Text: Matt 27

**Introduction**

The order of events as it probably happened is the Triumphal Entry – the procession of palms – leads to the clearing of the temple, Jesus flipping the tables of the money changers and whipping out the animal sellers. And there are weeks where one feels like - at least metaphorically - flipping tables and whipping.

But the unique reading assigned for today is Pontius Pilate. The second half of the Passion Sunday reading, the crucifixion, gets its own day in Holy Week – Good Friday. The triumphal entry, the welcoming of a King, is always the text for the first Sunday in Advent. Today we are offered the chance to think about Pilate. Why was he important enough to have made the creed? For 2000 years Christians have remembered that Jesus “suffered under Pontius Pilate.” Or as the Nicene Creed puts it, “was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate.” It was the great hope of every man in the ancient world to be remembered. The great curse was *damnatio memoriae* – the condemnation of memory. Every mention of someone ever even being alive was to be removed. From Egyptian stele to Roman arches you will find places where names in stone have been chiseled out – the condemnation of memory. Why would the Christians take Pilate and inscribe his name in the creed?

**Text**

Justice is one of the four cardinal virtues – Prudence, Justice, Fortitude and Temperance. And those have often been taken as the inheritance from the ancient pagan world. The Jews had divine revelation, so the law of Moses was much more complete, Jerusalem had much more to add, but natural revelation is not worthless. Athens described the best that men could discern absent God appearing to them in a burning bush and constantly sending prophets. And the word used for justice was- *dikaiosune -* which is the word the Apostle Paul uses for righteousness. You are made *dikaiosune* – righteous – by faith in Christ. But to the Romans it was *justicia*, and it was the Romans that spent the greatest amount of time thinking about Justice.

Justice was the fair balancing of claims. First within the self. The person who was self-disciplined was able to properly balance the various demands on the soul with justice. The demand of patriotism or family or clan of the gods and of self. The Just person balanced those claims appropriately with fairness. But maybe the greatest Roman extension was Justice as applied not to the individual but the state. The state through its laws sought to achieve the balance of competing claims between peoples and clans and Fatherland and what was owed the gods. Cicero, for a long time taken as a highpoint of Roman thought explained injustice in two parts: “the one, on the part of those who inflict wrong, the other on the part of those who, when they can, do not shield from wrong those upon whom it is being inflicted. He who does not prevent or oppose wrong, if he can, is just as guilty of wrong as if he deserted his parents or his friends or his country.” And the entire justification – the justice – of Roman rule, or so they thought, was that they alone had perfected the law. When the Roman legions conquered and enslaved, they brought justice to the barbarian. In a world full of injustice, Rome was a unique country, alone worthy of great power and rule because of her justice.

And before anyone thinks that I’m being facetious or sarcastic here we should state it clearly. Rome was better than anyone else in antiquity. There are cases of ancient Kings taken as wise rulers who looked at their heirs and left their kingdom to Rome, and the citizenry heralded them. Rome is the best of us when *dikaiosune, justicia* – justice, is being considered. They were rightly proud of Roman Law. They were a unique country. And that is what you have to accept when pondering Pilate. This is the best of us. This is the high point of natural man: both as an individual and a state.

“Now Jesus stood before the governor…”

Our reading this morning came from Matthew, but I am freely borrowing from the other gospels here. They all present a slightly different picture of Pilate. Matthew ultimately want to get to the injustice of Pilate – the unrighteousness of the best of us. This man vested in the authority of Roman Law is presented with an innocent man. And the innocence of the man is clear from the start. Pilate asks, “Are you the King of the Jews?” as a self-revealing question. A man handed over by the Jews to the Romans is clearly not the King. And Jesus plays along with the question, “You have said so.” The Pharisees and Priests are not in on the joke and they harangue Pilate with accusations about Jesus. But Jesus doesn’t answer them. They’ve already issued their ruling. And besides, the person on trial is Pilate – the best of us. Although at this point the entire scene is amusing to Pilate, “the governor was greatly amazed.” Luke has Pilate tell the Priests, “I find no guilt in this man.” Matthew tells us something similar both in that bemused amazement and when he writes “He knew it was out of envy that they had delivered him up.”

Now Pilate – the representative of the best of our justice – is attempting to balance the demands. He has an innocent man before him. But he also has a crowd of envious angry people. He has his wife – his family and clan – telling him “have nothing to do with this man.” But he also has the demands of state. When the priests start telling him that Jesus “stirs up the people.” That is something that pricks Roman ears. But in all the stories Pilate’s first response is to try and dodge. Whether is it sending him to Herod. “Oh, he’s a Galilean. Most of his stirring of the people is in that district. Let Herod handle him.” Or if it is the Barabbas dodge. Here, who do you want, a known murderer and reprobate that nobody wants released back into their midst; or Jesus?

Who do you want released the murderers and thieves our city DA’s refuse to prosecute, or the lady praying outside an abortion clinic arrested and charged?

But neither of Pilate’s dodges work. This Jesus keeps coming back to him – the best of us. It’s his trial. He pleads with the crowd – “Why, what evil has he done?” Pilate knows. As Cicero said, “He who does not prevent or oppose wrong, if he can, is just as guilt.” What do you want me to do with “the Christ?” Crucify him. The shouted all the more, “Crucify him.”

The demands of justice are clear. If Rome – the best of us – is what they claim, Pilate has to figure a way out. If man has any chance to make himself righteous, here it is. Will the law save the innocent man?

“He rook water and washed his hands saying, ’I am innocent of this man’s blood, see to it yourself’…and he delivered him to be crucified.

The best of us could not live by justice. His pantomime of washing his hands is a travesty. If the mantel is yours, you can’t just wash it off and play to the mob. All he’s done is authorized the mob. The best of us. The sum total of human justice, releases Barabbas and justifies the mob.

**Application**

We today are ruled by Pilates.

We claim to be an indispensable nation, unique in the world. We are great because we are good, as the saying goes. But our justice releases Barabbas back into our midst. Our justice abdicates exactly when it is needed. It hands authority to mobs to burn cities and storm capitols when it doesn’t get its way.

It spends the week of the murder of six people, three innocent 9 year olds, justifying and celebrating the murderer. Saying we must protect that.

Instead of applying justice we say “give them what they want, even if they are insane.” And anybody who stands in the way, maybe we shouldn’t encourage sin and cutting off healthy parts, gets the mob.

But that is the point. We are always ruled by Pilates. If their hour of trial comes and they are relying on themselves – this is the best of us. The better prayer is deliver us from the evil one. Lead us not into the trial.

Although I don’t think for us we are that fortunate. The time of trial is here. And if we are honest, there is always some trial. Nazis are only The Nazis clearly in hindsight. Justifying the sins of the age is always the trial.

And the best of us, we are natural Pilates. Seeking to avoid the appointed time. Washing our hands of it. Handing The Christ over to the mob.

Which is why the law does not make us righteous. We are only made righteous, justified, by faith in Jesus Christ. Christ took the best we had to offer, and gave us something better. He took our justice and gave us His grace. That cross stands there as the sign of what the best of us would do. And it stands there as the fount of the beginning of God’s grace. Where we and all our dreams of justice end, God has turned into His offer of life to all who believe.

Why did Christian inscribe Pilate into the creed. So that we wouldn’t forget. Not Pilate, but all he stands for. This is the best of us. We did this. We handed Jesus over to be crucified. Our justice.

But what we meant for evil, God made the highest good.