

Pontius Pilate

When politics and religion mingle, the result is rarely good!



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Political movements often co-op religion to build their power. Religion often fosters divisions and even violence in politics. Consider this Pontius Pilate story. The tension between Rome and the Jews was shaped by mutual hatred and violence.

The Jews hated the pagan Romans who ruled the world and tried to subject them to an emperor who claimed to be a god among a crowded list of gods. The Romans viewed the Jews as just another race to be conquered and ruled over. The Sadducees (priestly class) controlled the Temple and its lucrative revenues and partnered with the Pharisees (scholars) to guard the Jewish faith and identity as God's chosen people.

When Pilate was sent by Rome in 26 AD as governor of the province called Palestine, he enraged the Jews by parading into Jerusalem with banners bearing the golden eagle and image of Tiberius Caesar. The Jews were enraged and sent a delegation demanding the immediate removal of the pagan images from holy Jerusalem.

After six angry days of protests and negotiations with no resolution, Pilate threatened to kill the Jewish leaders. Their response was to kneel before him and bear their necks. Pilate backed down, but the truce remained fragile from then on. There were numerous small uprisings over the years and several men who claimed to be God's Messiah. These disturbances were summarily ended by brutal military action and crucifixions.

Our story occurs at a particularly sensitive time when Jerusalem was flooded by thousands of pilgrims attending the greatest holy day, Passover. The Roman garrison was increased and put on high alert. Pilate came to Jerusalem from his comfortable palace in Caesarea in case

there was any serious disturbance.

The Sadducees were also on high alert. The uneasy alliance with the Romans protected their power and wealth. At the same time the Sadducees wanted to maintain their control among the Jews, so they did all they could to destroy Jesus, whom they saw as a threat to their comfortable world. They also put Pilate in the position of hated judge and executioner.

After an illegal late night trial at the palace of the high priest, the religious leaders drug Jesus before Pilate the next morning. The political intrigue is immediately clarified by Pilate's initial question to Jesus: "Are you the king of the Jews?" (v. 11).

Is this another self-proclaimed messiah? Does he have enough followers to start a Jewish war? How can Pilate sort this out, protect himself, pacify the Sadducees and avoid a riot? Obviously the people are upset, but is this anything more than another minor internal Jewish argument?

The idea that Jesus claims to be "king" of the Jews is an affront to Caesar, who is the only king Rome recognizes. But Pilate sees the element of jealousy in this situation (v.18). A curious personal note is included as Matthew records Pilate's wife sending her husband a note warning that she has had a frightening dream about this "righteous man" (v. 19).

The plot is further complicated by a custom that at Passover the Roman governor would release one prisoner chosen by the people. "But the chief priests and elders persuaded the crowd to ask for Barabbas and kill Jesus" (v. 20). Notice their request not just for mercy on Barabbas but also for the execution of Jesus.

This perplexed Pilate. Why would these Jews clamor for the death of one of their own when there was no criminal accusation, only the religious opposition of the Sadducees? But the reality of a riot could not be ignored. Although Palestine was an assignment no Roman desired, Pilate

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was a governor with a comfortable retirement to consider.

To view this story as far removed from us is to fail to see beyond a tale of injustice and moral cowardice. Jesus came into our world, accepted every human limitation and chose the cross to give us God's love. We witness the power of selfishness, immorality and ignorance that remains in us today.

This is not a tale about the Jews killing Jesus, as many have attempted to make it. We see how great is the chasm between God and us. We are reminded of the evil potential within every human heart. We should be grieved by the reminder that God's grace is often cast aside like garbage while we clamor for self-importance, comfort and wealth.

Are we as weak and afraid, as was Pilate when he had this choice to make – truth or self-preservation?

We face the same question Pilate faced. It is not always easy. Will you do the right thing when life is challenging? Will you trust God in the hard times when you know you deserve better? Will you take responsibility for your life? Will you follow Jesus, even though the crowd is going another direction? Pilate washed his hands before the crowd, but nobody was impressed. They saw his decision was the safe call.

How do you deal with failure and guilt? Denial changes nothing. Neutrality compounds unhappiness and frustration. The only transformative and healing way to live a complete life is to trust in God's grace and healing. The stark reality of the story is that for all the power of Rome and the religious authorities, for all the anger and rejection of the mob, Jesus went to the cross because God loves every one of us!

Retired after 45 years in pastoral ministry, Michael K. Olmsted enjoys family, supply preaching and interim work, literature, history, the arts and antiques.