

“Credo, Third Series, part Two: Pontius Pilate”:
A Sermon for Trinity United Church (Nanaimo, B.C.)
for March 29th 2020 (Fifth Sunday in Lent)
by Foster Freed

Matthew 27: 11-26

*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...
--from Matthew 27: 24*

I have been pondering—all week long—the irony...

...the irony that this series of reflections on The Apostle’s Creed...

...today marks the 14th Sunday in its multi-Sunday run!...

...the irony that this series has wound its way to the name of a figure who is well-known: indeed, not merely well-known but, in fact, quite notorious for an act of hand-washing that rarely garners any praise. I have been pondering the irony of our reaching this stage in our reflections...

...a mere seven days before the world-wide Church reaches this stage in **its** Passion Sunday reflections...

...where we behold an especially problematic instance of “hand-washing” at a time when we are all of us being enjoined (with considerable urgency) to **wash our hands!** The irony in this...the odd timing of this...is pretty impossible to ignore. But let’s ignore it for a wee while, because I am definitely getting ahead of myself. Let’s take a step backward...and begin by noting how extraordinary...

...how extraordinary it is that the two Creeds that have exerted the greatest influence on the shape of the Christian faith for well over 1500 years, are Creeds both of which (the Apostle’s and the Nicene) prominently feature the name of Pontius Pilate. How extraordinary indeed!

Consider...consider that of the five names mentioned by The Apostle’s Creed (six if you include “the Holy Catholic Church” as an additional name)...

...consider that of the names mentioned by The Apostle’s Creed, three of them belong to divine figures, specifically God the Father Almighty, Jesus Christ His only Son our Lord, and the Holy Spirit. If we include “the Holy Catholic Church”, that

name pertains to an institution. Which leaves only two other names: one of them belonging to Mary, the Mother of our Lord and the other belonging...

...well, the other belonging to the Roman Governor under whose authority Jesus was put to death. How remarkable it is that he, of all people, turns up in the Creed. No Peter, no Paul. No Judas, no Caiaphas. None of the other members of the supporting cast, many of whom figure far more prominently in the Gospel narratives—and in the overall flow of the New Testament—than does Pilate. And yet: it is the name of Pontius Pilate that is woven into the very heart of the Christian Creed. And, you know:

...whatever prompted the early Church Fathers to include Pilate in the Christian Creed, from one most basic perspective that decision has proven itself essential. Why? Because more than any other element in the Christian Creed, the name Pontius Pilate clarifies just what is at stake at the very heart of what is sometimes referred to as the Christian “kerygma”: a Greek word meaning “proclamation”. To put the matter sharply: the Christian claim is that our faith is grounded upon an historical event...an event that transpired not in the imaginations of a handful of enthusiasts, but an event that unfolded in time. While it is true that this event **in time** points to truths that **transcend time**...

...truths that point to eternity and will only be fully comprehensible from the perspective of eternity...

...those truths are to be understood as grounded in an historical happening, an event that took place some 2000 years ago in and around the city of Jerusalem. And here I need to speak personally...

...duly noting that I am not a fundamentalist and that I would have made a very poor fundamentalist indeed! In particular, I am very far from the camp of those who regard each and every one of the Biblical stories as historical accounts. And so, to cite two of my most cherished Biblical books: I care not a whit whether the story of Job or the story of Jonah are or are not historical accounts. As I read Job, it represents a profound meditation on the “justice” of God. As I read Jonah, it represents a profound meditation on the “mercy” of God. I am simply incapable...constitutionally incapable...of caring one way or the other as to any historical foundation for those marvelous Biblical books; they have far too much to teach me about the deep things of God and of the world in which God has placed us, for me to worry myself about their historical grounding, or their lack thereof. It simply does not matter as far as I am concerned. However!

It matters very much indeed that the story of Jesus, the prophet from Galilee—the one who “suffered under Pontius Pilate”: it matters a great deal that the story of this Jesus is not merely an “illustrative story” presenting certain “theoretical” truths, but that it is grounded in the historical reality of a man who was born, who lived and who—under Pontius Pilate—suffered and was (at the apex of his suffering) “crucified, died and was

buried”. It simply will not do for all of that to have been the creative “composition” of a well-meaning philosopher or scribe. If that basic narrative does not reflect something that really and actually transpired 20 centuries ago, then—to quote from the Apostle Paul in a somewhat different context—we Christians “of all people are most to be pitied.” That, for me, is a bottom-line...

