

PONTIUS PILATE

SERIES ON MATTHEW VI
MT ALBERT BAPTIST CHURCH

A SERMON BY STUART MCGREGOR

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At 6.30am anyone is grumpy. Especially after a decadent Roman orgy the night before. Hungover, worn out, smelly. Sore and raspy throat from all the vomiting, awful breath. Let's face it, it's not the time to be having to wrestle with petty complaints from a strangely tolerated race who have a preposterous religion. He rubbed his eyes and looked at the people around him who were trying their hardest not to laugh at the morning hair sticking out from one side of his head.

Pontius Pilate belched.

"Where are they?" he said uncaringly.

"They say they won't come into your hall. It's got something to do with their purity laws and their feast at the moment."

The Jews were celebrating the Passover. This was an extremely difficult and volatile time for the Roman authorities. Through their research they had found that this 1100 year old tradition was highly politically charged. It celebrated a time when 2 million Jews were set free from the oppression of Egypt. Any reminder therefore of how their God would deliver them from their oppressors always incited the more zealous among them to want to rise up against Rome.

Every year the Romans needed to make sure the Jews understood exactly who was in charge and so they relocated their governing body to Jerusalem to hammer home the point. And hammer it home they did. A number of times crowds had formed in protest to one of Pilate's schemes and he had had to squash their little rebellions through violence. One time he had made his soldiers dress as civilians with clubs concealed under their tunics. They were to mingle with a crowd of protestors and when the order was given they would club them all to death. Brutality is a great communicator. Swift and focussed.

So, the time was 6.30 in the morning and these Jews, who ought really to know better were knocking on his door wanting to discuss some trivial thing.

He belched again.

Easing himself out of the chair, checking all his movements and sympathising with his protesting muscles he found himself standing precariously on two feet that this morning felt they were badly designed and simply unable to do what feet are supposed to do.

He plastered the hair on his head with some spit on his hands, and threw himself clumsily into a walking action.

“Sheesh” he thought to himself. “I need another holiday.”

He came to the door and sat on his official chair that his servants had brought out especially for him though he didn’t spare them a thought for their initiative at all.

He took a look at Jesus. Jesus the betrayed, the alone and the rejected. Jesus who knew that this was the beginning of a torturous 12 hours. Jesus who had seen his disciples sleeping in their ignorance of what was going on, was watching the rest of the world do the same. Jesus was the only one who knew exactly what was about to happen. No-one else had faith. No-one else believed.

Triumphal entry into Jerusalem? He had mixed feelings about their cries proclaiming him the king of the Jews. This is madness said the very human side. This is God’s will said the divine. And Jesus with the internal battle raging. Subjecting himself every single moment to the painful, destructive and almost suicidal will of his father, he stood with his story raging over his face.

Pilate looked at this weakling. This confused man who was tired and harmless looking. He could see that Jesus’ body was relaxed and resigned to it’s fate. He wasn’t standing like a prisoner, but more like someone stands at a bus stop. “Not a violent bone in this man’s body” thought Pilate.

Pilate scratched the back of his head and squinted because the sun hurt his eyes.

“Er . . . what are you bringing this man to me for? He doesn’t seem to be much of a criminal. He doesn’t even look like a petty thief. Stop wasting my time.” And he rose out of his seat in a dismissive kind of way.

“With respect sir,” said one of the high priests, “We wouldn’t have brought him to you if there were no serious charges.”

“Well, why can’t you judge him with your own law?” said Pilate walking away with his back to them.

“Because we are not allowed to carry out the death penalty while you are in charge.”

Pilate stopped and turned. “Death penalty?” Now he knew that he had to listen to this case. He looked around at the group of men who had brought Jesus to him. They were angry, impassioned, worried, frightened even. “Ironic, really,” He thought, “they look more like prisoners than he does.”

“Alright. Alright. Give me five minutes and send him in to me.” He turned, shook his head and left. His soldier took a statement from the chief priests and told them to wait while he took Jesus away.

