

Pontius Pilate. Bethesda Coffee Morning. 15 July 2015.

As you know, we are now well on the way through our series of talks about people who feature in the gospels of the New Testament. All of us know at least something about our character for this morning. We know him as Pontius Pilate. And I am taking our text for today, not (as you might expect) from the gospels themselves, but from something the apostle Peter said when preaching after the healing of a lame man in Jerusalem very soon after our Lord's resurrection and ascension.¹ Addressing the gathered Jewish crowd, Peter declared:

'Men of Israel, why do you wonder at this, or why do you stare at us, as though by our own power or piety we have made him walk? ... the God of our fathers glorified His servant Jesus, whom you delivered up, and denied Him in the presence of Pilate, *when he had decided to let Him go.*² But you denied the Holy and Righteous One, and asked for a murderer to be granted to you'.³

Peter's words concerning Pilate's attitude to Jesus, 'when he had decided to let Him go', raise two fairly obvious questions.

First, why did Pilate make up his mind to release the Saviour? And, second, why, in the event, didn't Pilate let Him go?

First then, why did Pilate make up his mind to release the Saviour? Well, to begin with we need to understand the nature of the charges levelled at Jesus. The Jewish leaders, we read, 'began to accuse Him, saying, "We found this man misleading our nation, and forbidding us to give tribute to Caesar,⁴ and saying that He Himself is Christ, a king"⁵. This formal bill of indictment was deliberately tailored to alarm any Roman governor, for it amounted to nothing less than a charge of *high treason* against both State and Emperor – a charge known technically as '*majestas*',⁶ the most heinous crime known to Roman law.

But such a charge rang hollow in Pilate's ears. Stepping indoors, he summoned Jesus, and asked Him. 'Are you *the King* of the Jews?'⁷ 'My kingdom is not of this world', Jesus replied. 'If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would have been fighting, that I might not be delivered over to the Jews ... You say that I am a king. For this purpose I was born and for this purpose I have come into the world -- to bear witness to the truth'.⁸ This brief interrogation satisfied Pilate that our Lord's claim to rule over a kingdom of 'truth' certainly had no worrying political implications.

And so, having also referred the case to Herod Antipas, the ruler of Galilee, who was in Jerusalem at the time,⁹ Pilate then called together the chief priests and the rulers and the people, and announced, 'You brought me this man as one who was misleading the people. And after examining Him before you, behold, I did not find this man guilty of any of your charges against him. And neither did Herod ... This man has done nothing to deserve death'.¹⁰

But there was more to Pilate's determination to set our Lord free. For Pilate knew, we are told, 'that it was out of envy' that the Jewish rulers had handed Jesus over to him.¹¹

Besides which, (and I quote) 'while he was sitting on the judgment seat, his wife sent word to him, "Have nothing to do with that righteous man, for I have suffered many things today in a dream because of Him"¹². And we must realise that dreams were taken *very* seriously by the Romans, and were believed to foretell the future. No Roman of Pilate's day needed to be told about the famous dream which, less than eighty years before, had terrified the wife of Julius Caesar the night before his assassination, causing her to cling to him and plead with him (unsuccessfully as it turned out) not to attend the senate that day.¹³ Oh no, Pilate would not lightly dismiss his wife's dream.¹⁴

Why, we asked, did Pilate decide to release the Saviour? First then, because he knew Him to be entirely innocent of the charges arrayed against Him; no less than four times in all Pilate declared publically that he found 'no fault' ('no crime') in Jesus.¹⁵ Second, because he knew that, whatever the Jewish rulers pretended, their true and underlying motive in delivering Jesus to him was that they envied our Lord's influence and popularity with the common people.¹⁶ And third, because of the ominous warning conveyed by his wife's dream.

Yes, but why then, we ask, didn't Pilate simply dismiss the case and release Jesus? Why *did* he capitulate to the demands of the Jewish authorities and of the crowd they had incited?

