

The End and the Beginning According to John

Pilate

John 19.1-17

March 28, 2021

John 19.1 Pilate then took Jesus and scourged Him. ² And the soldiers twisted together a crown of thorns and put it on His head, and put a purple robe on Him; ³ and they began to come up to Him and say, "Hail, King of the Jews!" and to give Him slaps in the face. ⁴ Pilate came out again and said to them, "Behold, I am bringing Him out to you so that you may know that I find no guilt in Him." ⁵ Jesus then came out, wearing the crown of thorns and the purple robe. Pilate said to them, "Behold, the Man!" ⁶ So when the chief priests and the officers saw Him, they cried out saying, "Crucify, crucify!" Pilate said to them, "Take Him yourselves and crucify Him, for I find no guilt in Him." ⁷ The Jews answered him, "We have a law, and by that law He ought to die because He made Himself out to be the Son of God."

⁸ Therefore when Pilate heard this statement, he was even more afraid; ⁹ and he entered into the Praetorium again and said to Jesus, "Where are You from?" But Jesus gave him no answer. ¹⁰ So Pilate said to Him, "You do not speak to me? Do You not know that I have authority to release You, and I have authority to crucify You?" ¹¹ Jesus answered, "You would have no authority over Me, unless it had been given you from above; for this reason he who delivered Me to you has the greater sin." ¹² As a result of this Pilate made efforts to release Him, but the Jews cried out saying, "If you release this Man, you are no friend of Caesar; everyone who makes himself out to be a king opposes Caesar."

¹³ Therefore when Pilate heard these words, he brought Jesus out, and sat down on the judgment seat at a place called The Pavement, but in Hebrew, Gabbatha. ¹⁴ Now it was the day of preparation for the Passover; it was about the sixth hour. And he said to the Jews, "Behold, your King!" ¹⁵ So they cried out, "Away with Him, away with Him, crucify Him!" Pilate said to them, "Shall I crucify your King?" The chief priests answered, "We have no king but Caesar." ¹⁶ So he then handed Him over to them to be crucified. ¹⁷ They took Jesus, therefore, and He went out, bearing His own cross, to the place called the Place of a Skull, which is called in Hebrew, Golgotha.

We've been looking at the Passion of Jesus Christ as narrated by the disciple John, "The End and the Beginning According to John."

We mentioned last week that there was actually a total of six phases in the interrogations and trials of Jesus Christ. Three of these proceedings were by the Church and three by the State.

Today's episode is the last of all the trials. It was conducted by the State and presided over by the Roman, Gentile governor of Judah and Jerusalem, a man named Pontius Pilate. And it's in

THIS trial that Pilate issues his notorious mandate, translated into Latin by the famous words (v. 5), “Ecce Homo” – Gk: ἰδοὺ ὁ ἄνθρωπος and in English, “Behold, the Man.”

John uses the nonspecific word for man – not a male but a human – mankind or humanity. Pilate parades Jesus in front of His accusers, the priests and Temple officials and Pilate says, “Behold, the Man...Humanity.” And that’s exactly what I’d like to DO today (this Palm Sunday) to look at man. We’d rather avoid it, I know.

“What IS man?” asks the Eighth Psalm (also 144.3, Heb 2.6, Job 7.17); what is our nature? What do we all have in common? How should we think of ourselves when everyone seems to be self-identifying by their peculiarities – sexuality, age, gender, political affiliation, race/ethnicity – all the ways we classify people – but what makes “US” us?

What defines humanity? What makes us (very important word) authentic people, true human beings?

I think there are three depictions of humanity here:

- 1. Evasive Man**
- 2. Responsible Man**
- 3. Authentic Man**

Evasive Man is represented by the officials of Church and State (as we saw last week) and specifically Pilate and the Priests. Last week we saw them as guardians of the status quo (keeping themselves in power). This week we see them (particularly Pilate) as supremely evasive – Pilate avoids taking blame; he’s fixated on getting out of this mess safely and without culpability.

It’s another facet in the quest for status-quo – Pilate and the priests and all of humanity, universally, we ALL want to evade criticism and fault and censure and shame. It goes back to the first pages of the Bible and Adam and Eve trying to avoid liability for their actions – they break the agreement with God, they feel shame and they run, hide, cover and blame.

