

## **Luke's Gospel 23:1-25**

### **Pilate and Herod**

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New King James Version of the Scriptures used unless otherwise stated.]*

"The king who is situated anywhere immediately on the circumference of the conqueror's territory is termed the enemy. The king who is likewise situated close to the enemy, but separated from the conqueror only by the enemy, is termed the friend (of the conqueror)." Kautilya. Perhaps more commonly understood as "the enemy of my enemy is my friend!", this theory was developed by Winston Churchill, in comments to his personal Secretary, John Colville, on the eve of Nazi Germany's invasion of the USSR. He was quoted as saying, "if Hitler invaded Hell, I would make at least a favourable reference to the Devil in the House of Commons."

Today, we will think about two unlikely bedfellows as we continue our studies in the Gospel of Luke. Let us begin then by reading some of the events of the most climatic period of human history and see what we can learn from this part of God's word:

"Then the whole multitude of them arose and led Him to Pilate. And they began to accuse Him, saying, "We found this fellow perverting the nation, and forbidding to pay taxes to Caesar, saying that He Himself is Christ, a King." Then Pilate asked Him, saying, "Are You the King of the Jews?" He answered him and said, "It is as you say." So, Pilate said to the chief priests and the crowd, "I find no fault in this Man." But they were the more fierce, saying, "He stirs up the people, teaching throughout all Judea, beginning from Galilee to this place.""

When Pilate heard of Galilee, he asked if the Man were a Galilean. And as soon as he knew that He belonged to Herod's jurisdiction, he sent Him to Herod, who was also in Jerusalem at that time. Now when Herod saw Jesus, he was exceedingly glad; for he had desired for a long time to see Him, because he had heard many things about Him, and he hoped to see some miracle done by Him. Then he questioned Him with many words, but He answered him nothing. And the chief priests and scribes stood and vehemently accused Him. Then Herod, with his men of war, treated Him with contempt and mocked Him, arrayed Him in a gorgeous robe, and sent Him back to Pilate. That very day Pilate and Herod became friends with each other, for previously they had been at enmity with each other.

Then Pilate, when he had called together the chief priests, the rulers, and the people, said to them, "You have brought this Man to me, as one who misleads the people. And indeed, having examined Him in your presence, I have found no fault in this Man concerning those things of which you accuse Him; no, neither did Herod, for I sent you back to him; and indeed, nothing deserving of death has been done by Him. I will therefore chastise Him and

release Him” (for it was necessary for him to release one to them at the feast).

And they all cried out at once, saying, “Away with this Man, and release to us Barabbas”— who had been thrown into prison for a certain rebellion made in the city, and for murder.

Pilate, therefore, wishing to release Jesus, again called out to them. But they shouted, saying, “Crucify Him, crucify Him!” Then, he said to them the third time, “Why, what evil has He done? I have found no reason for death in Him. I will therefore chastise Him and let Him go.” But they were insistent, demanding with loud voices that He be crucified. And the voices of these men and of the chief priests prevailed. So, Pilate gave sentence that it should be as they requested. And he released to them the one they requested, who for rebellion and murder had been thrown into prison; but he delivered Jesus to their will.

In giving us four independent accounts of the life of the Lord Jesus, the Gospel writers each had their own audience and perspective to relate. Even when we combine the four accounts there remains much “behind the scenes” detail that is not given and we can only guess at. Before we consider the events of this most momentous of days, it is helpful to understand a little of the character of the two main protagonists mentioned in this chapter – Pilate and Herod.

Herod Antipater, more often known by his nickname Antipas, was a son of Herod the Great, who had been reigning at the time of Jesus’ birth. He was not the man his father was – which is perhaps something to commend him. After all, it was he who had ordered the massacre of so many infant boys.

Upon Herod the Great’s death, his kingdom was split into four parts, all of which were client states under Roman rule. Herod Antipas took Galilee and Perea as his tetrarch (although referred to as King Herod in Mark 6:14, he never actually held this title). Under his rule the area prospered economically and remained largely peaceful, unlike the more troublesome Judea and Samaria, to the south, which had been given to his brother Archelaus. He had the city of Tiberias built, named after the Roman Emperor, and encouraged culture and commerce to thrive. I guess if we were to sum up his life then we would say that he believed that we only have one life to live and so we might as well make it as pleasant and enjoyable as possible. However, this philosophy takes no account of eternal values and the rights of God in this world.

His marriage to his sister-in-law, Philip’s ex-wife, had already brought him into trouble with John the Baptist, and was widely disliked by many of his subjects. Jesus’ own description of him as “that fox” (Luke 13:32) perhaps illustrates something of his character – wily and deceitful. He was one of life’s endurers – at least until he finally fell out of favour with Rome.

When Judea and Samaria became too troublesome, Archelaus was got rid of and the territory was taken under direct Roman rule under the Procurator Pontius Pilate.