To answer such questions we need to rerun the video – and that for several years. We know that at the time of our Lord's trial, Pontius Pilate had been the governor of Judea for some seven years.¹⁷ Scholars assure us that it is highly likely that he owed his appointment to that office to one Lucius Sejanus,¹⁸ then second in power in the whole Roman Empire only to Tiberius Caesar himself.¹⁹ One Roman historian wrote, 'The closer a man is with Sejanus, the stronger his claim to the emperor's friendship'.²⁰

Yes, but this Sejanus was *no friend* of the Jewish people – in Rome, Jerusalem or anywhere else.²¹

In many ways, it is hardly surprising therefore that, during the seven years he had governed Judea, Pilate had crossed swords with the Jewish authorities on more than one occasion. Indeed, the *first* incident took place soon after he took up his new post, when he brought Roman ensigns bearing the emperor's image within the city of Jerusalem under the cover of night. This provoked a five-day Jewish mass demonstration in Caesarea (the administrative capital of Judea), which resulted in Pilate removing the offensive standards.²²

Later, Pilate had been responsible for the killing of some Jews from Galilee while engaged in slaying their sacrifices in Jerusalem.²³ And, on a separate occasion, he used money from the Temple treasury to construct an aqueduct. When the Jews assembled outside his quarters to protest, he ordered soldiers to dress like the Jews and mingle among the crowd. On his signal, the soldiers drew clubs hidden in their clothes and beat and killed many of the Jews.²⁴

But, of late, things had changed dramatically for Pilate – and this for two reasons. First, some eighteen months before Jesus' trial, Sejanus, the man responsible for Pilate's appointment as governor, had fallen both from power and the Emperor's favour – and indeed had been executed²⁵ – and, what is more, executed, in effect, on the charge of '*majestas*', the very charge now brought against Jesus.²⁶ And not only so, but Emperor Tiberius had *also* put to death a number of officials whom Sejanus had appointed.²⁷

And then, secondly, to cap it all, during the period *since* Sejanus's execution, Pilate had blotted his copybook badly with the Emperor on account of his mishandling of a Jewish issue. He had hung some golden shields carrying an inscription of dedication to Tiberius in Herod's palace in Jerusalem (where in all likelihood our Lord's trial was now taking place). When the Jews protested, Pilate had refused to remove the shields, as a result of which the Jews had taken their case to the emperor himself, who had rebuked Pilate, ordered him to remove the offensive shields, and warned him to respect the religious and political customs of his Jewish subjects.²⁸

You can imagine therefore just how thin was the ice on which Pilate was skating when a matter of months later he found himself locked in conflict with the Jewish Supreme Council over the case of Jesus of Nazareth.

Yet, rather than condemn an innocent man arraigned before him on what he knew to be trumped up charges, he resorted to every tactic he could think of to set Him free²⁹ ... (i) attempting to unload the troublesome case onto Herod Antipas,³⁰ (ii) offering the people the choice between the release of Jesus and that of a notorious, murderous rebel (Barabbas),³¹ and then, (iii) in an attempt to satisfy their blood-lust, having Jesus scourged and publically humiliated.³²

But all to no avail. For the Jewish leaders played their trump card³³ ... 'If you *release* this man, *you* are not a friend of Caesar.'³⁴ Everyone who makes himself a king declares himself opposed to Caesar'.³⁵

And Pilate had every reason to fear the implied threat. Tiberius had proved that he was quick to entertain suspicions against his subordinates, and was equally swift in dealing ruthlessly with any perceived rivals. Pilate still smarted from that recent occasion when the Jewish authorities had voiced their displeasure with him to the Emperor, and he had no reason to suppose they would refrain from doing so in this case. And what defence could he offer against the accusation that he had failed to convict and execute a man charged with high treason by the Sanhedrin no less – the highest court in the land?

At one point, Pilate had thrown out the question to the hostile crowd, 'What shall I do with Jesus who is called Christ?'³⁶ but now it was for Pilate to answer that question himself. And the choice which faced him was simple. It had to be Jesus or him. And he made his choice ... 'he delivered Him to be crucified'.³⁷

And just a few verses later, Pontius Pilate stepped off the stage of world history in his role as the earthly judge of Jesus. But the question he asked confronts every one of *us* at some time or another, 'What shall *I* do with Jesus?'

Endnotes

¹ Compare the other non-gospel references to Pilate: Acts 4. 27; 13. 28; 1 Tim. 6. 13. Also the reference in Tacitus: 'Consequently, to get rid of the report, Nero fastened the guilt and inflicted the most exquisite tortures on a class hated for their abominations, called Christians by the populace. Christus, from whom the name had its origin, suffered the extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of one of our procurators, Pontius Pilatus', Tacitus, *Annals*, Book 15. 44. In addition, the 'Pilate Stone', discovered in 1961 and dated c. A.D. 30, includes a description of Pontius Pilate and mentions him as 'prefect' of Judea.

² ΑΠΟΛΥΕΙΝ.

³ Acts 3. 12-14.

