



A RETREAT FOR HOLY WEEK by Father Robbie Low

## **Five Characters in Search of an Author**

### **1 – PONTIUS PILATE**

The Christian Faith is not a philosophy. It is not a moral code. Never has it been proclaimed as a set of Divine Principles nor dismissed as a mythological attempt to explain the complex reality in which Man finds himself and within which he seeks self-understanding. It is first and foremost a religion of history. It claims nothing less than that the Eternal has chosen to dwell in time and the Immortal to clothe Himself in our mortality as part of the essential contract of our salvation.

That time, and its anchorage in the known record, is therefore hugely significant in the verification of the most fundamental proclamation of what we have come to call the Gospel, the Good News of our redemption. So I want to begin with a perplexing and ambiguous character in the Passion narrative who does just that, Pontius Pilate.

Pilate's significance as a proof text means that the very man who oversaw the condemnation and crucifixion of Jesus finds his name on the lips of the faithful down two millennia as Christians affirm their faith, Sunday by Sunday, in the Nicene Creed: '*Suffered under Pontius Pilate.....*'

We know of his existence from the Gospels but these witnesses are confirmed by various apocryphal works and, more importantly, by historians Philo and Josephus and Tacitus. Final affirmation was uncovered in the early nineteen sixties when a staircase was excavated in Caesarea and revealed a stone with his name, office and a tribute to the Emperor. It became known as the Pilate Stone.

The Gospels tell us only what we need to know for salvation but if we look a little wider we get a bit of context and perhaps deeper understanding of Pilate's dilemma in dealing with Jesus.

We know that he served under Tiberius, the great Roman war leader who found himself saddled with Empire after the death of Augustus and retired to Capri to indulge his debauched tastes – what we would now describe as paedophilia.

Pilate was an Italian of Equestrian rank and held the governorship of Judaea for some ten years c26-36 AD, an unusually long term of office. It is difficult to know why he was retained there because his temperament and insensitivity had already caused problems with the fissile Jewish community. Philo described Pilate as 'vindictive and with a furious temper, naturally inflexible, and with a blend of self-will and relentlessness'. At one point he had marched soldiers into Jerusalem bearing the banners and shields of Rome which displayed forbidden 'graven images'. This led to a five day stand-off with threats of insurrection. Pilate backed down but later tried the same trick hanging up gold plated shields in Herod's Palace. In the face of near revolt it took a stiff letter from the Emperor to get him to withdraw.

Jewish sources describe his governorship as characterised by 'briberies, insults, robberies, outrages and wanton injuries, executions without trial constantly repeated, ceaseless and supremely grievous cruelty'. The final straw was his assault on a peaceful religious gathering at Mt. Gerizim which resulted in the slaughter of a village.

His final withdrawal by the deeply mad Caligula – accompanied by the invitation to commit suicide lest a worse fate befall him - finally brings down the curtain on a deeply unedifying career.

This then is the man before whom Jesus stands awaiting judgement. The Creator of the World stands before the legate of the temporary ruler of this world.

If you visit Jerusalem you can stand there yourself on the pavement, the Gabbatha, beneath the Convent of Our Lady of Sion. It is one of the most profound memories I have of my own pilgrimage – the place where history turned.

So here we see this deeply flawed but immensely powerful man at the moment he will be immortalised in history. He is a tough and ruthless soldier. He profoundly dislikes his posting and his troublesome Jewish charges. He has had at least two major run-ins with them and, humiliatingly, lost both times. Further failure will, he rightly surmises, cost him his job. He would love to get one over on the Jewish authorities through the bizarre offices of this Galilean peasant and his interrogation reveals that he is not without guile or political intelligence. The matter is further complicated by the emotional outpourings of his wife who has had 'a dream'.

He has to ascertain that Jesus is not setting Himself up as a rival secular or religious authority. No self-appointed kings. Only a Roman Emperor could become a god. Jesus doesn't seem a threat to Imperial power only a nuisance to these half-baked incomprehensible Jews and their outrageous hypersensitivities. Jesus is before Pilate because the Jewish authorities know that the Governor alone can condemn to death and they need a final solution to the Jesus problem.

Jesus and Pilate have common ground. They have both fallen foul of the Jewish hierarchy. Mob rule is, once again, about to become the deciding factor.

At the end of Pilate's interrogation of Jesus, Our Lord tells him simply that, *'I came into the world to be a witness (martyr) for the Truth. Everyone who is of the Truth hears my voice'*. This provokes the line from Pilate that echoes down the centuries. *'What is Truth?'*

Irony of ironies. The judge stands in judgement of the One who will finally judge him. The interrogator demands a definition of Truth from the Truth Himself. Face to face with ultimate reality, man sees only contingency, compromise and accommodation.

Pilate's question is at once profound but also dismissive. His assumption is that Truth cannot be known. He is a victim of our very fashionable modern, but oh so ancient, heresy of relativism. Your truth and my truth, I often ask the proponents of this vacuous relativism if they would extend the same lunatic courtesy to Hitler or Stalin. We pretend to an apparent toleration of incompatibles and witness the consequent the collapse of integrity, virtue and morality.

And when he hears that Jesus has been called Son of God, his fear begins to grow. 'Where are you from?' he asks in near panic, as the orchestrated mob begins to bay for blood. Pagan Pilate understands you don't mess with the gods, the immortal powers.

So I am going to invite you to your first exercise on this retreat. In your room or in the chapel or in the garden or conservatory or on a quiet walk, take yourself back to the Pavement. Take yourself back to the judgement seat of Pilate. Read John Chapter 18. Stand with Pilate and look down on Jesus and ask yourself, Who is the Truth?

Then kneel and look up to Jesus and ask Him to be truly King of your life. Ask to hear His voice and know it to be the Truth itself. Ask for grace to acknowledge Him as Son of God, Lord of Lords.

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