Pilate is an expert at it – HE’S TEFLON MAN (nothing sticks!) AND every one of us if more skilled at this universal human failing than we really know. We learn pretty early that there are ways to get out of things, to avoid liability, to pass the buck, to not really “lie” (such an old-fashioned and hard word!) but to put the right spin on things. The theological word for this is “self-justification.”(Rom 10.3)

Very early in life it becomes a reflex – we touch a hot stove and our reflex is to withdraw our hand (automatic!) and just as reflexive is the sinful instinct to run, hide, cover and blame. It’s mindless – sub-conscious.

Pilate wants to let Jesus go free. He's made several attempts at evading what might get him into trouble but these clergymen are so insistent. So, he tries again; he really doesn't think this man has done anything wrong but if it'll get these priests off his back (that's what evasion is all about – get people OFF my back!)

So Pilate makes a show of it: he has Jesus whipped (a brutal punishment in those days) and then allows the soldiers to mock/abuse/slap/spit on Him.

Finally, Pilate parades Jesus in front of His accusers in a purple robe (Matthew adds a reed in His hand for a mock scepter). but they're NOT pacified by the hideous sight: a Man bleeding from His head and His beaten face and shredded back; totally pitiful/shamed.

The flogging alone actually killed some people (blood-loss, shock and infection!) but the clergymen want Him GONE – because they too are evasive and He is everything they SHOULD be – they hate the sight of Him and only want to avoid Him forever (they won't) because when they compare themselves to Him – He makes them look bad... and people will do anything to evade/avoid shame.

Then the priests invoke their Law (v. 7) “We have a Law and according to it – He has to die!” That really troubles Pilate because now they're closing in on him... He can't evade their LAW.

Pilate then asks Jesus for help – “Gimme somethin' here! I wanna let You go – where You from?”

Jesus won't answer (He already did – “My Kingdom is NOT of this world!”) so Pilate doubles-down, “Look! I'm trying to help You here – but I have authority to set You free or kill You in the worst way ever devised.” Jesus says, “You and all humanity HAVE no direct authority, only derived authority – from heaven. You're taking yourself way too seriously..”

Pilate seems to sense that Jesus is on to something and once again tries to avoid the death sentence and tells the priests – “C'mon, let's let 'im go!”

But they use more leverage (v. 12); they turn from religious Law to pretend patriotism: “If this one you release then you are no friend of Caesar – anyone claiming to be a king opposes Caesar.” These guys are not patriots to Rome (they hate Rome) but they're using all the leverage they can muster.

Finally, Pilate knows he can't avoid/evade anymore, so he gives in. He goes to the Bench, the seat where verdicts are rendered and says, “Behold, your King!”

I think (of course, it's only an educated guess) but I think Pilate's trying to infuriate the clergymen so that he can say forever, “I did everything I could do but those priests were WILD with rage and in the end, I had to give in...had to wash my hands.”

“King”, they said, “King? We have no king but Caesar!” – well, you can’t argue with that!

These guys who are accusing Jesus of blasphemy in v. 7 are now committing full-throated blasphemy of their own! So bent on avoiding this Jesus who has NO CREDENTIALS at all but is infinitely greater a pastor/shepherd than they will ever be – HE SIMPLY HAS TO GO – “we can’t bear to look at Him – He’s a walking, talking indictment on us and we’ll do anything to avoid/evade Him” (of course they won’t).

Pilate, always avoiding blame, makes them say it out loud, “Shall I crucify your King” and they answer, “Away, Away, Crucify Him!” (Pilate: “You heard ‘em!”)

And the passage ends, “So he then delivered Jesus to them to be crucified. They took Jesus therefore, and He went out, bearing His own cross, to the place called the Place of a Skull, which is called in Hebrew, Golgotha.” (16-17)

Evasive man... humanity so freaked out by shame, so bent on self-justification that they're willing to blaspheme and skillfully manipulate the voters so he can blame it on them (“Me? I did everything to let Him go!” – “Why’d you keep calling Him a King?!”)

What a truly scary indictment this is on us. Because we all know, if you’re self-aware at all that we hate criticism... We hate when people point out our faults and flaws. Shame is the emotional experience that most closely approximates the experience of Hell. And we’ll do anything to evade and avoid it.

And then there’s this other Man present that fateful day – I’ve called Him, not Evasive Man, but Responsible Man. He came into the world NOT to evade but to carry, to take responsibility for my sin and everything about myself I find so hard to face.