⁴ 'Fomenting tax resistance was a capital offense. Pilate was responsible for imperial tax collections in Judaea'.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pontius_Pilate#cite_ref-25.

⁵ Luke 23. 2. Since the Jews could not execute a person without approval from the Roman authorities, the Jewish leaders brought Jesus to Pilate to pronounce the death sentence for them, John 18. 28-31. It was the time of the Jewish feast of Passover. About 6 o'clock that morning, the Jewish leaders approached Pilate's official residence when he was at Jerusalem. They had come to obtain his official confirmation of the verdict they had passed on Jesus, and to have the death penalty applied. And all this, they intended, without providing any specific charges. They remained outside Pilate's residence so as to avoid defilement according to their religious rules, and Pilate was therefore compelled to come out to them, John 18. 28-29. And the Roman governor made it clear immediately that he was going to have none of it. 'What charge do you bring against this man?', he demanded. The leaders were thunderstruck – for this was the opening formula of a formal Roman trial (P. L. Maier, *The First Easter*, page 65). Pilate had no intention of being treated as a rubber stamp! Urgently, but very cleverly, the Jews framed the three political charges.

Incidental note: While it is true that sometime later the Jews did inflict capital punishment, illegally, in the stoning death of Stephen, Acts 7. 58, one great deterrent in the case of Christ was the involvement of Annas, John 18. 13, 24. For in A.D. 15, while Annas was the Jewish high priest, he led the Sanhedrin to violate this law when there was temporarily no procurator in Judea. That action resulted in his being deposed by Valerius Gratus that same year. (Source: The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, 'Jesus Christ, Arrest and Trial of', by John James Maclaren, volume 3, page 1671.) Annas would undoubtedly have had a great influence on the decision of Caiaphas, the high priest during Christ's trial, since he was Caiaphas's father-in-law, and the case involved popular opinion.

⁶ 'Majestas' is short for 'majestas minuta populi Romani', 'the diminution of the majesty of the Roman people'.

⁷ John 18. 33.

⁸ John 18. 36-37.

⁹ Luke 23. 5-7.

¹⁰ Luke 23. 13-15.

¹¹ Matt. 27. 18.

¹² Matt. 27. 19.

¹³ '... especially his wife Calpurnia, who was terrified by a dream that night [that before the Ides of March BC 44]. She clung to him and said that she would not let him go out on that day', Nicolaus of Damascus.

See http://ancienthistory.about.com/library/bl/bl_032210_caesarassassinationpassages.htm.

Also <http://www.eyewitnesstohistory.com/caesar2.htm>.

Again, 'when day came, she begged Caesar, if it was possible, not to go out, but to postpone the meeting of the senate; if, however, he had no concern at all for her dreams, she besought him to inquire by other modes of divination and by sacrifices concerning the future. And Caesar also, as it would appear, was in some suspicion and fear. For never before had he perceived in Calpurnia any womanish superstition, but now he saw that she was in great distress', Plutarch, *The Parallel Lives*, Volume VII, page 593; accessed at ...

http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Plutarch/Lives/Caesar*.html.

¹⁴ 'Twelve years earlier the Roman Senate debated a proposal that no wife could accompany a provincial magistrate in his duty. Had the senate not defeated that proposition, Pontius Pilate's wife would not have been present to warn him of Jesus's innocence—a verdict she deduced from her dream (Matthew 27:19)'. Wayne Stiles ... <http://us4.campaign-archive1.com/?u=463e57a6fc34555adb711b92&id=ac175051f8&e=968d5bef2f>

¹⁵ Luke 23. 4//John 18. 38; Luke 23. 14; John 19. 4, 6.

¹⁶ Cf. Mark 12. 37.

¹⁷ '(Tiberius)...sent Valerius Gratus to be procurator of Judea, and to succeed Annus Rufus...When Gratus had done those things, he went back to Rome, after he had tarried in Judea eleven years, when Pontius Pilate came as his successor ... So Pilate, when he had tarried ten years in Judea, made haste to Rome ... but before he could get to Rome, Tiberius was dead', Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, 18. 2. 2; 18. 4. 2. Tiberias died on 16 March 37 AD. As by then Pilate had ruled for approximately 10 years, he must have been appointed to Judea in either 26 or 27 AD.

I assume throughout that our Lord was crucified in 33 AD. (See Harold W. Hoehner, *Chronological Aspects of the Life of Christ*, Bibliotheca Sacra 131 (October-December 1974), pages 332-348. Also Andreas J. Köstenberger and Justin Taylor, April 3, AD 33 – accessed at <http://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2014/04/april-3-ad-33>) This means that Pilate had been governor for about seven years at the time of our Lord's trial.

