

**A Journey through Lent: to Pilates' Palace**  
**Sermon of 2021-03-14**

By Major Brian Coles

[slide 1] Donald Marshall, David Milgaard, and Rubin "Hurricane" Carter. What do these 3 Canadian men have in common?

They were all convicted for crimes they did not commit and spent many years in prison before being exonerated. They were all victims of gross injustice.

[slide 2] But the most unjust sentence in history was given by Pontius Pilate to the Messiah, Jesus.

Jesus was accused by the Jewish Sanhedrin of blasphemy against God and the temple, and insurrection against Rome.

The charges were false and the witnesses against the accused were liars.

But the accusers were determined to force a guilty verdict and gain the maximum sentence, which was death by crucifixion.

Because the Sanhedrin did not possess the power to execute anyone at this time in their history, which John makes clear in his gospel, 18.31,

they took Jesus to the Roman Governor, Pontus Pilate.

[slide 3] Pontius Pilate, the governor of Judea, had a responsibility to administer justice in this case, but he failed miserably.

Pilate was intimidated by the angry mob. And he puts his own self-interest ahead of serving justice.

Admittedly he was in a tight spot and did what was politically expedient,

but the result is that a completely innocent man was sentenced to die by the most inhumane torture known to man.

[slide 4] I invite you to open your bible to Matthew 27 as we examine the details of the trial at Pilate's palace.

Once we've examined the details of the trial, we will then have the opportunity to render our own verdict, our own decision, concerning Jesus, based on the evidence presented.

[slide 5, blank] We'll pick up the story in Mt. 27.11.

But before we work our way through the text, let me give some important background information on Pontus Pilate.

Pilate finds himself on the horns of a terrible dilemma.

To appreciate his predicament, we need to understand something about his person; who he was.

Pilate was appointed by Rome, during the reign of Emperor Tiberius, to govern Judea in A.D. 26.

Normally he resided in his palatial mansion on the Mediterranean coast in Caesarea,

but now he's in Jerusalem during the Passover Feast because the crowds are large and the chance for unrest great.

His presence, along with all the soldiers he brings, are there to help maintain law and order in the streets of Jerusalem during the Passover festival.

This is because there were constant uprisings in Judea because of the Jews' stubborn resistance to Roman rule.

But Pilate was not a very good governor. In fact, he is an anti-Semitic tyrant who was tactless and ruthless.

How do we know this? We know this from a letter sent by King Agrippa to Emperor Caligula, who succeeded Tiberius in A.D. 37,

which was recorded in the writings of the Greek speaking, Jewish philosopher, Philo [pronounced Phy-low].

This is the scathing testimony received by Caligula from Agrippa: “Pilate is unbending and recklessly hard. He is a man of notorious reputation, severe brutality, prejudice, savage violence, and murder.”

No wonder Pilate is hated by the Jews and was a constant source of trouble for Emperor Tiberius, the emperor before Caligula, under whom Pilate served.

Tiberius has received a number of complaints about Pilate’s brutality and prejudice toward the Jews.

For example, when Pilate first takes office he marches his army through the streets of Jerusalem carrying the Roman banner with a bust of the Emperor on top.

The Jews are outraged by this. They regard it as highly offensive.

All previous governors had removed the offensive images in deference to the religious practices of the city.

But Pilate stubbornly refuses to do the same. And the protesters hound him for 5 days.

Finally Pilate agrees to meet with the protesters in an amphitheater.

There he surrounds them with soldiers and tells them to disperse or he will kill them on the spot.

The Jews are so angry they dare him to do it and bare their necks, inviting him to strike.

Finding them so adamant in their opposition, and not afraid to die, Pilate finally backs down and the offensive images are reluctantly removed.

During his term in office, Pilate determines that Jerusalem needs a new water supply, so he constructs an aqueduct.

But in order to finance this project he takes money from the Temple treasury.

He rationalizes that it is going to benefit the city and therefore the Temple too.

But the Jews react so violently to this action taken by Pilate that they surge through the streets of Jerusalem in protest and begin a riot.

Pilate then has his soldiers dress in plain cloths, carrying concealed weapons, while mingling among the mob.

On his signal they attack and many of the Jewish protesters are stabbed and clubbed to death.

As a result of these and other actions, Pilate is “on report.” He is under investigation by Rome and he will have to report directly to Caesar to explain his actions.

This background information on Pilate helps us understand why this otherwise unbending, brutal man, appears to dither so much during Jesus trial.

And to that trial we now turn our attention. [**slide 6**] It was at the break of dawn when an angry Jewish mob,

led by members of the Sanhedrin, brought Jesus to Pilate and shout,

*“This man is a criminal and we want you to execute him. If you don’t you’re no friend of Caesar.”*

They have Pilate on the horns of a dilemma. He is faced with a difficult choice - his job or Jesus.

There are 2 factors that make Pilate reluctant to condemn Jesus:

[slide 7] 1<sup>st</sup>, there is Jesus’ claim to be a King. Look at vs.11 of Mt. 27.