He’s the God-Man. Imagine that it was He who pronounced the Curse in the garden. And yet He knew, even as that Curse was declared, He Himself would one day take responsibility for the sin of His people and NOW that day is come “Both thorns and thistles the soil shall grow for you... By the sweat of your face You will eat bread, till you return to the ground, because from it you were taken; For you are dust, and to dust you shall return.” (Gen 3.18-19)

And now Jesus Christ, sweating great drops of blood and crowned with those thorns (first mentioned in the Garden) now He takes responsibility for MY sin and He bears the Curse – futility, weeds/thorns and thistles and the sweat of His brow. He takes the blame and becomes responsible for what I deserve.

Pilate looks at Him and says, “Behold: Man!” and yet we can’t even bear to behold Him. Isaiah predicted, “Like one from whom men hide their face He was despised, and we did not esteem Him. Surely our griefs He Himself bore, and our sorrows He carried” (Isa 53.3-4)

“Behold the picture of humanity – human beings are become ridiculous. We were meant to be Kings and Queens over creation, Vice-regents of God, royal ambassadors who care for the earth under the smile and sanction of God. The seal of God’s own self, His IMAGE is indelibly stamped into our very being.

Caring for the earth; filling the world with God’s image as we are fruitful and multiply; working NOT in futility but boundlessly flourishing and turning the wilderness into a Garden...always with our Father.

And yet now... as we heed Pilate, if we force ourselves to behold the Man, we’ll see that He is a picture of what we have become. He’s a ridiculous parody of a king. We dress the part only to cover our shame. We’re crowned with the curse, thorns and sickness and sweat. We hold a scepter that’s a reed – we’re disconnected from the earth and from heaven and from each other. We’re become absurd.

And all that we are... and all that we deserve...and all about ourselves that we EVADE/avoid because it’s too painful to behold – HE is bearing the Curse; He is taking responsibility. He lived the Perfect Life of Love and yet He takes responsibility for MY ridiculousness and sin and shame: “Behold the Man.”

And if we haven’t seen it YET... the passage ends with these stark words: “They took Jesus, therefore, and He went out, bearing His own cross (i.e. taking full responsibility)” (17)

But, you see, Jesus Christ is become the Responsible Man that I might stop being the Evasive Man and become the Authentic Man.

He becomes everything I am – and everything I deserve – so that I can become what He is.

He is crowned in shame that I might be crowned with glory. Isaiah 28.5 in the Greek OT (LXX) says this, using the same Greek word for twisted that John uses in v. 2 “In that day the Lord of hosts shall be the crown of hope, the woven crown of glory, to the remnant of the people.” (LXX)

Jesus Christ comes to restore us to our place as royal sons and daughters. He comes to put us back under the authority of God JOYFULLY (Jer 24.7) – not in a forced and artificial way but in a way we welcome – knowing (what evasive Pilate didn’t know) that we have no authority but what is delegated to us by our Father who has all authority – and we’re becoming OK with that – we welcome it as the happy life!

He is even now, as we believe the Gospel and repent and live in this joyous place of trust – He is making us into AUTHENTIC human beings. Our jobs, even if we're sweeping streets or changing diapers or repairing engines or managing personnel or teaching students – whatever the job, it now becomes a sacred calling (vocation).

We live in relationship with the Responsible Man who became ridiculous to show us what we are AND rose from the dead to show us what we will be – died under our penalty and rose as our destiny.

And in the process of having the image of God slowly restored in us... we fail. And we're able to face the shame of our failures with courage – we're giving up the evil, absurd practice of self-justification and evasion.

We can admit that we often fail because WE HAVE SOMEONE who became responsible for our failings.

He became like us, so we could be like Him. We're getting a little more receptive to hearing about our faults... It still feels a bit like a crucifixion when we're justly criticized... BUT we know our worth as a person and our dignity, identity, OUR AUTHENTICITY is NOT dependent on us – but on Him.

If you're a believer in Jesus Christ – press on – keep on repenting and believing. Stop self-justifying and learn to face your broken humanity and your sin and shame KNOWING that someone else is taken responsibility. Know that God will soon take away the curse all together and will exchange our thorny crowns with one He has woven for us – true dignity and true authenticity that only HE can restore.

If you're NOT a Christian – it's really the same process for you. Begin trusting Jesus and the on-loan right-ness that He offers you. You'll be declared right even before you ACT right... Keep on facing your sins and flaws courageously because you know that Someone else took responsibility.

And little by little you'll find yourself moving in His direction – the direction of Authentic Humanity – all that God has designed and destined you to be.