

Voices in Jesus' Story – Pilate

Adapted from monologue in *If Only I Had Known*

Scripture: Luke 23:1-7, 11, 13-25

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Truth. He wanted to talk about “truth” to me. He’d come into the world for the purpose of telling people the truth, he said. Hah! “What *is* truth?” I asked him.

Not that I was all that interested in what he might say. I knew what truth was from my vantage point. Power. Power is truth. That’s what I showed him. I, Pontius Pilate, Procurator of the Roman province of Judea, servant of my lord the Emperor Tiberius, I showed him. I, Pontius Pilate, appointed head of a conquered people, obedient to the state I serve faithfully, I showed your Jesus that power is truth.

Yes, I am the one who sentenced your leader to be executed. I don’t deny it. I’m not exactly proud of it, but it was the job to be done. I washed my hands of the whole affair a long time ago. I had my orders, you know. Keep the peace. Maintain law and order. Use whatever force is necessary to keep matters from getting out of hand. So I did. I was just doing my job. Do you really think you would have handed down a different verdict if you’d been in my place?

I’d had my eye on your Jesus of Nazareth for some time. Does that surprise you? Listen, you don’t get to be governor of a Roman province by being indifferent to potential troublemakers. I had my hands full with insurrections and disturbances. And let me tell you, the ones who give in to violence are the easy ones to control. Like that fool Barabbas. Caught him in the act. The ones who use words...now they are harder to get a handle on. Before Jesus, it was John the Baptist, but Herod put an end to him.

This Jesus seemed a whole lot more dangerous to me than Barabbas. Word had it that he was giving people new ideas and they were following him around like puppy dogs. Believe you me, there is nothing more threatening to official power than people with an idea. You’ve got to take care of it quickly...stamp it out before it ignites a fire. My kind of power fears people thinking for themselves. And yet Jesus encouraged it.

Now really, he wasn’t a threat as long as he stayed out in the boondocks. He wasn’t my problem until he came to Jerusalem anyway. But finally he did.

I was getting regular reports from my staff from the moment he entered the city. His arrival caused an uneasy stir among the soldiers. It seemed like the whole city went out to greet him that day. The soldiers were on edge, on constant alert. If we weren’t careful, we’d have an uprising on our hands.

I was sure that was precisely what we were facing when I heard about the confrontation in the outer hall of the temple. But, the chaos stayed there...it did not spill out into the streets.

He was teaching by day, slipping away quietly by night. But, that’s exactly what made him dangerous.

So, I was surprised when I was awakened at daybreak one morning with the news that his own religious leaders had arrested him and were wanting to dump him on my doorstep. They weren’t anybody’s fools, I thought to myself as I was getting dressed. They recognize the threatening power of a new idea, too.

“On what charge is he being brought before me?” I asked. On the charge of disloyalty to the Roman state, I was told.

He kept preaching about a new kingdom, about his kingship. But I knew, and the Jewish leaders said they knew, that we had no king but Caesar.

Smart fellows. They knew who buttered their bread. They knew the value of following the rules.

But Jesus...he was different from anyone else who ever stood before me accused of a crime. He wasn't intimidated by my high office or my authority. He didn't beg for mercy. ... and I resented that. I doubt that I would have ordered more than a scourging had it not been for that...that piercing gaze, that self-control. He didn't knuckle under. How dare he!

He presumed to face me as an equal. Even worse, he seemed to call into question my authority over him. I reminded him that I was in charge this time. And he had the audacity to tell me that I had only the authority over him that his god allowed me. The nerve!

Did I consider him guilty of anything? Of course, I did! Your people tell the story as if I found him innocent but sentenced him to death anyway. That's not true. I sentenced to death a man who, had he had his way, would have toppled the foundations of the Roman Empire with nothing more than ideas. What kind of truth is that? It is dangerous, that's what it is.

And his own people were crying out against him right outside the palace. They were crying for his blood. I wondered how many had been hailing him as King David's heir only days before...

I went out and offered to free a prisoner, to let one of them go. And the crowd cried for Barabbas...the rebel, the freedom fighter, the one who would topple Rome with a sword. ... I let them have him.

I knew just what I was doing. Give them Barabbas. He'd be back in prison soon enough. If I gave them Jesus, there were no guarantees. He was the more dangerous of the two. Barabbas, he was the kind I could deal with. He played by the same rules as I did. He merely wanted to exchange one ruler for another.

But, Jesus...he threatened to undermine the entire system, he tried to set people free with the truth, he tried to approach human struggles and conflict with forgiveness and mercy...with love instead of force. I wouldn't be in power long if those ideas flourished.

So, I gave them Barabbas instead of Jesus. I sentenced Jesus to be executed immediately. And you condemn me. Don't you realize I did you a favor? I allowed you to go back to business as usual. When it comes down to it, you don't like his truth any more than I do. You fall back on the same policies and politics that I do. Your king is Caesar, too.

Our leaders knew how to keep the people distracted. Offer them bread and circuses. Amuse them, dull their senses. Your time isn't so different. You American Christians say he is your Lord, but you spend more money on athletic events, vacations and cable television than you provide in support of his causes.

Hah! He may have known what you *needed*, but we know what you want.

Our leaders said, "Be obedient to Caesar." He told you to distinguish between what was Caesar's and what was your god's. We said, "Sacrifice your principles for the nation's demands." He told you God and not the state should be lord of your judgments. But you go right on giving in to your world, your nation, just like I did.

Do you see me now as I am? I am Pontius Pilate, Caesar's faithful servant.

You despised me because I handed down the verdict that sent him to the cross. ... I know crucifixions aren't pretty. They weren't intended to be. They were supposed to deter others from committing capital crimes. It didn't work, but we kept doing them...and in your own way, you do too.

I represented worldly power. He denied my authority. So, I used my power to dispose of him. In my world violence, bullets and bombs and crosses were more powerful than ideas. Is it different in your world?

So, who won in the end? He or I? You tell me. Your actions, your allegiances, your commitment – they are the judge. Face it – I won and you know it. When your backs are against the wall, you play by the same rules that I do. Oppose force with greater force. Bomb them into submission. You aren't against my power – You use it!

There is a rumor circulating that he didn't stay dead. His followers spread the word that he won after all, that his god conquered the worst that my power could do to him. I don't know about that. I know that I released his body for burial to one of the members of the Sanhedrin who was secretly a follower of Jesus. I know that a short time later the tomb in which his body was placed was discovered to be empty. I don't put much stock in that, though. After all, it doesn't prove anything one way or the other.

There's only one way you're going to convince me that he was victorious in the end. If I should see him in you ... then I'll know he really got the best of me. Not until then will I give any credence to the rumors of his so-called resurrection.

So, who won? Did he? Or did I? You be the judge. Your life...is...the judge.