...a bottom-line that appears also to have been the bottom-line for those who first shaped the ancient Creeds, given the prominent role Pilate is given in both the Apostle’s Creed and the Nicene Creed. Arguably more than any other figure who has a role to play in the events of the final days of Jesus’ life, it is Pilate whose presence in and around Jerusalem is most fully attested by sources **other than the four Gospels**. He plays a prominent role in annals of the Jewish historian Josephus; he can be found in writings from the Jewish philosopher Philo; his name is recorded by the Roman historian Tacitus; and there are even trace amounts of archaeological evidence to attest to Pilate’s time—roughly a decade—as the Roman Governor of Judaea. Make no mistake about it. The name Pontius Pilate—whatever other role it plays in the Apostle’s Creed—testifies to the inescapably “historical” grounding of Christian believing. As much as our faith and our lives have been shaped by important **ideas** about God, the world, and what it means to be a human being, all of those **ideas** take as their launching place, **the lived existence** of a particular human being. We call him Jesus. And yes...having been born of the Virgin Mary...he went on to suffer. To suffer under Pontius Pilate.

Well...here’s a further irony for you!!

While it is an impossible to deny the fact that Pontius Pilate was an historical figure...while it is also impossible to deny that the name Pontius Pilate in the Creed stands as an unmistakable invitation for us to ground our faith in the history of the man Jesus...

...it’s also pretty impossible to pretend that we actually understand what sort of a man Pontius Pilate really and truly happened to be. Oh yes: we know that he must have been a career servant of the Roman Empire, one with significant experience (and likely the kind of significant connections) that would have seen him chosen to serve as a provincial governor. Once we establish that much, however, it becomes exceedingly difficult to reach any further conclusions.

He was, for starters, the longest-serving Governor of Judaea: having been posted there for at least a decade. Given that the Romans regarded Judaea as something of a back-water—and definitely a troubled spot in terms of Imperial maintenance—do we take his lengthy posting as a compliment...or as a sign that the powers in Rome were only too happy to have him out of sight (and presumably out of mind) for a full ten years? Furthermore: while the evidence we have at our disposal makes it near to impossible for us to assess whether his time as Governor ought to be

regarded as a success or a failure, what we do appear to know is that his time as Governor ended in disgrace. Having brutally quelled what he perceived as an outbreak of Samaritan resistance to Roman rule in the northern part of the region he governed, Pilate was removed from his Governorship by his superiors, and returned to Rome to face trial. Whether that trial ever took place, whether it ended with a declaration of guilt or with his acquittal: all of that is lost in the mists of time. As is true of any figure from the distant past of 20 centuries, there is only so much of which we can be absolutely certain when it comes to Pilate, beyond the most basic facts that he lived and served in Judaea. And yet!

The incident with the Samaritans—his brutal crackdown over an incident which his Roman superiors came to view as far more benign than Pilate appears to have viewed it...

...the incident that brought his time in Judea to a rather abrupt close...

...suggests to many historians that Pilate was a far less sympathetic figure than the four Gospels appear to depict him. There can, of course, be no mistaking the fact that the real villains in the Passion narratives are Judas who betrayed him, to a lesser extent the other disciples who abandoned him, above all the Chief Priests and the other members of the Jewish Council who turn him over to Pilate. By contrast, Pilate is depicted as someone who might well be described as a “pawn” in somebody else’s game. All of which likely explains why the figure of Pilate, down through the ages, is depicted in such a wide—indeed, a wild—variety of ways. There are actually church traditions in which Pilate is depicted as a saint, having eventually converted to Christianity, as well as other church traditions in which he is presented in a far less noble light. As a matter of fact: if you have watched film depictions of Pilate over the years, they vary wildly between portraits that emphasize a kind of world-weary decadence (David Bowie as Pilate in *The Last Temptation of Christ*), some which view him through the sympathetic eyes of his wife (Hristo Shopov as Pilate in Mel Gibson’s *The Passion of the Christ*) and others still which capture something of the rage that must have fueled Pilate as he lived out his decade long service for Rome in the Judaeian backwater! For my money, that dimension of Pilate is best captured by Rod Steiger, who played Pilate in Franco Zeffirelli’s TV series from the 1970s: *Jesus of Nazareth*. Indeed: Steiger is my own personal favorite of screen portrayals of Pilate, because he seems to combine it all. He clearly senses that he is “over his head” and “out of his depth” as he tries to figure this Jesus out...but that doesn’t prevent him from reverting to the arrogant Imperial bully as soon as he loses patience, not only with the Jewish leaders with whom he has no choice but to deal, but with this Jewish preacher they have placed in his midst. But that still begs the question!