Pilate asks Jesus, *“Are you the king of the Jews?”* And Jesus replies, *“You have said so.”*

*“Then Pilate asked him,” v.13, “Don’t you hear the testimony they [the chief priests and members of the Sanhedrin] are bringing against you?”*

*But Jesus made no reply, not even to a single charge – to the great amazement of the governor.””*

Pilate’s been in the presence of Caesar. He knows authority when he sees it. And there is something impressive about Jesus. Could it be that he really is a king?

[slide 8] The 2<sup>nd</sup> factor that makes Pilate reluctant to condemn Jesus is the council of his wife.

In v.19 Mt. tells us that *“while Pilate was sitting on the judge’s seat, his wife sent him this message:*

*“Don’t have anything to do with that innocent man, for I have suffered a great deal today in a dream because of him.””*

[slide 9, blank] No matter how powerful a man is, he is wise to listen to the advice of his wife.

I imagine Justin Trudeau listens to the advise of his wife, Sophie, just as I listen to the advice of my wife... sometimes... most of the time!

A wife's advice means something. When Pilate is advised by his wife to have nothing to do with Jesus,

I imagine he listened to her and doesn't really want to condemn Jesus. He's looking for a way out.

But there's a basic principle at work in his life that we can apply to our lives too. And that principle is: Past mistakes limit your future options.

Pilate's earlier blunders made it impossible for him to negotiate with the Jewish people. His past mistakes limit his future options.

The same is true in our lives. Suppose you goof off your first couple of years at university.

Then in your 3rd year you decide you want to be a doctor. But you can't get into medical school because your grades are not up to par.

Your past mistakes limit your future options.

Pilate has made mistakes in his past, and now his future options are limited; he finds himself on the horns of a terrible dilemma - his job or Jesus.

If you place Mt. 27 alongside Lk. 23 and Jn. 18 you'll see a series of attempts made by Pilate to get off the horns of his dilemma.

[slide 10] His 1<sup>st</sup> attempt is to try and dismiss the charges. In Lk. 23.4 we read:

*"Pilate announced to the chief priests and the crowd, "I find no basis for a charge against this man."*

In other words, "Case dismissed." But the crowd would have none of it.

[slide 11] So Pilate tries a 2<sup>nd</sup> way to get off the horns of his dilemma - he tries referral.

Lk. 23.7: *“When he learned that Jesus was under Herod’s jurisdiction, he sent him to Herod, who was also in Jerusalem at that time.”*

In other words, “This isn’t a city matter. It’s a provincial matter.” So Pilate sends Jesus to Herod.

This is the same Herod, Herod Antipas, who beheaded John the Baptist, Jesus’ cousin, and the same Herod whom Jesus called “that fox” in Lk. 13.32.

Herod heard about the miracles of Jesus and asks him to perform one for his own amusement.

Jesus not only refuses to entertain Herod but he refuses to speak to him.

This angers Herod, so he makes up his own entertainment by ridiculing and mocking Jesus.

But in the end, he finds no basis for a charge against him. So he shrugs the whole thing off and sends Jesus back to Pilate.

[slide 12, blank] I can picture Pilate later that morning, eating breakfast with his wife, relieved that Jesus is no longer his problem.

Then, looking out the window while sipping his coffee, he sees a contingent of soldiers bringing Jesus back to him, followed by an angry mob.

“Oh no, now what I’m I going to do?”

Pilate then makes a third attempt to get off the horns of his dilemma. This time he offers amnesty.

[slide 13] Mt. records these words in 27.15f.

*“Now it was the governor’s custom at the Feast to release a prisoner chosen by the crowd.*

[Roman law allowed him to acquit or pardon a condemned man].

*At the time they had a well-known [notorious] prisoner, called Jesus Barabbas.*

*So when the crowd had gathered, Pilate asked them, “Which one do you want me to release to you: Jesus Barabbas, or Jesus who is called the Messiah [or Christ]?”*

*For he knew it was out of [jealous] envy that they had handed Jesus over to him.”*

Barabbas was an insurrectionist, using violent means to try and overthrow the occupying Romans.

Revolts and bloodshed, promoted by insurrectionists like Barabbas, were common at this time, and Barabbas was one of those arrested and imprisoned.

Interestingly, in the eyes of many Jews, Barabbas would not be considered a notorious villain but a hero, because of his hatred of the Roman occupiers.

[slide 14, blank] It may have been that the two men who were crucified with Jesus were co-insurrectionists with Barabbas.

The fact that 3 crosses were already prepared strongly suggests that Pilate has already ordered that preparations be made for the execution of these 3 rebels.

If so, Jesus the Messiah actually took the place of Jesus Barabbas because the people, incited by the leaders of the Sanhedrin,



preferred a political insurrectionist be freed instead of one acclaimed as their Messiah.

