

Jesus before Pilate

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[0 : 00] The 23rd chapter of the Gospel of Luke, and we'll read from verse 33. And when they came to the place that is called the skull, there they crucified him, and the criminals, one on his right and one on his left.

And Jesus said, Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do. And they cast lots to divide his garments. And the people stood by, watching.

Particularly these words at the beginning of verse 35, and the people stood by, watching. Now when I was a young boy, which to me doesn't seem like very long ago, but to some of you, you look at me and you'll go, that's a very old man.

Well, when I was a young boy, we had a record in our house. And that was, it was a record of a Negro spiritual. And the title of the song was in the form of a question.

And the question was, were you there when they crucified my Lord? Now this evening, I'd like to consider with you some of the people who were present on that first Good Friday.

[1 : 30] When Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ, the Messiah, the anointed of God was crucified. And as we look at each of these people, I'd like to challenge you, and myself too, as to which of these people do we most identify with.

Which of them come closest to the way that we feel about the church and about Jesus Christ?

Firstly, then, there was Pontius Pilate.

And in verse 1 of the chapter, his part becomes obvious. And then the whole company of them arose and brought him before Pilate.

Pilate was the Roman prefect or governor of the province of Judea for about 10 years from roughly AD 26. And he served under the emperor Tiberius.

We don't know a lot about Pontius Pilate. There are legends as to where he came from, one of which is that he had a Scottish mother. That she was a Pict from Perthshire.

[2 : 48] But his name indicates that he was probably from one of the tribes from central Italy. Now, Pilate loathed the Jews.

And that was a real problem for a man who was ruling over a land which was almost entirely Jewish. He became embroiled in controversy almost as soon as he arrived in Judea.

Both he and Herod the Tetra, who ruled the province of Galilee, became enemies. And some commentators think that this was because of Pilate's actions in Luke chapter 13, where he mixed, it says, the blood of the Galileans with their sacrifices.

Historians like Josephus and Philo tell us that Pilate was a bitter and a vindictive man. But Pilate was the consummate politician.

Despite the fact that he was a powerful representative of the occupying force in Judea, he knew that if he didn't manage to keep the population fairly contented, then complaints would be made about him to his superiors.

[4 : 06] And these complaints could result in him being removed or demoted, both of which would have been a disgrace and possibly have ended his career.

This is where the release of the prisoner at the feast of the Passover comes from. The Roman authorities had once a year this small-scale amnesty where a convict of the Jews' own choosing, irrespective of his crimes, was released to the people.

And we know from the story of the crucifixion that they chose Barabbas, a rebel and a murderer and a thief over Jesus Christ.

We also read in the chapter how Pilate smoothed his troubled relations with Herod by sending Jesus to him, as Herod was the ruler of Galilee and Jesus was a Galilean.

And we read in the chapter that Herod and Pilate became friends with each other that very day, for before this they had been at enmity. For Pilate this was good business.

[5 : 14] It was good politics. But Pilate was not totally without conscience. At his trial, Pilate said again and again and again, I find no fault in him.

I did not find this man guilty. He has done nothing wrong. He also said, Herod didn't find anything wrong with him either, for he sent him back to us.

Look, nothing deserving death has been done by him. I will therefore punish him and release him. As Pilate sat in judgment, his wife got involved as well.

She sent a warning to her husband, Have nothing to do with that righteous man. Look at the word that she uses to describe Jesus Christ. That righteous man. For I have suffered much because of him today.

Pilate seems to recognize that this is an innocent man that's in front of him here. Maybe even a good man, a righteous man. And he doesn't really want innocent blood on his hands.

[6 : 23] And he tries his best to bring the crowd round to see this, to let him release Jesus, perhaps with a bit of a beating and a stiff warning. But friends, the crowd won't have it.

Away with him, they shout. Crucify him, they cry. Now this would have worried Pilate. His politician's instinct for self-preservation would have taken over.

He didn't want to call him. He didn't want to cause a riot amongst the people. He didn't want them to complain to his superiors. Instead, he chose to let Jesus, who is called the Christ, be killed.

Rather than to put his own position into any kind of jeopardy. He decided that the will of the mob be granted. He chose to deliver Jesus up to be crucified.

No amount of hand washing, symbolic or otherwise, can remove that stain. Pilate looked at this situation. He looked at his nice life.

[7 : 32] He looked at his career, his position, his power. And he made that out to be of greater importance than Jesus Christ. Let me ask you a question tonight, friends.

Is that you? Yes, Pilate thought this was an innocent man. Yes, Pilate could find no fault in Jesus. Yes, he knew that his wife considered Jesus to be righteous.

But Pilate did not have the courage of his convictions. What's more, Pilate used the crucifixion of the Lord Jesus for his own political ends.

