

A Sermon for DaySpring

by Eric Howell

A Poem for Pilate

John 18.33-37

November 21, 2021

Today's reading from the Gospel of John takes us right into the headquarters of the governor of Judea, Pontius Pilate. Pilate is not just middle-management, a faceless bureaucrat. He is the face of the Roman Empire in Judea. Pilate exercised military, political, social, judicial, and economic power for Rome, sent here to this part of the Empire to ensure the protection, and prosperity of Rome's ruling elites.

On this day, among all the other things he had to do to keep the engines of empire grinding, he has to deal with yet another a dustup among the local religious fanatics. That's how he thought of them anyway. Good grief, it's always something with these guys. You can't eat pork, you can't work on Sabbath, you can't set up an abomination of desolation where it ought not to be. They won't say Caesar is Lord. Why Caesar keeps putting up with this is beyond me, he thinks. Just crush these guys and get over it.

For some reason today, they've pushed a haggard looking peasant onto his agenda. They want Pilate to authorize a crucifixion, which is something he alone has the power to do. It's not that Pilate is squeamish about such a thing, but it's quite unusual that they would be demanding a Roman execution for one of their own. That's very strange. So, what's going on here? Curiosity crosses his mind, but only a moment before irritation washes it away. Is this fellow worthy of all this or should he just be turned back to the preachers who can sort out for themselves their theological disputations and denominational squabbles?

We don't have long with Pilate today. He's busy. He is important. He is powerful. He is the image bearer, as he likes to remind himself, of the Caesar of Rome, the greatest empire the world has ever known. On this day, he comes face to face—*inches away*--with the Image Bearer of the God of the Israel, the Creator of all, and he doesn't even realize it.

We've been here before with Pilate and the peasant King every time we read this story on a Christ the King Sunday or a Good Friday, and hear a sermon on it. But nothing ever changes with him. It always ends the same way.

Pilate doesn't have time to listen to a sermon, so this time I'm going to try a poem. A poem in hope to get the attention of a busy man, in hopes that he might pay attention to the one standing before him. The one standing before you, Pilate, is more than you think, and history and your life hinges on what you do next. Today, for this sermon, I offer *A Poem for Pilate*:

Pilate, are you serious right now?

I mean, you don't know who this is standing right there in front of you?

Forgive me, I'll come back to that.

All due respect for the position that you find yourself in.

. . . Pilate, Pilate, Pilate, Pontius Pilate, or Po-Pi, or P-Squared,
 I don't know how to address you.
 You're an enigma to me. But I can imagine you, if that's ok.
 Long white robe, some kind of golden garland
 around your head symbolic of the crown you
 represent.

You are living the dream of every other
 rich young ruler out there.
 They want to be you; look at the way you are honored in the marketplace.
 You are feared, and that's got to be a powerful feeling.
 You live in the palace. You report to Rome.
 They all want to be you.

But they don't know do they
 how heavy lies the crown...
 It's hard to be Pontius Pilate, isn't it?

You have Caesar telling you to keep these people in line. He's never met these people.
 But you have. You deal with them every day.
 Some of them are reasonable; Rome is . . . inevitable, and they know it.
 One snap of your fingers, and you can wipe them out. They know that, too.

But others just don't seem to get it.
 They don't understand you're just doing your job when you tax them,
 when you house your soldiers in their bedrooms,
 when you need some of their food on your plate for your state dinners.
 They're always complaining about you and Rome . . .
 and there's always the whispers of uprisings.

So, you have a lot to do every day for sure.
 Roads and bridges to build. Economies to fund. Enemies to destroy.
 A nation to keep under the heavy thumb of Rome's peace,
 for which they are ungrateful. It's a lot.
 And today, of all days, you have to deal with another problem.

They bring him in. Without even looking up, you ask the question you wearily ask everyone they
 bring in, "Are you the king of the Jews?"
 These Jews, always think they're gonna get a new king
 and some of them imagine they're the, what do they call it, their "messiah."
 So, you've learned to always ask,
 "Do you think you're king of the Jews?"

It has a way of getting to the point without wasting everyone's time.
 He doesn't answer, not straight-away anyway. Most do.
 Either they say yes and spit at you
 and so you know immediately what you have to do.
 Or they insist no, and they cower.
 And you know they're awed by you, actually getting a glimpse inside your palace,
 for a moment, a part of this world you bring them momentarily into.

