

Pontius Pilate

Matthew 27:11-26

11 Now Jesus stood before the governor; and the governor asked him, 'Are you the King of the Jews?' Jesus said, 'You say so.' 12 But when he was accused by the chief priests and elders, he did not answer. 13 Then Pilate said to him, 'Do you not hear how many accusations they make against you?' 14 But he gave him no answer, not even to a single charge, so that the governor was greatly amazed.

15 Now at the festival the governor was accustomed to release a prisoner for the crowd, anyone whom they wanted. 16 At that time they had a notorious prisoner, called Jesus[a] Barabbas. 17 So after they had gathered, Pilate said to them, 'Whom do you want me to release for you, Jesus[b] Barabbas or Jesus who is called the Messiah?'[c] 18 For he realized that it was out of jealousy that they had handed him over. 19 While he was sitting on the judgement seat, his wife sent word to him, 'Have nothing to do with that innocent man, for today I have suffered a great deal because of a dream about him.' 20 Now the chief priests and the elders persuaded the crowds to ask for Barabbas and to have Jesus killed. 21 The governor again said to them, 'Which of the two do you want me to release for you?' And they said, 'Barabbas.' 22 Pilate said to them, 'Then what should I do with Jesus who is called the Messiah?'[d] All of them said, 'Let him be crucified!' 23 Then he asked, 'Why, what evil has he done?' But they shouted all the more, 'Let him be crucified!'

24 So when Pilate saw that he could do nothing, but rather that a riot was beginning, he took some water and washed his hands before the crowd, saying, 'I am innocent of this man's blood;[e] see to it yourselves.' 25 Then the people as a whole answered, 'His blood be on us and on our children!' 26 So he released Barabbas for them; and after flogging Jesus, he handed him over to be crucified.

MEDITATION: Pontius Pilate, prefect of Judea - an immensely powerful person with all the might of Rome at his disposal. Or so you would think, and yet in the accounts of Jesus' trial he comes over as singularly helpless. He was impressed by his prisoner, so calm and dignified, an innocent man. Clearly, he didn't want to condemn him to death - but, twist and turn as he might, he could not find a way to prevent it.

To a considerable extent, that was his own fault, because of the way he had trampled on Jewish religious sensibilities in the past. Where previous governors had dealt with the Jews with kid gloves, he had preferred the mailed fist. But his imperiousness backfired. At various times, it had provoked a mass protest, riots, complaints to Rome; and more than once he had had to back down. These events had seriously undermined his position, with the result that now, faced with an angry mob baying for Jesus' blood, he simply did not have the moral authority to stand out against it.

I wonder what any of us would have done in his place? Responsible for keeping control of a city overcharged with religious fervour, knowing from bitter experience how volatile these Passover crowds were, would you have risked more riots?

Would I have put my job on the line? Or would we too have decided it was better to sacrifice one man for the sake of peace and order?

Pilate washed his hands before the crowd, saying: 'I am innocent of this man's blood; see to it yourselves'





Pontius Pilate washing his hands, sculpture by Josep Maria Subirachs; from the facade of Antoni Gaudí's Expiatory Temple of the Holy Family, Barcelona. © Ron Gatepain

Loving God, forgive the times when I have put expediency before my knowledge of what is right. Help me always to stand for those who are vulnerable, even when I fear others' disapproval. Amen