He quietened the crowds by giving them Barabbas. He made political allegiance with Herod the Tetra. He gave Caiaphas and the rulers of the synagogue what they wanted.

A dead Jesus. He kept his job. For now at least. History tells us that Pilate's rule in Judea came to an end two or three years later.

[8 : 41] When he was sent back to Rome. Because he was too harsh in putting down a Samaritan rebellion in AD 36. Are you like Pilate, friends?

Do you look at Christ and say that there's nothing wrong with him? That he's a good man. Maybe even a righteous man. But he said some interesting things. That many of his teachings are worthy of examination.

Worthy of serious consideration. But. But. Are you afraid that if you were to follow Christ.

If you were to declare that he is your savior. It would mean maybe your lifestyle would have to change. People might think less of you.

What would your workmates say? That you'd be counted with these believers who rely on God for everything. These peculiar people who go to church and pray and sing to somebody that's been dead for 2000 years.

[9 : 49] Is that you? Is that you? Is that what you think? Jesus Christ is not dead, my friends. Jesus Christ is not dead. I always wonder how Pilate felt on that first day of a new week.

When reports started coming into his headquarters about the events at the sealed tomb. Reports that told him that Jesus' tomb was now open.

That his seal that he had put on the stone was now broken. That the stone was rolled away and that the guards placed there had now fled.

That the grave clothes were there like a cocoon. But that the body was not. What would Pilate have said to himself then?

If only. If only I hadn't been such a coward. Then there were the soldiers in second place. And we see the soldiers in verse 34 and verse 36.

[10:54] The soldiers also cast lots to divide his garments. And they mocked him. Coming up and offering him sour wine and saying, If you are the king of the Jews. Save yourself.

Now the detachment of Roman soldiers on duty that day. Went about their business with obvious enthusiasm. This wouldn't have been their first crucifixion.

There would be a pattern of abuse and humiliation. That they would inflict on the prisoners. The poor condemned souls. Who had only hours to live.

They would have their sport with these men. The Roman army was not known for its good record in human rights. So when Pilate delivered Jesus over to them.

They really went to town. Now here at Golgotha. The place of the skull. At this critical hour.

[11:56] When the only begotten son of God is suffering. In the place of sinful mankind. What are these soldiers doing? What's occupying their thoughts?

These men are intent on dividing up the few meager belongings. That Jesus had. Amongst themselves.

They're drawing lots to see who will get his seamless coat. They're too busy with the here and now. To notice the great eternal transaction. That's being made on the cross.

Just over their shoulders. Too busy. To see that the way of salvation. Is being opened up. Too busy to notice that Jesus is praying for them.

When he says father forgive them. For they know not what they do. Too busy. Too busy. Too busy. Is that you friends? Are you too busy?

[12:54] Too wrapped up with the things. Of this life. Earning enough money. Getting the job done. Putting food on the table. Following your career. Too busy to see what's going on around you.

All of these things friends are well and good. All of these things friends are our duties and our responsibilities. But we need to see more. We need to see past the immediate here and now.

Our friends this evening. Are you only here because you're following orders? Because your mum.

Or your dad. Or your husband. Or your wife. Or your boyfriend. Or your girlfriend. Ask you to come.

Are you only here in this building? Because you have to be. But your mind's off somewhere else.

Are you like the soldiers? I wonder if some of these very same soldiers who cast the lots for Jesus' belongings were amongst the guard at the tomb on that first day of the week.

Early in the morning. When an angel descended from heaven. When Pilate's seal was broken.

When Pilate's seal was broken. When the stone was rolled away. When Jesus rose from the grave.

[14:13] Leaving the grave clothes behind because he had conquered death. And the napkin folded to one side to show that he was coming back. These men had ringside seats at some of the most significant events in the history of mankind.

But they totally missed the point. Don't be like the soldiers, friends. Don't miss the point of why we're here. The late Colin McRae, the Scottish World Rally Champion, is often quoted as saying, We're not here for a long time.

We're here for a good time. That is so wrong. So, so wrong. We are here to glorify God. And we are here to glorify God by believing in him.

And if we do that, then we will enjoy him. Forever. In the third place, then, friends, there was the rulers of the synagogue.

And in verse 35, we can see their reaction. To the suffering Christ. The rulers scoffed at him. They mocked. They jeered.

[15:29] At this point, the plotting and the planning done by these men against Jesus Christ seemed to be paying off. In a few short hours, this upstart from Galilee would be dead.

And once he was dead, his followers would fade away. The rulers had grown tired of him and tired of the crowds that had followed him. They didn't need a savior who forgave sins.

They didn't see themselves as sinners at all. They were upright men. Good men. Men of the church. All of this faith stuff seemed like weakness to them.