Look at v.20ff, *"... the chief priests and elders persuaded the crowd to ask for Barabbas and to have Jesus executed.*

*Which of the two do you want me to release to you?" asked the governor [a second time].*

*"Barabbas," they answered.*

*"What shall I do, then, with Jesus who is called The Messiah?" Pilate asked.*

*They all answered, "Crucify him!"*

*"Why? What crime has he committed?" asked Pilate.*

*But [mob psychology prevails, and] they shouted all the louder, "Crucify him!"*

Pilate then makes one last attempt to get off the horns of his dilemma - he seeks appeasement.

All four gospels record Jesus being flogged in an attempt by Pilate to satisfy the mob and avoid execution.

[slide 15] John tells us in his gospel, 19.1-5, that *"Pilate took Jesus and had him flogged.*

*The soldiers twisted together a crown of thorns and put it on his head.*

*They clothed him in a purple robe and went up to him again and again saying, "Hail, king of the Jews!" And they struck him in the face.*

*Once more Pilate came out and said to the Jews, "Look, I am bringing him out to you to let you know that I find no basis for a charge against him."*

*When Jesus came out wearing the crown of thorns and the purple robe, Pilate said to them, "Here is the man!"*

Pilate is hoping that when they see Jesus has been flogged, that will be enough. But his efforts at appeasement fail.

The sight of Jesus' blood doesn't satisfy the chief priests and elders. They want him dead.

[slide 16, blank] The pressure on Pilate has reached its peak. Pilate has to make a decision. He has enough information.

He has the testimony of Jesus. He knows he is innocent.

He knows his accusers are corrupt. It is out of their own self-interest and jealous envy that they sought the death penalty for Jesus.

He received a warning from his wife, and Herod himself found no basis for a charge against Jesus.

Pilate has enough information to make the right decision, but he refuses to do so.

Sometimes we can refuse to make a decision. We may do so out of fear of making a wrong decision,

or think, "What if I make a decision and later regret it. It'll be too late to go back."

However, the bigger danger is that we make no decision at all. Failure to make a decision can be costly.

There comes a time when we must decide.

There are a number of people who avoid making a decision about Jesus.

They tell themselves they're going to do it someday, when they have enough information,

or when they get their life in order [whatever that means].

They procrastinate, make shallow promises, or try to joke their way out.

The truth is, Jesus compels us to decide about himself.

Pilate asked, "What shall I do with Jesus?" Each of us must answer that same question.

Pilate ends up making a selfish decision. He caves in to public pressure. He does what is politically expedient. He permits an innocent man to be executed.

His decision results in the most unjust verdict ever rendered, not just on a good man, but on the perfect man, the God/Man, Jesus.

Matthew records these words in v.24f, [**slide 17**]

*"When Pilate saw he was getting nowhere, but that instead a riot was brewing,*

*he took water and washed his hands in front of the crowd. "I am innocent of this man's blood," he said."*

[**slide 18, blank**] Are we ever guilty of trying to wash our hands of Jesus? In other words,

are we ever guilty of caving in to the pressures we face instead of standing firm for Jesus and doing what is right?

Do we wash our hands of Jesus for our job security? "I've got to lie a little. It's the only way I can keep my job."

Do we wash our hands of Jesus for financial advantage? “Sure I falsify my tax returns. But everybody does it.”

Do we wash our hands of Jesus to enhance our image? “In a job like mine I’ve got to use some foul language. It’s the only thing they understand.”

Do we wash our hands of Jesus to achieve success? “I’ll admit I cheat on a test on occasion, but it’s the only way I can make the grade.”

It’s not easy to decide to follow Jesus, to stand firm against the pressures we face, and do what is right.

It’s a lot easier to cave in to pressure and wash our hands of him.

Bill McCartney was the founder of Promise Keepers and is an example of one who did stand firm and did not cave in to pressure.

Before founding Promise Keepers, McCartney was the head football coach at Colorado University.

He used his gifts and abilities to lead his team to a national championship in 1990.

But the year of the teams’ greatest glory was also a year of personal trauma for him and his family.

His teenage daughter, Christine, announced to her parents that she was pregnant.

And she gotten pregnant by the football teams star quarterback. He wanted her to get an abortion. She refused. So he rejected her.

McCartney, however, stood by his daughter and told her she had made the right decision.

Later that year - March 29, 1990 - it was discovered that Sal Aunese, the star quarterback, was dying of stomach cancer.

On July 22, Bill McCartney went to the hospital room and led Sal to a personal r'ship with Jesus.

When he faced the ultimate test, not as a coach, but as a father to the daughter he loved more than life itself, he responded by giving the ultimate gift.

While coaching at Colorado, McCartney also spoke out against abortion.

The president of the university said he had no right to make those statements since he represented the university.

But Bill stood firm for his moral values. It ended up costing him his job.

Doing the right thing is not necessarily the most expedient or politically correct thing today.

When you do the right thing there will be opposition, ridicule, and sometimes personal loss.

When you do the right thing you may be persecuted, you may lose your job, you may lose a r'ship, and you may lose money.

But as Jim Elliot, the martyred missionary said, "He is no fool who exchanges that which he cannot keep for that which he can never lose."

God decided in eternity to send his Son, Jesus, to be our Saviour.

Now each of us must decide. Will I make the right decision and follow Jesus no matter what the cost?