

Good Friday, 2010

April 2, 2010

Among the people Jesus encountered on his way to the cross was a man named Pontius Pilate. And it's worth taking a little look at this man Pilate, for in him we might see some traits that are painfully familiar.

Pilate not such a bad man, really. If he were around today we probably wouldn't hold him in such disregard. A small time politician, cynical and jaded by the compromises and failures and dishonesty of the world. Maybe we would cut him slack and say he was just a practical man. But if we were more honest, we would say that he was a weak man. Not a man of vision. Definitely didn't want to rock the boat – didn't want any trouble – let's just maintain the status quo. Not a risk taker. Go along with the party line. "Don't blame me." Pass the buck, if possible.

He was not really interested in Jesus, one way or the other. He found no fault with Jesus, but neither did he embrace Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of God. In fact, he didn't know what do or what to make of Jesus. Yeah, people of narrow vision have never known what to do with Jesus. Actually Pilate probably wished this Jesus had never come around, this man who might shake his life, with its outward trappings of prestige and power, but its inward reality that was pathetic.

When Jesus is brought before Pilate, Pilate asks him – revealing his smug cynicism – "So, you are a king?" Jesus answered, "You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I have come into the world, to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth hears my voice." Pilate said to him, probably sneering, "What is truth?"

Pilate asks, "What is truth?" because he suspects there is no such thing as absolute truth. Like many of us, no doubt Pilate had seen how lies, insincerity, hidden agendas, phoniness, and greed are the ways of the world that seem to prosper. Nice guys finish last, they say. And Pilate was smart enough not to let himself get burned – keep your guard up, look out for number one. Pilate would say he was smart, wise maybe. I would say he was lost, a dead man with a heart beat, pathetic. When you're like Pilate, your horizons become small, you keep your nose to the ground, don't look around too much. Don't cause trouble. Just take of yourself, and let others take care of themselves. You are suspicious of everyone, trust no one, and you might actually begin to ask, "What is truth?"

Sometimes, our churches seem to have been influenced by Pilate. Church has become a nice safe place, a place where we don't want to rock the boat, don't want any trouble, let's just maintain the status quo.

An old preacher named Fred Craddock tells this parable [Fred M. Craddock, *Craddock Stories*, Chalice Press, 2001, p. 36]. He says,

I remember one night, sitting in a little rural church on a Sunday night. It was a summer meeting, so it was hot, and the window was open beside my pew. The preacher was preaching on his favorite text, "Be not the first by whom the new is tried, because a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush, and it's better to be safe than sorry, because fools rush in where angels fear to tread."

I was listening to him drone away when a man came by the church building and stopped by the church window and said, "Psst, psst."

I said, "What is it? I'm listening to the sermon."

He said, "Come with me."

I said, "Where are you going?"

He said, "I know where there's a pearl of great price that's more valuable than all the other pearls in the world."

I said, "There's no such thing."

He said, "In fact, where I'm going, there is treasure buried in a field."

I said, "You're kidding."

He said, "Where I'm going, bums are invited to sit down at the king's table."

I said, "That's ridiculous."

He said, "In fact, they give big parties for prodigals who come home."

I said, "That's stupid." Well, I listened to the rest of the sermon and after it was over, I told the preacher about how I was disturbed and that I hoped it didn't upset him during the sermon.

He said, "Who was that?"

I said, "I don't know. Telling me all that fancy stuff."

He said, "Well was he getting anybody?"

And I said, "Well, I'm glad to say none of our crowd went, but I noticed he had about twelve with him."

How do we respond to Jesus? Keep him at arm's length? Don't want to get too carried away? What is truth anyway? When Jesus says, "I am the way and the truth and the life," well that may be true for some people . . . after all, what is truth? Is there even such a thing? I mean what's true for you might not be true for someone else.

This is the hour that our Lord hung on the cross. There is nothing wishy-washy or half-way or let's-be-careful-not-to-offend-anyone about what Jesus did. His agony was real. His despair was real. His abandonment was real. His cries were real. He died there – laughed at and mocked by some, tortured by some, ignored by many – He died there in agony . . . for you and me. His is an action that demands a response, his is an action that cannot be avoided or dismissed. You must decide how to respond, for Jesus on the cross demands a response.

Mary and I attended a religious conference a few years back, and I remember one woman there, a nationally recognized speaker on spirituality, in fact. I'll call her Louise. She proudly described herself as "a Jewish Buddhist Lakota with Christian undertones." In other words, her religion was made up of little bit of this and little bit of that – the *smorgasbord approach* to faith. This approach is surprisingly popular these days, but it's an age-old heresy called *syncretism*, in which we can design our own religion by taking bits and pieces from various religions. It's the heresy committed by the children of Israel, when they wanted to incorporate Baal worship into their faith. It's like going to paint store and blending all kinds of different colors until we get just the one that suits our tastes.

One evening at the conference -- during our worship -- a passage from Paul's Letter to the Romans was read, in which St. Paul talks about those people who missed the coming of the Messiah – and their salvation -- because they rejected Jesus as the Son of God. The next day, Louise angrily addressed the whole conference and shared how disgusted she was about that Christians would suggest that there is only one path to salvation, through Jesus, and that somehow she had missed the Messiah. In other words, just like Pilate, she was saying there is no absolute truth. As Mary and I got to know Louise a little better during the week, we came to see just how lost and lonely and afraid Louise was in her life, how very desperately she needed the real love of God, how desperately she needed Jesus. But she just couldn't accept Him as Lord.

Maybe this is the year **we** finally get it, that **there is a truth**, a truth overarching all our existence, the truth of Jesus, the One who is both man and God, who at a very real time and place in history, died for you and me. He didn't just die for the world. He died for you and me as individuals who he loves. This Jesus you cannot keep at arm's length – you must either reject him or you must accept him for who he really is. And if you do accept him for who he really is, your life will never be the same – the Bible calls it becoming a new creation. Pilate desperately needed this. Louise desperately needed this. I desperately need this. And so do you!

God is not just a vague longing, not just the product of our imaginations or folklore or ancient superstitions or church traditions, or a smorgasbord mix-and-match God – He is a real God who set a universe in motion that exceeds our ability to understand it, a real God who lovingly breathed life into us, a real God who time and time again sought to have us turn to him, and then finally took the final step – the most extreme step – and came and lived among us – and then on this day, he died, carrying with him all the burden of all our sin and shame.

Let us pray: We adore you, O Christ, and we bless you, because by your holy cross you have redeemed the world. AMEN

-- Fr. Jim Trainor