Does that strike a chord with you? These men didn't want a carpenter king from a little village in the back of beyond in Galilee.

They had a saying, can any good thing come out of Nazareth? They wanted a warrior king to follow in the steps of David and to drive out their enemies, to rebuild the great kingdom of Israel with its capital in Jerusalem.

[16:41] They wanted someone who was going to usher in another golden age of Jewish military power. They didn't understand that Jesus Christ's kingdom is not one defined by walls and by

armies.

That his temple is not just in Jerusalem. They didn't realize that the kingdom that he was ushering in has no end at all.

Are you like this, friends, tonight? Do you look at Jesus on the cross and think that this is the epitome of weakness? Do you think that faith in him shows weakness?

Look at him. Look at all these false charges and he never said a word. Look at the beating he took, the spitting on him, the mocking. How can this be a king? They saw a weak man dying a curse of death.

They wanted a mighty warrior on a horse with a sword in his hand. God saw a sacrifice to satisfy his divine justice.

[17 : 53] God saw his beloved son in whom he is well pleased. Fourthly, there was the two criminals or the two thieves as they're commonly called.

in verse 33, they crucified him and the criminals, one on the right and one on his left. Now, each of these men we see in the chapter reacted to Jesus in a different way.

The first one railed on Jesus. He shouted abuse at him. He joined in with the soldiers and with the rulers of the church as they mocked him.

Now, this man seemed to know a bit about Jesus. He knew his reputation. He asks him, are you not the Christ?

He knew that Jesus had followers. Probably knew that he was a teacher, a preacher. Perhaps he even heard him. Who knows? But, friends, this knowledge that he had of Jesus did not save him.

[19 : 06] It did not change his life. It did not make him forsake all and follow. The words of the other criminal tell us that when he rebuked him, he said, we are receiving the jury rewards for our deeds.

They had been convicted and condemned for their crimes. Their own actions had brought them to this place. Even coming face to face with Jesus Christ at the very point of his death did not bring this man to see that eternal salvation was possible if only he would believe.

Even at this late hour, he still only thought about himself. Save yourself and us. Get us out of here. You're supposed to be a miracle worker.

Do something. God this man couldn't see beyond his immediate situation. Couldn't see further than his own pain and suffering. Couldn't see that he had a right beyond the fact that he felt he had a right to life.

A right to happiness. He only wanted Jesus Christ to help him escape the pain of the cross. not the eternity of suffering that awaited him.

[20 : 25] Is that you, friends? Do you only turn to God when you are in trouble but you keep clear of him when everything is going well? Are you so wrapped up in your own situation that you can't see that Jesus Christ loves you so much that he came from the glory to suffer and to die on that cross for you?

Friends, if that is you, it's still not too late. Surrender to him now. Think about your eternal future and let him come into your heart. Don't be like this man who came face to face with Jesus Christ but did not accept him as his savior.

The second thief was a different prospect altogether. He knew he was guilty as charged and that the punishment being meted out to him and to his companion on the cross was deserved.

He was under no illusion as to his guilt, as to his sin. It reminds me a lot of the publican praying in the temple who couldn't lift up his eyes to heaven but beat his breast and said, Lord, be merciful to me a sinner.

There's something refreshingly honest about this man. He has a respect for God. He tackles the first thief when he rails on Jesus.

[21 : 55] Do you not fear God saying that we are in the same condemnation? He points out that they deserve this punishment but he points out something else as well.

This man has done nothing wrong, he says, talking about Jesus. Then in his dying hours when his pain was at its most severe he looked over and he said to Jesus, Lord, remember me when you come into your kingdom.

The fear and respect that he had for God was a saving fear. Knowing his situation, knowing his guilt, how he deserved his punishment, he took Christ as his Lord, as his King.

There's a famous hymn that speaks about this thief, this criminal who recognized that the person suffering and dying beside him on the cross that day was no ordinary man but the Son of God, the

Christ, the Messiah, the Lamb of God who at that very moment was taking away the sin of the world, was taking away his sin.

The dying thief rejoiced to see that fountain in his day. And there have I, as vile as he washed all my sins away.

[23 : 18] Is that you, friends? Do you feel the weight of your sin? Do you understand the punishment that you deserve? Do you look at the Christ, the anointed of God, and do you recognize him for who he is?

Do you realize that he has a kingdom, an eternal kingdom, and he alone can bring you into that? Do you look at the wounds in his hands and his feet?

Do you look at his blood spilt for your sins? And do you say, Lord, remember me? Do you? If you love Jesus Christ as your Lord and your Savior, he will remember you.

He can do nothing else. The Bible tells us that we are carved on the palms of his hands. before that day was over, this man was truly in paradise.