At the end of the day, which was it? Man or monster? Shrewd political operator...or a pawn in someone else’s game? Evil genius...or an innocent bystander? When push comes to shove...how are we best to regard one Pontius Pilate, Roman

Governor of Judaea, under whom Jesus Christ suffered...and was crucified, died and was buried?

Ironically...here's a final irony for you this morning...

...ironically, as I have pondered that question over the past week, I have grown increasingly convinced that Pilate, who like most human beings was likely a complex mix of the good, the bad and the ugly...

...ironically, I have found myself sensing that the Pilate I actually need—the one that will be of most help to me (and I suspect to most of us)...

...the Pilate from whom we are likely to derive the most benefit is, in fact, the Pilate presented by the New Testament: the one who—in the midst of a damnably confusing situation—agrees to participate in something utterly horrendous, even though he is far from comprehending the full contours of that confusing situation: going so far, in the account provided by Matthew, as fetching a bowl of water so that he can “wash his hands” of the whole thing. Even when I factor in the historical evidence suggesting Pilate could be a brutal man...even when I ponder the historical factors that would have prompted the Gospel writers to emphasize the Jewish Council rather than the Roman Imperial powers as the real monsters in the story of Jesus' death, nevertheless...

Nevertheless: it is to the Pilate of mixed motives and confused response—rather than to Pilate the monster—that I find myself drawn: at least in part because I have met very few monsters in my nearly 70 years on this planet...whereas I have met many who have found themselves “going along to get along”, including the person who stares back at me each morning when I shave. And you know, at the end of the day...

...there is something profoundly revealing—and profoundly pathetic—in the “hand-washing” in which the Pilate of Matthew's Gospel indulges. Revealing in that it displays, in the most glaring of ways, our human tendency to evade responsibility for the many matters for which we do, in fact, bear at least some measure of responsibility. And pathetic...pathetic in the sense that the “hand-washing” in which Pilate engages is not merely “wrong”: at the end of the day it's “impossible”. And you know:

As awful and as frightening as COVID-19 has been and will continue to be for the next few months if not longer...one of the lessons this “novel” virus has once again brought home, is the essential unity of the human family. A virus which appears to have started out in a particular neighborhood in China, has now begun to impact every region of the world. While it is most certainly my obligation to wash my own hands...and to do everything in my power to keep **physically** safe and to help to keep others **physically** safe throughout this crisis...

...it should, by now, be obvious that we are being powerfully reminded that what we dare not do—because we cannot succeed in doing it—is to pretend that we can isolate ourselves from the wider contours—the essential **spiritual** unity of the human family: for we are all one in Adam and (thankfully) we are all one in Christ...

...the Christ who, far from having washed his hands of us, has chosen to journey onward with us...who urges us to journey onward with him, and with all who share in humanity: our humanity and thankfully, **his** humanity. Try as we might, that is a connection from which none of us will ever succeed in freeing ourselves. And here I need to say...

...need to say that over the past few days, as I have pondered our inability ever truly to “wash our hands” of one another, the words that keep ringing through my heart and mind come not from scripture, but from the scripturally endowed pen of John Donne.

*No man is an island entire of itself;
every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main;
if a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less,
as well as if a promontory were,
as well as any manner of thy friends or of thine own were;
any man's death diminishes me,
because I am involved in mankind.
And therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls;
it tolls for thee.*

As those for whom the bell will one day toll: may we live each day with courage and with the hope that is ours in the name of the One who freely and fully entered the life of the world: that we, too, might have life and have it in abundance. Thanks be to God.

A Prayer for the Fifth Sunday in Lent

Father in heaven:
the love of your Son led him to accept the suffering of the cross
that his sisters and brothers might glory in new life.
Change our selfishness and self-centeredness
into self-giving.
Help us to embrace the world you have given us,
that we may transform the darkness of its pain
into the life and joy of Easter.
Grant this through Christ the Lord.
Amen.

--Adapted from a prayer for this day
from the *Liturgy of the Hours*