But this one answers with his own question about why you're asking.
 You really don't have time for this do you.
 You look up for the first time, then look down and check your notes.
 "Who is this?" you ask your calendar.
 Your secretary has penciled in the name: Jesus from Nazareth.
 You look him over. He doesn't look much like a king of any kind,
 or frankly of a threat of any kind at all. Ok, I'll bite, you think, "What have you done?"

That's what you ask him, "What have you done?"
 And I have to ask P-squared, with all due respect, are you serious right now?
 Are you for real? You really don't know?
 You really don't know who this is and everything he's done?

I wish I could jump in and help you right about right here.
 I wish I could step in because I think I can help.
 What has he done? He's not going to tell you, but I'd like you to know.

This one, right here in front of you, with the black eye and bloodied hands.
 It's not like he's been hiding . . .
 Everyone knows...everyone else knows...
 He's given sight to the blind; He's caused the lame to walk, the deaf to hear.
 He's cast out demons and set people free.
 He turned water to wine and fed thousands when there was hardly anything to eat.

What has he done?
 He called young men to follow him and they did, leaving everything behind. But he didn't train them as soldiers going to battle; he led them as servants, to be servants--teaching them to serve God and one another.
 More people followed him, too. Lots of them. Crowds of thousands. They said they never heard anyone talk about God the way he does.
 And then he had the courage to speak hard truth to them and watch many of them walk away.

What has he done?
 He quieted storms when he had to. And silenced opponents when he needed to.
 And he prayed. And he loved, especially the poor and the vulnerable.
 That's what people remember about him--how he loved.

You haven't heard what he's done? Just ask around:
 the Samaritan woman at the well when he changed her life,
 or Nicodemus at night when he challenged his mind,
 Zaccheus the rich man in the tree when he changed his fortune,
 Mary Magdalene whose whole life was transformed,
 Or Lazarus, you've heard that story right, Lazarus was dead 3 days
 and Jesus raised him from the tomb.

You, seriously, you really don't, I mean is it really possible, you don't know who's standing in front of you? Could that be even possible?
 With your network of yes-men and your soldiers and all those people who do anything to keep you in power and keep themselves near your power.

You really don't know who this is? All this time, he's been right there,
 but your head's so far up your ambition to ascension
 that you haven't been paying attention.
 Seriously? You're living at the most amazing moment in human history,
 and you're ruling over Israel, you're on the seat in Jerusalem.
 You're the image of Empire coming face to face with the image of God's Kingdom.
 Two words colliding. Inches away—nose to nose.
 History hangs on you. And you didn't know.

I mean, c'mon. He didn't hide it. He didn't run around in the shadows or hide behind a mask or behind his computer screen. He was right there all along. You weren't paying attention?

I get it Pilate, I really do. You're busy. I'm busy. We're all busy and even more than we are busy, we are distracted. We're so distracted.
 In modern democratic capitalism, we each rule our little individualistic kingdoms now.
 We all have too many things to think about so sometimes we don't pay attention to the very most important things right in front of us;
 or the very most important people;
 or the very least important people except in God's eyes, or Jesus.

Yet there **he** is, standing in front of you, the king of kings and lord of lords, and you really have no idea that history is hinging in that moment.
 And your life is, too.
 Because he is the one who said God loved the world and sent him into it.
 And that means your world, you're, please forgive me, P-squared, the world you've created, the world that puts breakfast on your plate, the world of Pontius Pilate:
 your violent, greedy, selfish, hedonistic, sword-wielding, empire-building, frenetic,
 freedom-&-justice-for-some, soil-destroying, soul-numbing world.
 He came into that world.

Apparently, though it's beyond imagination, God so loves and still loves that world, your world, to send this one, this Jesus from Nazareth, that all who believe in him would not perish with that world when that world perishes, and it will, but you will have eternal life.

Here's your chance to be free from all of that.

He doesn't want your crown; he wants you to not want your crown.

His presence in front of you is an invitation to lay it down and follow him.

He's standing there, just like he is standing in front of all people, saying to all who will listen:

My kingdom is not of the world

this world you're trying so desperately to rule and desperately trying to defend.

My kingdom isn't like this at all.

It's so much more. It's so much better. It is so much more alive.

Pilate, I know you're not listening. You never do.

In your moment of truth. Is he a threat to your way of life or not?

And if he is, do you do away with him

or take a knee and surrender all.

I wish you could do the thing I think you want to do.

Cast your golden crown before him,

kneel before him ,

and confess Jesus Christ is Lord,

and discover the truth will set you free.

I pray for the day we all would do the same.

To the ruler of all, to the one who shows us

the kingdom of God will cost you everything, but not one thing that will actually last.

Thanks be to God.