This man was in the eternal repose of his Savior, the one who keeps his promises, the one who bled and died for him.

[24 : 29] And finally, this evening, friends, there was the Roman centurion. the Gentile who praised God. This man would have been the commander of the Roman guards that day.

He would have been in charge of the soldiers on duty at Golgotha. Now, a centurion was a professional officer of the Roman army and would have commanded somewhere between 80 and 100 men.

In the modern army, the centurion is roughly equivalent of a lieutenant or a captain. These men had a well-deserved reputation for being hard men.

They led in battle from the front. They inspired their men by example. But they were also educated men.

The centurion had to be literate. They had to be able to read and to write. They had to have connections with the ruling classes who could provide letters of recommendation for their promotion.

[25 : 35] They had to be mature men over 30 years of age. They had to be experienced men. They had to have been in the military for some time. So this man, this Roman centurion, gazing on the cross of Christ, would have been a battle-hardened veteran.

A strong man, skilled in the use of sword and shield, who would have done his fair share of hand-to-hand combat. The centurions were noted for their ability to carry out orders without question.

So he would have gone about his business on that day in as efficient a manner as possible. He would have seen that all the arrangements were made so that there would have been no delay in stripping and then nailing the three prisoners to their respective crosses.

crosses and then lifting these crosses up and setting them into the sockets in the rock for all the assembled crowds to see that there was punishment being carried out.

But there was something about the man in the middle of the three being crucified on this day that caught the centurion's attention. this man was different.

[26 : 56] This man had a sign over his head that said he was the king of the Jews. This man did not shout and scream at the crowd. This man did not complain to all that were listening that he was innocent, that he didn't deserve the punishment.

This man refused the pain-dulling drink that he was offered to ease his passing. This man only said seven things whilst he hung on that cross and died.

This man spoke to God and called him father. At the point of death when normally a crucified man would have been at his weakest and slipping into unconsciousness, this man shouted in a loud voice, it is finished.

there was also the darkness which covered the place for three hours from the middle of the day till three in the afternoon, a darkness recorded by historians all over the Mediterranean.

This man's death was different. This man's death was full of purpose and meaning. His life was not being sloughed out like a spent candle.

[28 : 17] and the centurion recognized that. Now this story of the centurion reminds me of something I read recently. Some of you will know about it as well, of the death of the Lutheran pastor, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who was executed by the Nazis in 1945, just weeks before the end of

the Second World War.

Some time after the end of the war, the camp doctor, who was a member of the SS, put down his thoughts on paper.

He witnessed the execution of Bonhoeffer and he wrote, I saw Pastor Bonhoeffer kneeling on the floor, praying fervently to God.

I was most deeply moved by the way this lovable man prayed. So devout, so certain that God heard his prayer.

At the place of execution, he again said a short prayer and then climbed a few steps to the gallows. Brave and composed.

[29 : 28] His death ensued after a few seconds. In the almost 50 years that I worked as a doctor, I have hardly ever seen a man die so entirely submissive to the will of God.

The death of the righteous is a powerful tool in the hands of God. The centurion saw the day's events as they unfolded, took note as he saw Jesus crucified in obedient submission, listened as Jesus spoke from the cross, listened as he blessed the thief and spoke of his kingdom.

And this brought the centurion to one single inescapable conclusion. He praised God, saying, certainly this man was innocent.

Truly this man was the son of God. Is that like you, my friends, this evening? I hope it is. I pray it is. I hope and pray that you look at all that Christ has done, all that the gospels tell us that he suffered for you and for me, and that it drives you to our knees to proclaim without caring who hears us or what they think truly, this man was the son of God.

There are three verses of that old spiritual song that I spoke about at the beginning of the service that I can remember.

[31 : 04] Each one of them asks a different question of the listener. Were you there when they crucified my Lord? Are you to be found with the soldiers too caught up in what you're doing to see what's really going on?

With Jesus who is called the Christ? Or are you like Pilate too caught up in the politics of the situation? Too politically correct we would say? Perhaps too scared of what the crowd might think to do the right thing?

Were you there when they nailed him to the tree? Or you were the rulers who wanted Christ dead so that they wouldn't be bothered by him or his followers anymore?

who didn't see the need of a savior because they couldn't see that they were sinners? Are you like the first criminal who knew a bit about Jesus but could only see him as a way out of a tricky situation?

Were you there when he rose up from the dead? Friends, I pray that you are like the thief who knew that he was a sinner, that he deserved to be punished and who recognized that the man suffering alongside him was the king of glory.

[32 : 33] That like the centurion, you praise God that this was his son who bled and who died for you at Calvary.

Amen. Let us pray. Amen. Let us pray. Amen. Let us pray. Amen. Let us pray. Let us pray. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.