Five minutes later and Jesus was standing in the middle of a room with a chair in it. Pilate came out and sat down and read the statement handed to him earlier.

He looked at Jesus, scratched his nose in an uneasy kind of way and said abruptly. “Are you the King of the Jews?” It was a question that really needed no answer because it was clear that this was not the case.

There was no reply. “It’s a simple question . . . Jesus, yes or no would be good. Are you the king of the Jews?”

Jesus replied, “you clearly don’t believe it yourself, so why do you ask? Did the others tell you to ask me this? What kind of judge are you if you don’t ask your own questions?”

“Don’t start with me sonny,” said Pilate. “Am I a Jew? Am I the one you are bristling against here? Don’t include me in your little world. They have put you in my hands for some reason, and I need to know why that is. What are you guilty of?”

“I’ll return to the first question if I may,” said Jesus. “My kingdom is not here on earth, it’s a realm that you don’t understand. You talk of physical kingdoms, where you can draw perimeters and borders, something you can put on a map. That’s great, but you don’t have the loyalty of the people do you. I mean really . . . do you? The kingdom I have jurisdiction over is in people’s heart, it transcends your boundaries.”

Pilate raised his eyebrows, blinked a few times and stared into space. His arrogance of being Roman wouldn’t let him think too long about that last comment. There was silence and then he said, “That’s a real conversation stopper isn’t it . . . so *are* you the king of the Jews?”

Jesus answered him, “*You* seem to be implying that I am. Don’t you think that’s weird? The thing is that I’m not a king like you think. I’m not someone to be conquered. I’m not an enemy like any other kings, I’m not

someone you need to subdue. My purpose here is to tell people the truth. To demonstrate and stand for something that every one is suspecting is there but are too afraid to explore. Anyone who loves the truth will be drawn to me. They will want to be a part of my kingdom because it takes their questions, it makes sense of their pain, it restores their faith in God, themselves and others. It gives them a glimpse of the future, of what is to come. It let's them experience love. And I tell you, only I am able to provide the help that people need, because I am Truth.”

Pilate stopped and felt uneasy. This kind of thing is just too much at this time of the morning. This is nuts. He's having to wrangle with some kind of lame philosopher who has upset some leaders of an obscure religion that believes in one unseen God.

Jesus? Was he supposed to be representative of this religion? What a wacko. He got angry inside at a number of things.

All roads lead to Rome, he thought. This guy is being far too specific for my liking. And his conscience pricked him, yeah but don't you want to be set free? Don't you want to stop feeling like you have to impress people all the time? Don't you want to stop feeling like you are having to pander to the whims of insecure men who hold absolute power? Don't you think that you could be stronger than this being pushed around by other people's expectations?

And he braced himself against his conscience and deconstructed it all. And he said “Truth? What is truth?” And he didn't know because he didn't want to know.

“Don't you get it Jesus? This is the post-modern age! Gone are the days where we could be confident in such strange concepts as Truth. Gone are the days when we can be certain about anything! We threw away superstition when Isaac Newton came up with his laws of physics. We discovered that the world could be understood through cause and effect. That was modernity in a nutshell, they thought they could discover all knowledge and be certain about everything if they could but find the equations to suit. But we have moved on from that now. Einstein changed it all. He turned time into a variable instead of an absolute. And we discovered that time goes at different speeds in relation to proximity, speed and gravitational effect. Jesus, even you know that the GPS satellites around the planet have built in timing corrections to take the theory of relativity into consideration. There are no absolutes. Only best guesses.

“And you stand there, and have the nerve to tell me, that you have a monopoly on Truth? That you of all people, know more than anyone. I can't

believe that you would be so arrogant. But then, arrogance is not a crime, if it were I wouldn't be alive."

"Truth?" and he got up and left the room.

But he was now stuck between a rock and a hard place. This man Jesus had obviously upset the Jewish authorities, so much so that they wanted to kill him. If he doesn't give the order to crucify him then the Jews may riot, beginning civil uprising in this current climate and resulting in more deaths. Emperor Tiberius might consider this lack of control a sign of weakness.