¹⁸ Full name 'Lucius Aelius Sejanus', Prefect of the praetorian guard and highly influential in court circles.

¹⁹ Note in particular Gary DeLashmutt, *Sejanus and the Chronology of Christ's Death*; accessed at ...

<https://www.xenos.org/essays/sejanus-and-chronology-christs-death> (see, in particular, note 54 – which quotes, 'It seems more than probable that in 26 AD, Pontius Pilate was nominated to succeed Valerius Gratus as praefectus Judaeae by L. Aelius Sejanus...Undoubtedly it was Pontius Pilate's implementation of Sejanus' policy in Palestine which caused the familiar imbroglios with the Jews', P. L. Maier, *Sejanus, Pilate and the Date of the Crucifixion*, pages 8-9; and 'It is probable that when Pontius Pilate succeeded Valerius Gratus as prefect of Judea in AD 26 he was appointed by the equestrian Lucius Aelius Sejanus', Harold W. Hoehner, *Chronological Aspects of the Life of Christ*, Bibliotheca Sacra 131 (October-December 1974), page 341. (See also Hoehner's article 'Pontius Pilate' in the IVP *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, and pages 172-183 in his *Herod Antipas*, published by Zondervan.) DeLashmutt also refers to *The Catholic Encyclopaedia*, Volume 12, page 614. See also, 'He was appointed prefect of Judaea through the intervention of Sejanus, a favourite of the Roman emperor Tiberius', *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, article 'Pontius Pilate'.

'This (Sejanus) was the man whom Tiberius, because of the similarity of their characters, attached to himself, elevating him to the rank of praetor, an honour that had never yet been accorded to one of like station; and he made him his adviser and assistant in all matters', Cassius Dio, *Roman History*, Book 57. 19. 5 (page 169).

²⁰ Tacitus, *Annals*, Book 6. 8.

²¹ Philo claims that Sejanus was anti-semitic and planned to destroy the Jewish race completely. Philo wrote of 'his hatred of and hostile designs against the Jewish nation', Flaccus, 1. 1, and, at length, wrote of the change which came about following the death of Sejanus:

'Therefore everyone everywhere, even if he was not naturally well disposed toward the Jews, was afraid to engage in destroying any of our institutions, and indeed it was the same under Tiberius though matters in Italy became troublesome when Sejanus was organizing his onslaughts. For Tiberius knew the truth, he knew at once after Sejanus' death that the accusations made against the Jewish inhabitants of Rome were false slanders, invented by him because he wished to make away with the nation, knowing that it would take the sole or the principal part in opposing his unholy plots and actions, and would defend the emperor when in danger of becoming the victim of treachery. And he charged his procurators in every place to which they were appointed to speak comfortably to the members of our nation in the different cities, assuring them that the penal measures did not extend to all but only to the guilty, who were few, and to disturb none of the established customs but even to regard them as a trust committed to their care, the people as naturally peaceable, and the institutions as an influence promoting orderly conduct', Legatio 24, 159-161. It is clear from this latter passage that Sejanus was propagating anti-semitic policies while he was in power, that procurators with jurisdiction over Jewish communities practiced those policies under Sejanus' authority, and that Tiberius made it clear to those procurators that such policy was no longer permissible.

Based upon what Philo wrote, see '...Sejanus, who was then in great favour with Tiberius, had made every effort to destroy the whole nation of the Jews from the foundation, and that in Pontius Pilate under whom the crimes were committed against our Saviour, having attempted everything contrary to what was lawful among the Jews respecting the Temple at Jerusalem, which was then yet standing, excited them to the greatest tumults', Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, 2. 5.

²² Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, 18. 3. 1; and Josephus, *Wars of the Jews*, 2. 9. 2-3.

²³ Luke 13. 1.

²⁴ Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, 18. 3. 2; and Josephus, *Wars of the Jews*, 2. 9. 4.

²⁵ 'Sejanus suddenly fell from power in 31 AD ... Amidst suspicions of conspiracy against Tiberius, Sejanus was arrested and executed, along with his followers', <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sejanus>. He was put to death by strangling..

