

Matthew 27:22

“What shall I do, then, with Jesus who is called Christ?” Pilate asked.

American Historian, Paul Maier, in his historical novel of the Pilate’s life wrote:

Pilate could never know it — he would have been astonished to know it — but, apparently insignificant ex-prefect that he was, his would eventually be the most familiar name in all of Roman history. For uncounted masses in future ages, who knew little about a Caesar or Augustus or even Nero, would confess in The Creed: “I believe in Jesus Christ ... who ... suffered under Pontius Pilate.”

Each of the four gospel accounts records Jesus on trial before Pontius Pilate

- The Roman governor or prefect
- In those days, Judea was a province of the Roman Empire
- So the ultimate judicial authority rested with Pilate

Matthew is the gospel-writer who gives the fullest account of the teachings of Jesus

- In Jerusalem after his triumphal entry on what we call ‘Palm Sunday’
- His teaching contained a large amount about God’s forthcoming judgment
- And it seems that because of this the religious leaders wanted to do away with him

Before the Jewish ruling council (the Sanhedrin) Jesus has been accused of blasphemy

- When asked if he were the Christ, Jesus replied, ‘it is as you say’
- But the Roman authorities would not have been interested in a religious charge
- So, the religious leaders brought Jesus to Pilate saying Jesus claimed to be a king
- A political charge, a charge of treason, which explains Pilate’s question to Jesus ‘Are you the king of the Jews?’
- Jesus’ reply, ‘Yes, it is as you say’ is a qualified affirmative
- He is indeed the king of the Jews, but not exactly in the sense Pilate might think
- Jesus brief reply to the accusations of the religious leaders amazed Pilate
- For unlike the English legal system that generally gives the accused a right to silence
- In the Roman system the defence depended heavily on the defendant’s response
- And it appears that from that moment on Pilate takes tentative steps to release Jesus
- But not with the boldness or authority that befitted his position, rather:

I HE TRIED TO AVOID HIS RESPONSIBILITY

By sending him to Herod

- In his gospel, Luke records that once Pilate heard that Jesus was a Galilean
- He sent him to Herod, a superstitious, cunning and wholly immoral man
- This Herod, Herod Antipas, was son of Herod the Great (the Christmas Herod)
- Who as Tetrarch of Galilee and Peraea had some authority
- Herod found no basis for the charges against Jesus and sent him back to Pilate
- Who concluded that the best thing would be to punish Jesus
- Presumably with a severe beating, and then he planned to release him
- Doubtless, Pilate had heard of Jesus before, but he is unprepared for Jesus’ silence

II HE TRIED TO EVADE HIS RESPONSIBILITY

Knowing it was out of envy that the Jewish religious leaders had handed Jesus over to him

- No doubt because they felt threatened by the authoritative ministry of Jesus
- Pilate decided that he would offer the crowd a choice between Jesus and Barabbas

Amnesties for condemned prisoners at national festivals were quite common

- And there was evidently some tradition of releasing a prisoner at Passover time
- The great national festival that the Jews were celebrating in Jerusalem
- Pilate saw this as the perfect solution to his dilemma
- He could administer a reversal to the policy of the religious leaders
- By allowing it to be the people's choice
- And he would have known of Jesus' popularity from his recent arrival in the city
- It seemed the perfect solution

Although Barabbas is described in Matthew as 'a notorious prisoner'

- Information that we can gather from other gospels describe Barabbas
- As a notable insurrectionist – one might say 'freedom fighter'
- Possibly a bandit of the Robin Hood style, Barabbas could also be a popular choice
- With the crowd momentarily faltering, it is left to the leaders to make up their minds
- The irony is plain to see
- The crowd had shouted with amazement and enthusiasm at his teaching (7:28-29)
- They had celebrated his miracles (9:7) and his triumphal entry to Jerusalem (21:8)
- for while Jesus had offered the crowds salvation and discipleship
- But faced with an attractive alternative, they gave up their shallow allegiance
- it had always been an 'either-or' choice – and faced with it they chose Barabbas