Outside of the record of Scripture not a lot is known about Pilate with certainty. He was probably a brusque ex-soldier who married the well-connected Claudia Procula, who was a granddaughter of Augustus Caesar. This personal connection to the seat of power served Pilate well, and led him to bringing his wife with him to Judea, as he became the Procurator in A.D. 26. He had already shown an obstinacy and lack of political awareness in his dealings with the Jews. For example, Pilate had wanted to build an aqueduct from Solomon’s pools to the centre of the city to improve hygiene. However, to fund the building process he wanted to use the money from the Temple

Treasury, the so called “corban” coins. When the populace revolted against this, Pilate sent soldiers into the mob to put down the rebellion with much loss of life.

So, we have two men, one out of his depth, stubborn and intolerant of religious sensibilities, the other worldly wise, wary of Roman power. Both were naturally suspicious of the other and only too happy to see the misfortune of the other. Into this mix we must add the most dramatic events of history. We have seen in the previous chapter that Jesus had been arrested. The religious leaders, under Caiaphas the High Priest clearly feared and hated Jesus. They wanted Him dead. They recognised that if Jesus was to increase in power and popularity, if He was the Messiah, then it could not end well for their hold on power. In all probability they probably genuinely believed Jesus to be an imposter, but they were still afraid of two things. They were afraid of public opinion and though they might not give full credence to the miracles that Jesus had been doing, they were still nervous about proceeding against Him directly.

It is probable that they would not have made their move against Jesus had they not have first assured themselves of two things. After all, arresting Jesus when Jerusalem was full and overflowing as the feast of Passover approached, was likely to be a volatile and unpredictable move. Firstly, in some way, they had the knowledge that Jesus Himself was expecting His death – news brought to them by Judas.

I think that Judas’ message was much more than just where Jesus could be found. At no time during that final week had Jesus made any attempt to hide His presence. The spies of the High Priest would have been more than able to locate Jesus at any time had Caiaphas so desired. Secondly, Caiaphas needed to know that if an arrest was made then Pilate would be happy to pass the death sentence so that it could all be over and done with before the start of the Passover Feast. It is probable that during the time delay between Jesus leaving the upper room, and the agonies of the Garden of Gethsemane, and His arrest, perhaps a period of four hours or so, Judas had brought news to Caiaphas, who had then hastily assembled some of the Sanhedrin to make plans. But could a death sentence be assured?

Caiaphas may well have visited Pilate privately during the late-night hours to outline the case against the accused and to enquire if Pilate would be prepared to grant a legal sitting on a day when he was not expecting to hear cases. The religious leaders could not go into the court for fear of ritual contamination so close to the Passover, so would Pilate grant them the unusual step of coming out of the palace to hold court? Having outlined the case would Pilate also be ready to wave through a de facto death sentence to be carried out immediately? Without those two assurances it is probable that Caiaphas would not have made his move against Jesus before the Passover, but rather waited until Jerusalem was a good deal quieter and less on edge.

So, very early, as soon as day broke, the religious Sanhedrin was summoned, and Jesus found guilty by a majority decision. They bound Jesus and led Him to Pilate, fully expecting a swift rubber stamping of the death penalty. The plan was working! Except for Pilate's wife (Matthew 27:19). If, as has been suggested, a late-night meeting took place between Caiaphas and Pilate, then it is not at all unlikely that Pilate would have spoken to his wife about this. It is then entirely reasonable that with this on her mind, she dreamed about this during the night. On waking, she sends the most urgent of messages to her husband – have nothing to do with this Man for I have suffered much because of Him!

What had been an apparently simple case the night before was now taking an unusual turn. Pilate wanted to know more. After coming out of the palace to meet the religious leaders and crowd they had assembled, Pilate begins to question them as to the prisoner before him. One can almost feel the stirrings of uneasiness in Caiaphas’s mind. This was not meant to happen. Pilate forces them to outline the case against the accused and reluctantly Caiaphas rehearses the case he had outlined the night before. This surely was the strangest charge sheet ever to appear before Pilate

and so he goes in to Jesus and questions Him as to who He is and the accusations made against Him. Matthew 27, Mark 15 and John 19 give supplementary evidence as to the questioning and the toing and froing between the accused and the accusers. Increasingly, Pilate realises that this is no open and shut case. Three times in these verses Pilate states that there is no basis for a guilty verdict, no reason for him to confirm the death sentence so secretly agreed the night before.

Poor Caiaphas, he must have been exhausted, his nerves fraying like so many ends of a split rope. Things were not going to plan and might yet get a whole lot worse. So he launches his killer thrust – if Pilate was to let Jesus go then he would be no friend of Caesar! How low man will go in opposition to Christ! Here they were, a puppet state with only limited autonomy to act and yet they are appealing to the occupying power that had crushed and subjugated their freedoms as the basis of their wishes. Man has not changed. We still go to extreme lengths to avoid our responsibilities to God.

Pilate recognises that he is being boxed into a corner and is desperate to be rid of this bother and so pulls the first of two rabbits out of his hat. On hearing that Jesus was a Galilean he tried to shift the jurisdiction for this case onto the local secular power – Herod Antipas. So Jesus is sent to Herod, and from that day on Pilate and Herod were to be friends. Jesus Himself said that “he that is not for Me is against Me” (Matthew 12:30). These two natural enemies were united in their opposition to the Lord Jesus. The enemy of my enemy is my friend.

