

Faces of Failure: Pontius Pilate

Matthew 27:1-2, 11-26

Our text today is about choices. The most obvious one is the one made by the chief priests, elders, and people. They choose between Jesus, or Barabbas. As you know, they chose Barabbas, and Jesus goes to the cross because of it.

While that decision is at the heart of our reading, there are other choices as well. It is one of those on which we want to focus today. That is the choice Pontius Pilate made.

Our reading begins when the chief priests and elders met to finalize their condemnation of Jesus. While they had the authority to punish those that violated Jewish Law, they didn't have the right to impose the death penalty. Only their Roman overlords could do that. So, they bound Jesus and delivered him to Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor, who would have come to Jerusalem to keep the peace.

Matthew doesn't say much about Pilate, but the historian Philo suggests he wasn't a man with which to trifle. He was corrupt, cruel, inflexible, relentless, vindictive, and possessing of a fierce temper. He also was known to almost enjoy antagonizing the Jews.

Yet we don't get that sense of Pilate in his encounter with Jesus. He seems much more reasonable as he asks Jesus if he is the "King of the Jews," a secular translation of the Hebrew term "Messiah." And he doesn't even seem to be put off by Jesus's answer: "You have said so." We have heard that response before in Matthew's Gospel. On two previous occasions it meant "Yes," as it does here, but it's ambiguous enough not to concern Pilate.

Rather than pronounce judgment on Jesus, Pilate decides to give the people a choice. Matthew says it was a tradition for the governor to release one prisoner at the festival each year. He gives the people a choice between Jesus and Barabbas, who he calls a notorious prisoner but who Mark and John identify as an insurrectionist. Either way, Pilate probably didn't expect them to choose Barabbas, but the religious leaders rile up the crowd against Jesus and for Barabbas. They even pronounce a sentence upon Jesus, as if they were a jury. "Let him be crucified," they declare.

Clearly Pilate doesn't agree with their decision, so he puts it all on the people. Invoking a Jewish ritual for rejecting responsibility, he literally washes his hands of Jesus's fate and assigns all the guilt to the people, a guilt they willingly embrace. And then he has Barabbas released, Jesus tortured and then delivered up to be crucified.

Obviously the most important choice is the people's choice of Barabbas at the expense of Jesus. In doing so, they become complicit with the religious leaders and Roman authorities in his death. That's important because they represent all of us, all humanity, in our rejection of Jesus.

But Pilate's choice may be the most disturbing. While the crowd probably didn't know whether Jesus was innocent or guilty, Pilate knew. Matthew tells us that he recognized that the real issue between the religious leaders and Jesus was not the Law but popularity. The religious leaders were envious of Jesus. They were jealous because people were turning to him and away from them. Pilate also knew Jesus was innocent because his wife told him so.

In the Gospel of Matthew, dreams always convey truth. Here God uses a dream to reveal Jesus's innocence to Pilate's wife. So disturbed is she by it that she sends word to her husband to "have nothing to do with that righteous man."

Beyond that, Pilate tells us Jesus is innocent. When the people demand Jesus's death, Pilate replies: "Why? What evil has he done?" It is not a rhetorical question. It is one that they can't answer.

And yet knowing that Jesus is innocent, Pilate still sends Jesus to the cross. He knows he's innocent but chooses to let him die anyway. Why?

The answer is expediency. That is Pilate's failure. Faced with the possibility that Jesus might be a threat to his rule and the near riotous behavior of the religious leaders and crowd, Pilate takes the easy way out. He decides the best way to keep his job, maintain the peace, and appease the religious leaders is to do what they want rather than what is right, to execute an innocent man rather than stand up for him. He chooses to sacrifice Jesus rather than save him.

And while none of us have the responsibility, power, or authority that makes Pilate's decision so horrific, we do share the temptation to choose expediency, convenience, pragmatism over Christ.

Fearful of losing anxious about what others might think of us, worried about losing political power, concerned about what obedience might cost us, we are tempted to choose expediency over Christ.

And we often give into that temptation. That's why we find ourselves putting the "necessities of the workplace" in one category and "devotion to God" in another. That's why, when faced with someone who's critical or even just skeptical of the faith, so many of us withdraw into silence rather than speaking up for the Gospel. It's why we send a hurting friend a text message rather than go to them and share their pain. Like Pilate, we choose expediency over Jesus.

Yet we don't have to give in to that temptation because of a third choice that was made in our reading. That is the choice Jesus made.

When Pilate asked, "Are you the king of the Jews?" Jesus could have chosen expediency. He could have denied it outright. He could have explained to Pilate that this was all some terrible mistake and that, if he just set him free, he'd go away never to return. But he didn't.

When the chief priests, elders, and crowds were hurling their accusations against him, Jesus could have silenced them with a word. He could have ended it all right then. But he didn't.

When the Roman soldiers were torturing him and when they crucified him, he could have said, "Enough is enough. I'm not going to do this." But he didn't. Instead, Jesus chose us over expediency. He chose to save us rather than himself.

And because he did, we are empowered to choose him. Because he chose us, we live each day knowing God's love is greater than whatever social, political, or financial pressure the world might bring to bear upon us. We know that his grace is greater than whatever obedience to him might cost. We know that the relationship we have with him is far, far more important and life-giving than what others might think of us and that knowledge sustains us in the face of temptation.

So, the next time you find yourself torn between doing what's easy or what's right, doing what's convenient or what honors Christ, recall the choice Jesus made, the choice he made for you and your salvation, the choice he made of the cross.