

March 22, 2015
5th Sunday in Lent

Those Who Wanted Jesus To Die: Pilate

St. John 19:10-16

Dear Friends in Christ,

It was Shakespeare who wrote, "Cowards die many times before their deaths, but the valiant taste death but once." I think of that statement every time I think of the subject for our consideration this day. And, with it, this from Winston Churchill: "Each appeaser hopes if he feeds the crocodile enough, the crocodile will eat him last."

A coward and an appeaser. Those are adjectives most fitting for the person we're considering this morning - a person who wanted Jesus to die - well, sort of wanted Him to die. This day . . .

PILATE

I. You Might Be Wondering.

Our text begins with,

So Pilate said to him, "You will not speak to me? Do you not know that I have authority to release you and authority to crucify you?" Jesus answered him, "You would have no authority over me at all unless it had been given you from above. Therefore he who delivered me over to you has the greater sin."

From then on Pilate sought to release him... (Jn. vs. 10-12a).

You might be wondering why we started a text at this point. After all, there are a lot of details regarding Jesus and Pilate preceding our text: Talk - conflict - the increasing tension - the flogging - and the rage of the Jewish leaders and people. And specifically this exchange:

Pilate said to them, "Take him yourselves and crucify him, for I find no guilt in him." The Jews answered him, "We have a law and according to that law he ought to die because he made himself the Son of God." When Pilate heard this statement, he was even more afraid. (Jn. 19:6b-8a).

You see? There were issues here that frightened Pilate. Though an unbeliever, a skeptic, a man far more interested in the politics of the moment - there was that underlying "What if?" What if Jesus is Who He says He is? And so, our text contains these two statements: First, Pilate's "I have authority to release you and authority to crucify you". Secondly, "From then on Pilate sought to release him...". Why? Because that "What if?" loomed there.

And then there's the underlying concern as to what Rome would think if Pilate cannot keep things under control. He has been entrusted with great responsibility. What would Caesar think?

And so, the reason we start with this portion from John. Our overriding theme is "People Who Wanted Jesus To Die." Now we see. Pilate really wasn't convinced. From the standpoint of law and upholding the law, Pilate knew the charges were a farce. In one sense, Pilate did not want Jesus to die.

II. The Pilate Dance.

I call it *The Pilate Dance*. Trying to appease the crowd because of the pressure of the moment and where it might take him in this world. Wanting to release Jesus because he knew the Lord was innocent. Cowardly caving in to human pressure. Remember this from St. Luke's Gospel?

Pilate addressed them once more, desiring to release Jesus, but they kept shouting, "Crucify, crucify him!" A third time he said to them, "Why, what evil has he done? I have found in him no guilt deserving death. I will therefore punish and release him." (Lk. 23:20-22).

It's a dance of absurdities. Pilate desires to release Jesus. He finds no guilt in Him. "What evil has he done?" This is his third plea. Pilate represents all of Rome. He has power and authority. What's the problem?

The crowd, along with their leaders, prove nothing. Again, "but they kept shouting, 'Crucify, crucify him!'" And Pilate dances around the issue, bent on finding a way out. The least conflicting way - at least for the moment. And just for a moment. Sooner or later, one way or another, appeasement and cowardliness result in consequences.

Have you been there? *The Pilate Dance*? Your faith challenged by family or friends? Too much talk about sin! Too narrow minded because you believe Jesus is the only way to eternal life! Too much negative about the good things of this world! It can get uncomfortable, right? How about some compromises? How about a little appeasing so family and friends don't reject you? How about that burning sensation that maybe there's a little coward in each of us - at certain times?

And look where the dance takes Pilate:

So when Pilate saw that he was gaining nothing, but rather that a riot was beginning he took water and washed his hands before the crowd, saying, "I am innocent of this man's blood; see to it yourselves." (Matt. 27:24).

Really? A little water to illustrate he is "clean" of guilt? "I am innocent of this man's blood"? Really? Well...*really!* That's how Pilate sees it. He wants Jesus to die! What fierce conflict. It's where the dance always takes the coward and appeaser. Have you ever been there?

III. The Will of God.

But everything we're examining here is moving according to God's will. It is as God revealed some seven centuries earlier through Isaiah:

He was despised and rejected by men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not. Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. (Is. 53:3-4).

Such powerful words: "...stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted." Stricken, smitten, afflicted - by God. God uses man's sinful nature to pursue and secure His will. We see all the human antics and outrageous theatrics (then and now) - the wisdom and thinking that human wisdom sets the course and reaches whatever goals when, all along, everything moves as God sees fit! And what is God's will?

"But he (Jesus) was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed. (Is. 53:5).

Once again, recall that statement from Matthew's Gospel? "...when Pilate saw that he was gaining nothing, but rather that a riot was beginning he took water and washed his hands before the crowd, saying, 'I am innocent of this man's blood...'" (Matt. 27:24). But we know that any amount of water Pilate used could never cleanse away the guilt that marked him. And, yet, it would be the Christ Whose blood would cleanse away all sin from every sinner - you - and me. And that same blood would be available to such as Pilate.

And not only that, but this incident with Pilate reminds us of the water of Baptism - the visible Word. We hear those words of Ananias to Paul, "Rise and be baptized and wash away your sins, calling on his name." (Acts 22:16). The water of Baptism is truly cleansing. Cleanses us from our sin. Our guilt removed.

Yes, Pilate ultimately wanted Jesus to die. We find ourselves in conflict with his act of cowardliness - with his dance of appeasement at the expense of Jesus. But, finally, everything would lead to the forgiveness and eternal life won through Christ. It was as the High Priest unwittingly stated, "...it is better for you that one man should die for the people..." (John 11:50).

And, then, there is the reality of our own moments of appeasement and cowardliness at the expense of our witness to Jesus. The reality stands before us. We are still sinful and weak. We cry with Paul, "For I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. Now if I do what I do not want, I agree with the law that it is good. So now it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me." (Rom 7:15-17).

And the response that comes back to us - to each here - every day - the response is this: "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." (Rom. 8:1). No condemnation. None. The question is: What do you plan to do with that?

Amen.

Pastor Bill Abbott