

Pilate's Questions

Pilate was the Roman procurator of Palestine for 10 years, 26-36 AD. This is historically documented. This is fact. The procurator had military and financial authority over a geographical area of the Roman Empire. He could direct the army, tax the people, control commerce, imprison and execute any who violated Roman law.

We don't know what happened to Pilate after he left Palestine. There are two legends. One reports that he went insane, mad. In Matthew's account of the Passion, we hear that Pilate's wife went to him and warned him not to have anything to do with Jesus. She called Jesus a "*righteous man*," an "*innocent man*." And, then, she told her husband, "*I have suffered a great deal because of a dream about him...*" (Matthew 27:19). Perhaps Pilate, himself, suffered for years after he condemned Jesus.

The other legend proclaims that Pilate became a Christian, a believer! In fact, he was so faithful and strong after his conversion that he was martyred. Coptic Christians in Northern Africa know Pilate as a saint and he's even given his own feast day in their calendar.

We will never really know what happened to Pilate. What we do know is that he interrogated Jesus and decided to have Jesus crucified to keep the crowd from rioting and to appease the Jewish religious authorities. Yet John, unlike the synoptic accounts, clearly emphasizes that Pilate tried at least four times to release Jesus. He tells the Jews, "*I find no case against him*." He finally gives in when the Jews tell him "*If you release this man, you are no friend of the emperor*." A Jewish religious debate now becomes Pilate's political problem. Jesus is ordered to be crucified because Pilate decides he might be a political threat to the peace of the Roman Empire.

John, more than the other three gospel writers, wants to blame the Jews for Jesus' death. Perhaps the Christians who influenced John's narrative were hoping to spread the Good News throughout the Roman Empire. By the late first century, many, if not most, in the Jewish community and already rejected the good news of Jesus' disciples. Pagans might accept the message of Jesus if his death was not blamed on Roman authorities. Clearly anti-Semitic prejudice has grown as a result of this interpretation. In fact some think that John's account should not be read as part of a public Christian celebration.

Pilate's role is clear. He is responsible. The crowd is responsible. The soldiers are responsible. The Priests and Jewish leaders are responsible. Even the disciples are responsible. The Gospels show us that we are all responsible in some way, in our own time, for rejecting God's love in Christ. I guess that's why African American slaves began singing, "*Were you there when they crucified my Lord?*"

Pilate's three questions to the Jewish leaders show us his increasing frustration:

1. "*What accusation do you bring against this man?*"
2. "*Do you want me to release for you the King of the Jews?*"
3. "*Shall I crucify your King?*"

These three questions ask us to consider what Jesus has done and who he is.

On Saturday night the Bishop will ask our two baptismal candidates:

Do you turn to Jesus Christ and accept him as your savior? Do you put your whole trust in his grace and love? Do you promise to follow and obey him as your Lord? (BCP, pp. 302-303)

Those being confirmed, received and reaffirmed will proclaim, *“I will follow (Jesus Christ) as my Savior and Lord...”* Pilate’s questions to the Jews help us to proclaim Jesus as our King, Lord, Savior, Messiah, Christ.

The seven questions Pilate asks Jesus reinforce and affirm his identity as God’s only Son, the incarnate Lord. First come the questions about who Jesus is: *“Are you the King of the Jews?” “What have you done?” “So you are a King?”* John’s narrative is the early Church’s understanding of Jesus’ identity as Lord and Savior. *“My Kingdom is not from this world...For this I have come into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice...”*

Truth is one of the main themes in John’s Gospel. John mentions the word *“truth”* 25 times, beginning with his great announcement of Jesus’ incarnation, *“...the word became flesh and dwelt among us...full of grace and truth...”* (1:14). Jesus says, *“The truth will make you free.”* (8:32). And, *I am the way, the truth and the life...”* (14:6).

When Pilate asks, *“What is truth?”* we know, and the Church proclaims, Jesus is the truth. His passion and glory show us the truth. The cross is the truth. The empty tomb is the truth. The history of the Church for almost 2000 years is the truth.

Pilate’s last three questions to Jesus come after John tells us Pilate is *“more afraid than ever”* because the Jews have told him Jesus has claimed to be the Son of God.

1. *“Where are you from?”*
2. *“Do you refuse to speak to me?”*
3. *“Do you not know that I have the power to release you, and power to crucify you?”*

The end of the dialogue, the end of Pilate’s patience comes when Jesus responds, the only power you have comes from *“above.”*

So on this day, as we observe the death of Jesus, crucified as an enemy of Rome because of Pilate’s fear that the Jews would revolt and riot, we once again respond to questions we consider as soon as we begin to learn about Jesus: Who is he? What power does Jesus have in my life? Why did he die and how can I say he died for me? What is truth?

Pilate’s questions to the Jews and to Jesus are now questions for us to consider as we consider our own life of faith. We reflect upon our faith, what we believe each year at Holy Week and Easter. We reflect upon our faith, we question our beliefs at major turning points in our lives. What difference does my faith make when I have to decide what to study in school, or how I react to others, or how I want to spend my life, or what do I do for work, for a profession. All the questions of life are really questions of faith.

This is most obvious when we are challenged by suffering, by evil, by death. We always ask, *“Why?”* We always ask, *“What now?”* We wonder how our lives will change. We wonder if we’ll find the strength to continue.

Isaiah 52:13—53:12

Psalm 22:1-11

Hebrews 10:16-25

John 18:1—19:31