd as Pilate is, he cannot account for the bloodlust of these Jewish leaders. These men who claim to love righteousness prefer a lawless murderer over a peaceful rabbi with a large following. It doesn't make any sense. But then again dear saints of God, never try to make sense out of sin nor our sinful human nature. Jesus is the truth. Nothing makes ultimate sense without reference to Him.

Maybe, just maybe, thought Pilate, if Jesus is flogged, the Jews' bloodlust will be satisfied. Roman flogging was so brutal that many didn't survive. The prophet Isaiah (52:14) described our Lord's flogging, "[M]any were astonished at you— his appearance was so marred, beyond human semblance, and his form beyond that of the children of mankind." Pilate presented this marred and ruined man, Jesus of Nazareth, to the Jews, "Behold the man!" The bloodlust was only intensified. "When the chief priests and officers saw him, they cried out, 'Crucify him, crucify him!'"

Pilate is shocked. He can't bring himself to issue the order to have Jesus executed. "Take him yourselves and crucify him, for I find no guilt in him." That is the truth! There is no guilt in Jesus; at least, no guilt of His own. What Pilate could not have known was God the Father anointed Jesus of Nazareth to be the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. The truth of the matter is this: Jesus is the once-for-all perfect sacrifice of atonement for the sins of the world. The Lord Jesus bears the guilt and punishment of the world within His body. Pilate was an instrument used by God the Father to lead His Son, His beloved Son, to death by crucifixion. The prophet Isaiah (53:4–5) told us this mysterious truth when he wrote, "Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted...upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his stripes we are healed." That's reason enough for Pilate to be mentioned in the Creed.

Pilate attempts to let Jesus go one more time. "From then on Pilate sought to release him, but the Jews cried out, 'If you release this man, you are not Caesar's friend. Everyone who makes himself a king opposes Caesar.'" That did it! The Jews' trump card. Pilate is the consummate Roman politician. Pilate's world revolved around the lie that political power – that is Caesar – was the beginning, middle, and end of all human existence. "So when Pilate heard these words, he brought Jesus out and sat down on the judgment seat at a place called The Stone Pavement, and in Aramaic Gabbatha. It was about the sixth hour. Pilate said to the Jews, Behold your King!"

That's the truth, saints of God. Jesus is your King. Bloodied, disfigured, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. But your king, nonetheless. In this King, God the Father is glorified. His heavenly kingdom is established. Victory over sin, death, lies, and evil is found only in this King of the Jews. He is our light and our salvation. Pilate could not have known that his judgment pronounced from Gabbatha, the Stone Pavement, was God the Father's judgment. This is the means by which the world's salvation is achieved. Isaiah (53:10) foretold this when he wrote, "Yet it was the will of the Lord to crush him; he has put him to grief; when his soul makes an offering for sin, he shall see his offspring...the will of the Lord shall prosper in his hand." That's reason enough for Pilate to be mentioned in the Creed.

We don't know much for certain about Pilate after his encounter with Jesus. Pilate was recalled back to Rome in 36 AD to give answer to charges about his mishandling of a different political crisis. Legends abound. Many are contradictory. He's been called everything from Christian convert, martyr, and saint to an archenemy of Christ and the truth.

His question, "What is truth?" still stands to this day. Tonight, we celebrate the truth of who Jesus is. The king of the Jews, the Lord of glory who willingly came to this earth to "suffer and be crucified for us under Pontus Pilate." What Pilate wrote above Jesus' cross is true "This is the King of the Jews."

Blessed be King Jesus who won for us victory over lies, deceit, evil, Satan, death and the grave, and a meaningless eternity. That is why we sing tonight and rejoice in the life-giving cross on which was hung the salvation of the world. For behold, by the wood of Christ's cross joy has come into all the world. Glory be to King Jesus, crucified under Pontus Pilate.

✠ In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. ✠ Amen.

Now the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.