

MARK 15:1-15**Jesus before Pilate**

15 As soon as it was morning, the chief priests held a consultation with the elders and scribes and the whole council. They bound Jesus, led him away, and handed him over to Pilate. 2 Pilate asked him, "Are you the King of the Jews?" He answered him, "You say so." 3 Then the chief priests accused him of many things. 4 Pilate asked him again, "Have you no answer? See how many charges they bring against you." 5 But Jesus made no further reply, so that Pilate was amazed.

Pilate Hands Jesus over to Be Crucified

6 Now at the festival he used to release a prisoner for them, anyone for whom they asked. 7 Now a man called Barabbas was in prison with the rebels who had committed murder during the insurrection. 8 So the crowd came and began to ask Pilate to do for them according to his custom. 9 Then he answered them, "Do you want me to release for you the King of the Jews?" 10 For he realized that it was out of jealousy that the chief priests had handed him over. 11 But the chief priests stirred up the crowd to have him release Barabbas for them instead. 12 Pilate spoke to them again, "Then what do you wish me to do[a] with the man you call[b] the King of the Jews?" 13 They shouted back, "Crucify him!" 14 Pilate asked them, "Why, what evil has he done?" But they shouted all the more, "Crucify him!" 15 So Pilate, wishing to satisfy the crowd, released Barabbas for them; and after flogging Jesus, he handed him over to be crucified.

SERMON "PILATE'S CHOICE"

My name is Pontius Pilate. It has been many years since that fateful day in Jerusalem that you just read about in Mark. Everyone always wants to know what my role in the whole affair was, so I'll try to tell you. I hope you understand that it wasn't as if I had anything against this Jesus, but events just took on a life of their own.

Let me tell you a bit about myself. I was an ambitious young man, I'll admit it, and I think I did pretty well for myself. I played the right angles, made the right kind of friends, and moved up the political ladder in the Roman Empire hierarchy. I was still fairly young when they made me governor of Judea and Samaria. I had always figured that if I did a decent job there, they might make me a governor of a province in Greece after that, which was about the most prestigious place to be in the Empire. And that's exactly what happened-I got to go on to Greece, be governor for a while, and then I retired here. It all worked out like I hoped, though somehow...

Anyways, like I said, I was a fairly young man when they made me governor of Judea and Samaria, and I stayed for there for about 10 years. The climate wasn't too bad, and they had some pretty good restaurants, but there were some awfully difficult people to deal with.

And the worst by far were the Jews. They had this crazy obsession about having just one God and worshipping that God alone. They said that this one God, who they called Yahweh, made heaven and earth, and that there were no other gods, and that their God had told them not to worship any other gods. Now when it comes to religion, I can go with the flow. A number of years before I got sent to Judea and Samaria, the Emperor in Rome, Augustus, decided that he was a god, and that everyone in the Empire had to worship him. So if you wanted to get ahead, that is what you did, and so that is what I did. Besides, he was only one more god on top of the hundreds we already had as Romans-what difference did it make? Those Jews though, they just couldn't handle this. They had to make everything difficult for me.

Still in the end, I had to find a way to get along with them. The job of a governor of a province in the Empire was basically two-fold. You had to maintain law and order, and to keep the money flowing towards Rome. I needed the cooperation of the Jewish leaders in order to do both. Again, I figured that if I did both well enough, I could get promoted to that province in Greece for the final years before my retirement. I certainly didn't like those Jewish leaders, but they had power and influence over the people, so I would have to deal with them.

Now I knew it was going to be a bad day when they brought in that Jesus. I had my sources and spies, as any good governor must, and so they had already told me some things about him. I knew that people claimed that he had done all kinds of miracles, and that he often had violent disagreements with the Jewish religious leaders. That made him ok in my book! I had heard that he entered Jerusalem on Sunday on a donkey, and that people were cheering him that day, and I knew from my informants that the religious leaders were trying to find some way to get rid of him.

But then they walked into my office that day with him, I didn't know that they had arrested him. They said that they wanted me to put him to death because he was stirring up the people against the Emperor, and proclaiming himself as a King. Now I knew that these Jews could care less about the Emperor, for they hated his guts! It seemed very suspicious to me that they should suddenly be concerned about him and Jesus' claim to be a King. So I asked this Jesus, "Are you the King of the Jews?" All he said to me was, "You have said so." What kind of answer is that? Then, these religious leaders are hurling all kinds of accusations against him, while he was just standing there, not saying a word in response. I could see just by looking at him that this man was no threat to the Emperor. He did not seem to be one of those revolutionaries,

though there was definitely something about him, but I couldn't put my finger on it. I could only wonder-what kind of a man doesn't defend himself against those who want to put him to death? Who is this Jesus anyways?

Well, I knew that it was just some sort of a power play that made these leaders bring Jesus before me, and there was something about this man that made me uncomfortable. He seemed to have such a righteous aura, so I wanted to come up with some solution short of putting him to death. So, I thought I hit on the perfect political solution that I would surprise everyone with.