However, Pilate was reminded of how the Emperor was favourably disposed to the Jews and so he thought to himself, "If I agree to kill Jesus I am pandering to a mob mentality and killing an innocent man. I will be seen as weak and easy to manipulate and the Emperor could get annoyed with me being so foolish.

Either way, I stand to lose favour with the Emperor and the Jews.

"This is not good," he thought.

And then he had an idea. "If I were to use one of their customs to my advantage . . ." And off he went to make an announcement.

By the time he had thought his plan through there was quite a lot of people gathered in the courtyard. Word had got around that Pilate was in a pickle and Jesus was the centre of it. Someone's head was going to roll and the crowd didn't care whose it might be.

When he appeared the crowd hushed.

"People, I am aware that it is your custom to free a captive to celebrate your Pass-under festival . . . Passover Festival or whatever, so I give you a choice.

"On one hand you have Barabbas who is responsible for the deaths of many Jews who he led in revolts against the authorities. He's not a nice man and will be a menace to your society. He was the main instigator in the recent Bali Resort bombings and is part of a terrorist network that spans the globe. Well, he's not the type of man you would want living next door."

"And on the other hand, we have Jesus who has committed no crime as far as I can see. You call him king of the Jews, but that's clearly untrue. If he were, then who is Herod? If he were then why haven't I heard of him before? At any rate, falsely accused and innocent is how I see things. You choose."

His plan was cleverly simple, the contrast between the bad guy and the good guy was huge. The crowd would make this issue go away from him by

voting that Jesus be set free. With the crowd behind him then nothing could
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“Barabbas?” The crowd had already been manipulated.

Jesus looked at the crowd. He saw a group of people who, not more than a day or two before, had welcomed him into their city with cries of how he was their King and Saviour. They had cried out to him for help. And he saw their embarrassment being shaken off by peer pressure justification. He saw their disappointment about how their king stood before them about to get put to death from the result of a mock trial. He saw them all disappointed that Jesus wasn't saving them in the way that they thought he should, in fact as far as they were concerned Jesus wasn't saving them. And this cry has been one that has resounded throughout the centuries.

“Jesus, you said that you would give me life to the full . . . why haven't I got it?” “Why won't you save me from my sin now?” And sometimes we might look around us and think that the world of Barabbas is more fulfilling. We might think that if we just tasted some of the world of Barabbas we might not need Jesus. We feel that if we take control, ignore our problems and embrace the other side with all of our hearts, then everything will disappear.

And who in this room would deny the fact that at times we would willingly shout Barabbas too. Many of our friends have. It's not so much an acceptance of evil, it is a rejection of Jesus.

And Jesus looked at the crowd that was bent on rejecting him, ridding themselves of his presence, ridding themselves of his penetrating conscience, ridding themselves of his freakish ability to cut to the chase, ridding themselves of his ability to reflect as best as anyone they had ever seen, the purest qualities of God. “Your light is too bright Jesus, you don't belong in my heart . . .”

And Jesus looked at the crowd as they looked at Barabbas when he was released. As Barabbas walked through the crowd, there was no cheer as he thought there should be but the terrified looks on peoples faces as he walked past them. And he realised that he was not actually anything other than a pawn in this game. He could've been anyone. It's not that they chose *him*, it's that they didn't choose Jesus. And he too felt alone. And he wondered for a brief moment why he thought this fickle society was worth fighting for and then disappeared into history.

Pilate scratched his head. “Well, that backfired. Now I have an innocent man to crucify and a very dangerous terrorist at large. This is not good. This is not good at all.”

So he took Jesus inside and said to him. "I am about to have you flogged. It will be with the cat of nine tails which has little bits of bone sown into it so that the flesh on your back is torn at each lash. It is in truth a bit ugly. You know that this is going to hurt. I will also be leaving you in the charge of my guards who can do what they want with you for a while . . . I hope they just beat you a little, nothing too serious . . . but the desired effect is to show the people out there that you have been satisfactorily punished. Then I will set you free and you can live with whatever delusions you have though in some other country. Hmm-kay?" He motioned with his hand and the guards took him away.

