

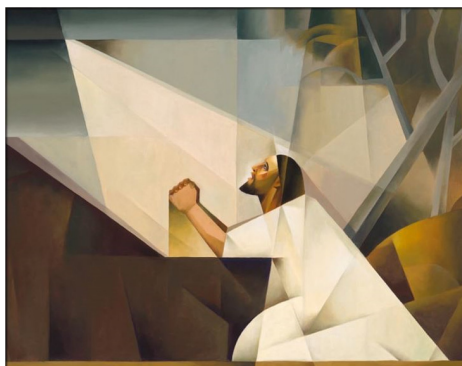
## The Passion of Lent: Jesus Before Pilate *by Rev. Dr. John C. Tittle*

### Prayer of Illumination

Send your Spirit among us, O God,  
as we meditate on the sacrifice of Jesus Christ.  
Prepare our minds to hear your Word.  
Move our hearts to accept what we hear.  
Purify our will to obey in joy and faith.  
This we pray through Christ our Lord.  
Amen.

### Background

Last Sunday we saw the extreme social distancing Jesus experienced with the disciples. All of his friends either turned on him or turned away from him. Jesus was all alone—friendless and Godforsaken. He understands quite well those times we feel isolated from others and cut off from God.



Gethsemane by Jorge Cocco Santangelo

In the Garden of Gethsemane Jesus wrestled with God, but ultimately yielded to God, praying the ultimate prayer of faith: not *my will* be done, but *thy will* be done.

After Judas' kiss and betrayal, Jesus was taken away by the religious leaders and the mob. The Sanhedrin questioned Jesus and accused him of blasphemy.

Then they prepared their case to present before Pontius Pilate in the morning. In Roman law, legal cases were heard just after sunrise.

*So let's hear now from:*

**Scripture: Mark 15:1-15 (NRSV)**

As soon as it was morning, the chief priests held a consultation with the elders and scribes and the whole council. They bound Jesus, led him away, and handed him over to Pilate. Pilate asked him, "Are you the King of the Jews?" He answered him, "You say so." Then the chief priests accused him of many things.

Pilate asked him again, "Have you no answer? See how many charges they bring against you." But Jesus made no further reply, so that Pilate was amazed.

Now at the festival he used to release a prisoner for them, anyone for whom they asked. Now a man called Barabbas was in prison with the rebels who had committed murder during the insurrection. So the crowd came and began to ask Pilate to do for them according to his custom. Then he answered them, "Do you want me to release for you the King of the Jews?" For he realized that it was out of jealousy that the chief priests had handed him over. But the chief priests stirred up the crowd to have him release Barabbas for them instead.

Pilate spoke to them again, "Then what do you wish me to do with the man you call the King of the Jews?" They shouted back, "Crucify him!" Pilate asked them, "Why, what evil has he done?" But they shouted all the more, "Crucify him!" So Pilate, wishing to satisfy the crowd, released Barabbas for them; and after flogging Jesus, he handed him over to be crucified.

*The grass withers and the flower fades,  
but the Word of God endures forever.*

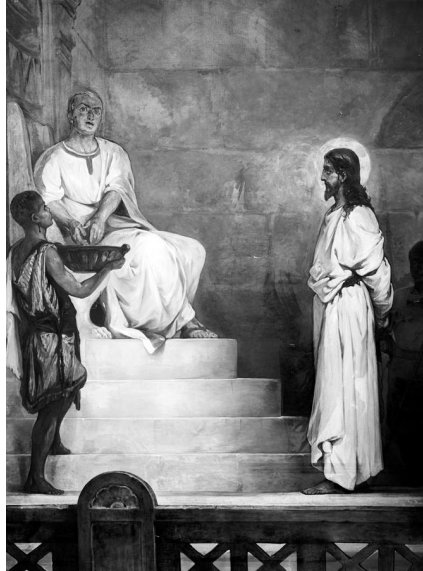
**SERMON – Jesus Before Pilot**

We've been hearing a lot about handwashing these days—that it's one of the best ways to prevent the spread of the coronavirus. (Short video clip of John washing his hands.)

Scrub for twenty seconds with soap—the water temperature doesn't matter. The average amount of time people wash is six seconds. So let's step it up a notch or two, people!!!

Use a circular scrubbing motion... First with the palms... Next the back of the hands... Then scrub the inside of your fingers... And don't forget those fingernails!

It's the combination of soap and water that releases and rinses the grip of germs off your hands... and down the drain they go. Remember to fully dry off your hands too—germs are less apt to stick to dry hands. Handwashing is a way to take responsibility—to own your own germs and do away with them. Proper handwashing works... and makes a difference.



"Jesus Christ, Pontius Pilate washing his hands"  
from Christ's Passion set of paintings by Kosheleff

But there's also a very different kind of handwashing that DOESN'T do the job. We just heard Mark's account of Jesus before Pilate, but in Matthew's account we read about a whole different kind of handwashing that DIDN'T clean Pilate's hands of wrong-doing:

"So when Pilate saw that he could do nothing, ...he took some water and washed his hands before the crowd, saying, 'I am innocent of this man's blood, see to it yourselves.'"  
Matthew 27:24

Instead of taking responsibility, Pilate avoided responsibility. He thought he could wash his hands of the matter of Jesus. "See to it yourselves." He absconded from leadership.