A little later, there was a crowd that had gathered outside my balcony. It was the Passover in Jerusalem, when thousands of people would come from all over the place for the religious holiday that remembered Moses bringing the people of Israel out of slavery in Egypt. It was always difficult to keep everything under control during this time, so I had developed this little tradition of releasing one political prisoner every Passover. It was one of my better moves, because it made me look generous, kept the crowds entertained, and we could always arrest the unfortunate again the next month anyways when all these people had gone home. When the crowd gathered and were asking me to release someone like they did every year, I decided to put my plan into action. Without telling the Jewish leaders what I was going to do, I came out with Jesus, and said to the crowd, "Do you want me to release for you the King of the Jews?" I thought Jesus was relatively popular among the people, so here was a perfect opportunity for them to set him free, and there would be nothing the leaders could do about it.

Unfortunately, those religious leaders must have already been suspecting something, and they had been working the crowd, and the crowd instead started to shout that they wanted me to release Barabbas, of all people. He was this punk who as a member of the local resistance movement dedicated to overthrowing Roman rule, and he had murdered some people during the last insurrection. He was popular as a local nationalist, though it really wouldn't be any skin off my nose if we released him. Like I said, we would just arrest him for something else next month. Still, that left Jesus. I said to the crowd, "Then what shall I do with the man who you call the King of the Jews?" I couldn't believe the response I heard, for the crowd began to cry out, "Crucify him! Crucify him!" I didn't understand this at all, for this Jesus didn't look like any threat to society to me, so I said to them, "Why, what evil has he done?" But they kept shouting louder and louder, "Crucify him! Crucify him!"

Everyone in the crowd looked so angry, and there was scuffling going on, and it felt like a riot was going to break out. I knew that the higher ups in Rome would not look too kindly on that, with Roman soldiers having to risk their lives to keep order and all, so I finally said to myself, "What difference does it make?" After all, it was only one life. I

mean, look at how many people get killed all the time around the world in order to make politicians and rulers look good. If it would make things better for me back at the home office, they could have their Jesus. So, I released Barabbas to their great delight, and then to make myself look really good, I had this Jesus flogged before delivering him to be crucified.

Now I do know that he was, which I might add was a pretty horrible death. WE only used it for slaves and foreigners. Afterwards, there were two men named Joseph and Nicodemus who came to me that night asking for Jesus' body, and after I found out from the Centurion that Jesus was dead, I released it to them. I heard later along with everyone else those strange rumors that he had risen from the dead, but I didn't pay much attention. I heard many strange things in that place, but as long as I kept the peace and made sure the tribute money kept flowing back to Rome, why should I care about anything else, other than my retirement of course? I figured the story would die out, like these things always do.

Now that it is many years later, I know the story didn't die out. There are people throughout the world who call themselves Christians, followers of this Jesus, and we even have some of them here in Greece. Sometimes people ask me, what kind of man was Jesus, and what was it like to sentence him to death? They say, you know, that he claimed to be the Son of God, the real God, the ones the Jews believe in. Now I have to confess that all this talk makes me nervous. There was definitely something about him that was different from anyone else that I have ever encountered. I don't know. As I look back, I wonder whether I did the right thing. I knew the crowd was being heavily influenced by the religious leaders. I could have called in my soldiers and disbursed them, but for one man, even this Jesus? I just did the safe thing. You know how it is in life, when you are faced with a choice between what you know in your heart to be right and what is going to get you ahead, make you popular, get you that brass ring, you know what I mean? Anyone else would have done what I did, wouldn't they? Wouldn't you? Amen.

PRAYER OF PASTORAL CARE Palm / Passion Sunday April 10, 2022

Our Prayer Response on this Palm and Passion Sunday is from Psalm 118 vs 22.

**The stone that the builders rejected
has become the chief cornerstone.** *Ps.118:22*

Eternal God, quiet within us distracting voices, that through the story of the passion and by the power of your Holy Spirit, we may have the same mind that was in Christ Jesus. You came to us, O God, in a human being who humbled himself like a slave.

**The stone that the builders rejected
has become the chief cornerstone.**

We pray for the nations that worship power and might; may they be ruled by humility and peace. We pray for the people of Ukraine; for all refugees, for those trapped without food or medicine or escape in Mariupol, for victims of atrocities in Bucha and elsewhere. We give thanks for the expulsion of Russia from the U.N. Human Rights Council. We pray for a ceasefire in the war and its devastation.

**The stone that the builders rejected
has become the chief cornerstone.**

We pray for the church and its leaders, that we may have the mind of Christ. Guide us amidst our diversity to seek ways of partnership in care and service to the world. We thank you for this church's new relationship with Elena Huegel, mission co-worker in Mexico.

**The stone that the builders rejected
has become the chief cornerstone.**

We give thanks for the Senate confirmation of Judge Ketanji Brown Jackson as the first black woman to become a justice of the Supreme Court. May we continue to work for racial and gender justice and equal voting rights in our land.

**The stone that the builders rejected
has become the chief cornerstone.**

We pray for those who are ill or infirmed, or rejected because they are seen to be weak.

We lift before you those on this church's immediate needs list.

God of compassion, through Jesus Christ you have come to us and shared our common lot. Mold us into people who show your mercy and keep us obedient to him whose name is above all other names – Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray. Amen.