²⁶ 'Pilate was probably Sejanus' appointee who actively carried out his anti-semitic policies, and thus was in danger after Sejanus was executed. The behaviour of Pilate and the Jews during the trial of Jesus makes sense only after Sejanus' demise', Gary DeLashmutt, *Sejanus and the Chronology of Christ's Death* (Conclusion); accessed at ...

https://www.xenos.org/essays/sejanus-and-chronology-christs-death#_ftnref68

²⁷ 'In the autumn of AD 31, however, Sejanus fell from power, and Tiberius Caesar executed not only Sejanus but many of his closest friends and supporters', D A Carson, *The Gospel according to John*, page 607. 'Tiberius persecuted all those who could in any way be tied to the schemes of Sejanus or had courted his friendship', <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sejanus>. 'He ordered the death of all who were lying in prison under accusation of complicity with Sejanus', Tacitus, *Annals*, Book 6. 19.

²⁸ 'Pilate ... not more with the object of doing honour to Tiberius than with that of vexing the multitude, dedicated some gilt shields in the palace of Herod, in the holy city; which had no form nor any other forbidden thing represented on them except some necessary inscription, which mentioned these two facts, the name of the person who had placed them there, and the person in whose honour they were so placed there. But when the multitude heard what had been done ... then the people ... entreated him to alter and to rectify the innovation which he had committed in respect of the shields; and not to make any alteration in their national customs, which had hitherto been preserved without any interruption, without being in the least degree changed by any king of emperor. But when he steadfastly refused this petition ... they wrote a most supplicatory letter to Tiberius. And he, when he had read it, what did he say of Pilate, and what threats did he utter against him! ... immediately, without putting any thing off till the next day, he wrote a letter, reproaching and reviling him in the most bitter

manner ... commanding him immediately to take down the shields and to convey them away from the metropolis of Judaea to Caesarea ... And in this way he provided for two matters: both for the honour due to the emperor, and for the preservation of the ancient customs of the city', Philo, *On the Embassy to Gaius*, paragraph 38 (299-304). That this event is dated at A.D. 32 has been shown by Harold W. Hoehner, *Chronological Aspects of the Life of Christ*, Bibliotheca Sacra 131 (October-December 1974), pages 344-345.

²⁹ It has been well said that Pilate 'sent Jesus to the cross, but not before he had exhausted every expedient for saving Him, except the simple and straightforward one of dismissing the case', *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, article 'Pontius Pilate', section 5. Character of Pilate.

³⁰ Luke 23. 5-7.

³¹ Matt. 27. 15-22; Mark 15. 6-13.

³² Luke 23. 22; John 19. 1-5.

³³ 'They threatened to implicate in the charge of rebellion against Caesar the governor himself', A. Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, Book 5, Chapter 14.

³⁴ 'The term "friend of Caesar" (Latin: amicus Caesaris) is a technical term reserved for senators, knights and administrators who were meritorious and thus favoured by the emperor', Gary DeLashmutt, *Sejanus and the Chronology of Christ's Death* (The Jews' Use of "Amicus Caesaris"); accessed at ...

https://www.xenos.org/essays/sejanus-and-chronology-christs-death#_ftnref68 See also A. N. Sherwin-White, *Roman Society and Roman Law in the New Testament*, page 47n: "The connotation, originally political rather than personal in Republican usage, becomes markedly official in imperial documents, with the suggestion that so and so is the official representative of the Princeps (Emperor)".

³⁵ John 19. 11.

³⁶ Matt. 27. 22.

³⁷ And the sequel? 'It is known from history that Pilate was removed from his position as governor in A.D. 36. The event that led directly to this was Pilate's leading his troops against some restless Samaritans on Mount Gerizim, and conducting a needless massacre. The Samaritans complained to Vitellius, the legate of Syria, concerning this, and he immediately deposed Pilate and sent him to Rome to answer the accusations before the Emperor Tiberius. However, by the time Pilate had reached Rome, Tiberius was dead, and Caligula was on the throne', R. Larry Overstreet, *Roman Law and the Trial of Christ ('Pilate's Later Life')* – Bibliotheca Sacra 135 (October 1978), pages 329-332. Based on Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, 18. 4. 1-2. See also S. A. Cook, F. E. Adcock, and M. P. Charlesworth, eds., *The Cambridge Ancient History*, volume 10, pages 649–50.

'Gaius Caligula, the successor emperor, either heard Pilate's case, or, more likely, quashed it, as he did with most of the cases carried over from Tiberius' administration', P. L. Maier, *The First Easter*, page 63.

Here Pilate disappears from the history books. But his history isn't finished. For one day *he* will 'stand before' Him, Rev. 20. 12, who once 'stood before' him, Matt. 27. 11.