"Christ et Pilate" by Georges Rouault

Marcus Pontius Pilate is a fascinating historical character. He was the Roman prefect or governor of Judea for ten years—from AD 26 to 36, while Tiberius was emperor. Pilate made it into Christianity's two most famous creeds: The Nicene Creed and Apostle's Creed.

But Pilate was certainly no angel. Philo described Pilate this way: inflexible, merciless, and obstinate. In Roman-occupied Palestine, Pilate offended the religious sensibilities of the Jewish people when he plastered images of the Roman emperor throughout the city of Jerusalem. He also had coins minted that were embossed with pagan religious symbols. Eusebius wrote that Pilate himself eventually had to stand trial before the Emperor Caligula for cruelty and oppression, namely for executing men without due process.

The Jewish religious leaders tried Jesus for blasphemy—saying that he claimed to be the Messiah. But they handed Jesus over to Pilate on very different charges: charges of high treason against Rome. They knew Rome didn't care about religious matters, but charges of treason definitely got their attention. When the Sanhedrin called Jesus "King of the Jews" it was a code word that Rome definitely understood. "King of the Jews" was a way of saying that Jesus was a freedom fighter—a leader of a political resistance against Rome.

The religious leaders wanted Jesus dead. But by Roman law, they could do nothing. Only Rome had the right of the sword to carry out the death penalty. Pilate questioned Jesus about the charges. "Are you the king of the Jews?" "You say so" said Jesus. His answer is very ambivalent—neither a denial nor an affirmation. Jesus couldn't say "yes" because it would be an admission that he was a political revolutionary, which he wasn't. But at the same time, Jesus was King—the Anointed One, the Messiah and Son of David for a very different kingdom than Rome, a kingdom not of this world.

"You say so" put the ball back into Pilate's court. Back into our court. "Aren't you going to answer? Listen to all their accusations!" Silence.

Pilate marveled at Jesus' silence. The same word "marvel" was used for the way people marveled at Jesus' miracles. Most men begged and pleaded Pilate for clemency. But not Jesus. The silence of Jesus was a solemn and dignified silence of a man who embraced God's will that he suffer and die.

It was Pilate's custom to release one prisoner that the crowds asked for each Passover. Israel was delivered from Egypt on Passover; one prisoner would be delivered each Passover by Pilate. It was a way to placate the people. To manage, rather than lead. "Do you want me to set free Barabbas or Jesus?" I'm not taking initiative—you tell me what to do.

Pilate was also playing power games with the Jewish leaders. He knew Jesus was innocent. He knew that the Sanhedrin was trying to frame Jesus. Pilate didn't want to do the bidding of the religious elite. But Pilate wanted others to say "no" for him. Maybe the crowds would set the innocent man free. They didn't. They chose Barabbas instead of Jesus.

Barabbas was jailed for murder and sedition. The name Bar Abbas means "Son of Abba" or "Son of Father." "What do you want me to do with the king of the Jews?" Do you want "Son of Father" or Jesus "the Son of God" released? Do you want the guilty one released? Or the innocent one? We want Barabbas! Crucify Jesus! "What evil has he done?" Crucify him!

Pilate was a politician. He was anxious to please the crowd. It was all about self-preservation. He wanted to keep order and keep his personal power. Pilate yielded to the popular cry—not his conscience. He declared Jesus NOT GUILTY, yet still convicted him.

The power Pilate had was given to him by God... and he misused his God-given authority. Yet at the same time, God was still firmly in control. God used Pilate to ensure that the Righteous Man Jesus would die in the place of an unrighteous man Barabbas. That his innocent Son would die for a guilty world.

Pilate reminds us: Don't pass the buck. Follow God's leading. Listen to your heart. Listen for that still small voice. Do what needs to be done, even if it's unpopular and costly.

What will we do with Jesus this Lent? Jesus washed feet, so must we. But we can't wash our hands of Jesus.

The Apostle Paul puts it this way in Galatians:

"Am I trying to please people? If I were still trying to please people, I would not be a servant of Christ." (Gal. 1:10)

The innocent one died. The guilty one was set free. Jesus died for Barabbas. We are Barabbas. Jesus took on himself the punishment we deserved.

As he heard the guilty verdict, Jesus was both silent and innocent. Quite possibly Pilate then uttered the legal words to Jesus: *Abi in crucem*: I consign you to the cross. The worst punishment for high treason in Rome was crucifixion. Jesus—the Word made flesh who holds together the universe, willingly put himself under Pontius Pilate.

As Karl Barth said,

"God came into our world in its utter unloveliness and frightfulness... He entered into it all. We are not left alone in this frightful and alien land."

Immanuel, Jesus is right there with us, in the pain, the uncertainty, the challenges—even in the valley of the shadow of death.

Amen.

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