After about an hour Pilate returned to the crowd with Jesus. The robe Jesus was wearing would have been purple but for the dark stains of blood oozing through from his back. Every time he moved the material would lift away from his raw and gaping wounds. The crown of thorns that had been moulded around his head pressed through his bruised scalp against the bone of his skull. He could only see out of one eye and had four teeth missing. His mouth was so swollen he could barely keep it closed to stop the blood from dribbling out. When he had been presented to Pilate, Pilate laughed and said to the guards, "Good, very good, that'll do the trick nicely. I like the crown . . . creates more blood, makes it look worse than it really is . . . no the irony isn't lost on me Brutus, well done."

"People, look at this man. Do you see how preposterous that is? Can you see how weak he is? Surely we've done enough, let him go . . ."

But the crowd when they saw Jesus standing there in his robe and wearing a crown were incited into hatred. The whole disappointing reminder of how he was supposed to be a king made them mad. And they yelled out . . . "It's not good enough, crucify him, crucify him. We won't be satisfied until he has died a torturous death. Let him agonise like we agonise under you. Let him fail and be humiliated like we are everyday in our own lives. Let him die like the worst of us, just so that he knows exactly what it's all about. Nail him to a cross. Do it Pilate, nail him and kill him."

Pilate said "do it yourselves, I see no crime in him . . . you are being ridiculous. What has he done?"

And the high priests said, "But he claims to be God. And our law says that such a man must be put to death."

Pilate became afraid. "This is not good, I've set a terrorist free, have flogged and innocent man, who may in fact be a god. This is not very good at all."

So he took Jesus back to his room again and asked directly, "Where are you from? Where are you from?"

"Answer me man, where are you from? Are you just going stand there silent? I have the power to kill you like that. I can end your life or save it. Answer me! Where are you from?"

And Jesus said, "you think you are in control of this? Who is arrogant now? You don't understand. God is letting this happen, don't worry, it won't be held against you because those who brought me here are the ones with the greater sin in God's eyes. But remember this, Pontius, you only have authority as it was given by God. Choose how to use it carefully and well for you will be judged accordingly."

All that Pilate heard was that God didn't think he was so bad after all and so he was determined to set Jesus free.

But the crowd shouted, "if you set this man free you will not be a friend of Caesar."

And Pilate heard that too. Perhaps setting Jesus free was a mistake that would get him in trouble with the emperor . . . that was too much of a risk and he became afraid.

So Pilate went and sat in the judgement seat. Worn out by the whole deal. And he sat in silence. He looked at the crowd, the seething throng of onlookers, nosey parkers, chief priests and other religious people. He looked at them and they had the look of hate in their eyes. Intolerable anger directed at this man Jesus, who wasn't capable of doing anything wrong. Pilate knew these men in his room were reacting out of wounded pride, he did it himself.

They wanted Jesus to be accused of high treason and to do that, Pilate had to judge that this man Jesus was in fact trying to overthrow Rome.

And defeated he looked at Jesus who stood there like he was waiting for a bus. Pilate shook his head in a desperate attempt to say sorry for what he was about to do.

Pilate felt weak and injured, two things a man in his position shouldn't feel. And with all the sarcasm that he could muster, all the anger that burned inside himself at being forced into this position he said to the crowd, "Is he the best you've got? Is this man who is so weak the strongest you have as a nation? Is he really stronger than you? There, is your king."

And the high priests in their lowest moment in history, renounced their nationality, renounced their pride in who they were and betrayed themselves into the hands of Rome at the same time sending a distinct message to God. "We have no king but your divine Caesar."

Pilate washed his hands and sprinkled it in their faces.

And the questions we are left asking are profound. How do we think Jesus will save us? How much are we affected by the mob? To what God's do we surrender the kingdom of our hearts?

How different to the crowd that day are we?