Pilate, having been advised by his wife to have nothing to do with Jesus, an innocent man

- Still tries to solve the situation by his manoeuvring
- It becomes a straight choice between Barabbas – the failed freedom fighter
- And the Christ – the one who offers spiritual hope
- But the crowd has become increasingly hardened
- And choosing not to repent and believe in him
- Will not allow the good news of his message to penetrate their hearts
- The crowd is well aware of the fate of the one not chosen to be released
- It is death on a cross
- Pilate asks the crowd, "What shall I do, then, with Jesus who is called Christ?"
- 'Crucify him' came the reply

Pilate's failure to deal with Jesus has left him in the unenviable situation

- of the crowd calling for the crucifixion of an innocent man
- and although he asks them what crime Jesus has committed
- they just shout all the more to crucify him
- the fact that three crosses were ready
- suggests that Pilate had already ordered preparations for three executions
- and, that being the case, Jesus the Messiah took the place of the rebel Barabbas
- because people chose a political rebel rather than the Son of God

III HE TRIED TO DENY HIS RESPONSIBILITY

Although public hand washing was not a Roman custom

- it seems that Pilate has picked up something Jewish customs
- by washing his hands in front of the crowd
- Pilate was admitting that he had not found anything in Jesus deserving death
- It was a belated yet blatant tempt to deny his own responsibility
- Nevertheless, it was a responsibility that he could not deny
- For it could only be on his orders that the execution was carried out

Pilate might have thought that his actions were conducted in relative obscurity

- Jerusalem was far away from Rome – but his actions, in the political backwaters
- With no thought for the historical and spiritual consequences
- Have implications for all humanity for all time

Whatever his motives, Pilate tried repeatedly to release Jesus

- He tried to avoid his responsibility
- By sending Jesus to King Herod
- He tried to evade his responsibility
- By offering to release him under the Passover amnesty
- He tried to deny his responsibility
- By publicly washing his hands of the matter
- But his question remains, “What shall I do, then, with Jesus who is called Christ?”
- And it is a question that each of us in our own hearts and lives must answer

Jesus is ultimately crucified not because of anything that he had done

- But because charges of claims to messiahship and kingship had been brought
- A decision of what we think should happen to Jesus Christ is ours today
- We can try our level best to avoid it – saying it really isn’t anything to do with us
- We can try to evade it – with whatever weasel words we can come up with
- We can say that nothing that happens to Jesus is our responsibility

The problem is that when we measure our lives against the characters in the gospels

- We find ourselves strangely similar to the religious leaders, to the crowds, to Pilate
- It is that their own rebellious empire and false religious teaching are threatened
- That the religious leaders wanted to do away with Jesus
- That pernicious combination of jealousy and self-interest
- It was because they were easily led, weak and vulnerable to taking the easy option
- That the crowds ultimately cry out for Jesus to be crucified
- It was political expediency, weakness and indecision that cause Pilate to crucify him

With Jesus there is no safe middle-ground

- if he is Messiah (Saviour), King and uniquely Son of God
- We must trust him, serve him and worship him
- If he is an impostor then what happens to him is of little consequence to us
- But what is not available is the choice that Jesus was a nice man, a good teacher
- Whose claims to be Messiah, King and Son of God have no relevance today

Good Friday brings us to the foot of the cross and to the cross-roads of eternity

- Our decisions require accountability to God's calling and claims on our life
- Regardless of the apparent obscurity or seeming insignificance of their impact
- Both accepting and rejecting Jesus and his Lordship have consequences

The Bible commentator Michael Wilkins puts it this way:

They may not be many, and they may not come often, but there are hills that are worth fighting and dying for, even when they may come in the relative obscurity of our own little worlds. We may be far from centres of power and acclaim, but the responsibilities allotted to us have untold consequences. They are a test of our character. Pilate compromised at his life's most important moment, knowing that the sentence of crucifixion he pronounced was on an innocent man.

When the opportunity presents itself

- each of us must contend for what we know to be right
- what then will you do with Jesus who is called Christ?