Herod was greatly pleased to finally get to meet Jesus. He hoped to see some miracle from Jesus, having heard so many reports of His powerful acts of grace. I cannot be but amazed at the inconsistency of Herod’s thought processes here. If I was to see someone do a genuine miracle then I think I would have to recognise that what they said too carried as much authority – however much I might not like what they said. Not so Herod. He wanted to see the miracles but had no intention of listening to the Man. Faced with the implacable hostility of the religious leaders’ accusations he allows his soldiers to ridicule and mock the Creator and Sustainer of the universe, before sending him back to Pilate. No miracles. No guilt either!

Pilate now finds himself in an increasingly difficult position and so he turns to rabbit number two. It was the custom of the day for Rome to show her generosity by releasing one prisoner of note. Today it would be Jesus! Perhaps, Pilate knew this would infuriate Caiaphas. So much the better. Given the choice between Jesus the Prince of Peace and giver of Life and Barabbas, one who stirred up rebellion and was a murderer, the crowd shout for Barabbas! How true the words of John 3:19 – 20:

“And this is the condemnation, that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. For everyone practising evil hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed.”

This world stands condemned because we would have made the same choice had we been there. I know this, as it is still largely the choice that we make today.

So, Pilate ratifies the death sentence and handed Jesus over to the will of the crowd. Caiaphas had got his way, but God had enacted His will. They take responsibility for their actions in their dreadful cry: “His blood be on us and on our children” which has been terribly enacted across the centuries. On the other hand, Pilate seeks to deny all responsibility and washes his hands of the whole business. Either approach, so far as God is concerned, is equally futile. He has made us responsible beings and we are all responsible for all that we do and say and think. We cannot shift the blame onto the shoulders of others, but when we do take it upon our own shoulders then the judgement of God is a fearful thing. The history of the Jewish people over the last two thousand

years gives ample testimony to this. And yet God is faithful and has not forsaken his earthly people. Nor does He forsake His heavenly people.

Barabbas was released and Jesus, though declared to be without fault, is sent for execution. What a complete travesty of Justice. In recent years we have been confronted by mistakes of the past but none of these compares to the total injustice of the events of that early Judean morning. Utterly out-manoeuvred, Pilate sent Jesus to be scourged and then led off to execution. It was not many years later that he was removed from office as Rome became increasingly exasperated with the news from this troublesome and unpeaceful province.

I think that it is just worth just pointing out an important lesson from all of this as we draw to a close. It touches on the very character of God and His relationship with mankind. You see, it is clear that, although on human terms, this was a terrible miscarriage of justice, it was in no way a surprise to God. Jesus was God's lamb, as we read in 1 Peter 1:18 – 20:

“Knowing that you were not redeemed with corruptible things, like silver or gold, from your aimless conduct received by tradition from your fathers, but with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot. He indeed was foreordained before the foundation of the world, but was manifest in these last times for you.”

The only way that God could forgive my sin and remain righteous was for His judgement to be fully enacted, but for He Himself, in the person of Jesus Christ, to bear that terrible judgement. How was this to be accomplished? Well exactly as we have read about here in Luke 23. God's sovereign will can never be altered or thwarted in any way. And how is this accomplished? By ensuring that He had just the right people in the right place at the right time. Both Pilate and Herod acted in complete accord with their character and will. God did not turn them into robots to ensure that a guilty verdict was passed. Each was fully responsible for the decisions that they made that fateful morning. They were acting fully in character and would in no way have recognised that they were accomplishing the plan of God. And yet they were!

The wonderful foreknowledge of God, His certain election and calling, enable God to allow man to exercise their puny free will at all times and yet when all is done, His eternal and infinite will has been done. We so easily fall into the mistake of making God in our image and utterly fail to see that He knows all things, past, present and future as if it were all complete.

This really ought to encourage us and humble us in equal measure. For good or ill, God will always have just the right person for the job, in just the right place at just the right time. Sometimes, I may think that in my particular circumstances things are hopeless and I can see no way in which His glory can be demonstrated. If so, I need to remind myself that He has allowed each and every circumstance, and He has made me the person I am for His good pleasure. I need never try to bear a burden of responsibility that is not mine to bear. I just need to be obedient to Him in the circumstances of life into which he has lead me.

Should I appear to prosper in anything that I do, I just need to remind myself again and again, that He has made me who I am and he has prepared the good works for me to do in advance. Do the two hands of a clock boast in the fact that they point to the right time, when all the work is done by the myriad of cogs and wheels out of sight? Whatever I may achieve in this life, it is nothing by comparison to what He is accomplishing in and through me.

Little is known of Pilate and Herod in the years that were to follow. They came into close contact with the Lord Jesus. They heard Him speak truth to them, but they would not listen. Their love of temporary position and power meant more to them than the eternal destiny of their souls. If

nothing else, then let us learn from their mistake and ensure that we never put the temporary before the eternal, the material before the spiritual.

Thank you for listening to the Truth for Today talk in the series on Luke's Gospel "Luke 23:1-25 Pilate and Herod" talk number T1220.

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