

# Sermons at First Church

**A Ministry of the Word**  
**March 28, 2021**

**First Presbyterian Church**  
**Clarksburg, WV**

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**Mark 15:1-15**

They bound Jesus, led him away, and handed him over to Pilate. (Mark 15:1 N.R.S.V.)

## Pilate

My name is Pilate'. Pontius Pilate'. Like the exercise. Oh, come on, loosen up a little. That is just a bit of Roman humor. Are you all stoics or something? My name is pronounced "Pilate." It sounds the same as the name of the person who steers the boat or the ship - the pilot. Although in Latin, the name Pilate means, "skilled with the javelin." It was a name that I won for myself in my military days. Nowadays you only hear of javelin throwing as part of a track and field event. But in my day, the javelin was a weapon used in war. And we Roman soldiers used the javelin very effectively against our enemies.

As a reward for my military service I was appointed governor of the Roman territory of Palestine. Sometimes I thought it was more of a curse than a reward. Palestine was a stinking backwater full of crazy religious zealots that was impossible to rule. Nobody really wanted the job. So they gave it to me.

In those days I was young and very "gung ho," so I took the job. And I think I did pretty well. Some historians say that I was a brutal and ineffective governor, but I want to point out that I held that governorship for 10 years. Only one other governor lasted that long. And Rome did not suffer fools as governors.

Some people think I was weak because I had to give in to the Jews on more than one occasion. I wasn't weak, I was practical. A good commander and a good governor chooses his battles wisely. Not every battle is worth fighting. Sometimes you have to compromise and move on. That is what we politicians do. Yes, the "gung ho" idealist in me wanted to lay down the law to these hicks and simply kill anyone who disagreed with me. They could be good Romans or they could be dead. There were Roman governors who did that. They didn't stay governors very long.

You see Rome, by which I mean the rich people who really ran things, was not interested in perfect behavior. They were interested in making money. The rich wanted to get richer and in order to do that, trade had to flourish. If a territory was in rebellion, trade did not flourish in that area. That hit the rich slobs in Rome where it hurt them the most - in their pockets. So, keeping the peace and keeping trade flowing, that is what Rome cared about. So that is what I learned to

care about.

I discovered early on that the secret to keeping the peace in Jerusalem was in working with the Jewish high priest. As the Roman governor of the area I had the power to appoint the high priest. The governors before and after me all made it a practice to appoint a new high priest every so often. I kept the same one the whole ten years that I was governor. Yes, Caiaphas was a snake. But I figured, better the devil you know. And besides, we found each other useful. You won't find anything written that ever talks about the relationship I had with Caiaphas. We kept it strictly on the down low. Caiaphas was never my buddy or my friend. But he was useful from time to time.

Early on I offended the Jews by bringing the imperial standards into Jerusalem. Because these military standards glorified the emperor as a god, the Jews were up in arms. A huge crowd gathered in protest and surrounded the praetorium for five days. I was not about to let the dignity of the emperor suffer because these local yokals were offended. I had my soldiers surround them and draw their swords. I thought that would be enough to make the crowd scatter. I was wrong. They called my bluff and stayed.

Caiaphas told me that if I would just remove the imperial standards, he would get the Jews to behave themselves. I told him that I could just kill them all. He pointed out that the governors who did such things did not remain in power. I knew he was right, so I backed down. I lost face, but I was still governor.

Then I decided that I would put up votive shields on the palace walls in Jerusalem. After all, this was Roman territory. It was right to "fly the flag," as they say. But again because the Jews thought shields were glorifying the emperor as a god, they protested again. This time I was determined to stand my ground. I wasn't going to kill a bunch of people. I just wasn't going to give in.

Caiaphas told me that it wouldn't work, but I didn't believe him. I was the power here and it was time everyone knew it. Some of the leading citizens of the area appealed to the emperor himself. And would you believe it? The emperor, Tiberius ordered me to take down the shields.

So I knew right then which way the wind was blowing. Rome only cared about keeping the peace and making money. So I took down the shields. I was still governor, but I knew that I was on thin ice.

Then one day the citizens of the area came to me and demanded that I build a new aqueduct for them. They were right, one was desperately needed. But Rome didn't want to put up any money. So I decided that the money could be taken from the temple treasury. They had the money, why shouldn't they pay for it. It was for their people after all.

Caiaphas looked the other way when I raided the treasury, he had to. There was no way I could have done that on my own. But somehow word leaked out and I had to back down once again. I

had to put the money back. But the up side was that the citizens stopped pressing me to build that stupid aqueduct. So there was that. And I was still governor.

Once again Caiaphas smoothed things over and all was well for a bit. Then one day Caiaphas had this itinerant preacher hauled up before me. As the Roman governor I was not only the administrator, I was also the judge. So I had to hear the case.

Caiaphas claimed that this Jesus was plotting against Rome and claiming the title of king. But when I asked Jesus outright if he was a king, he said that his kingdom was not of this world. That's when I knew that snake Caiaphas was using me again. This Jesus was a threat to him and to his fellow Jewish leaders. He was not a threat to me or to Rome.

This Jesus told me that he came to bear witness to the truth. I'll admit that I laughed out loud at that. By that time I had been in government long enough to be truly cynical. I almost said, "Whose truth? Your truth? My truth? Caiaphas' truth?" Because in my experience, what is the truth changes depending on who is telling it. So I said to Jesus, "What is truth?"

Just for a moment there I thought he would give me an answer. But instead the only answer he gave me was silence. Maybe he was thinking, "You can't handle the truth!" And perhaps he was right. Later on I heard that Jesus had said of himself, "I am the truth." He didn't say, "I tell the truth," or "I teach the truth." He said, "I am the truth." Hummm . . . I stopped laughing.

Somewhere in all of this my wife came to me and told me about a disturbing dream that she had. She told me that this man was innocent and that I must not stain my hands with innocent blood. I listened to her, well, kind of. I was still the governor. Certain things had to be done even if they were distasteful. Like many another man, I wish now I had listened better to my wife.

Still I tried my best. I tried to get Caiaphas to deal with this matter internally as a Jewish thing. But he refused. I had Jesus whipped and then presented him to the crowd. I hoped that seeing him humiliated that way would be enough, but they cried out, "Crucify him."

I told them that I was of the mind to pardon a terrible criminal on that day and did they want me to pardon this Jesus. But they instead cried out for Barabbas to be pardoned. Well, I really stepped in it that time. Barabbas was a terrorist. A truly bad dude and I was sure he would cause me no end of trouble in the future. But I was committed, so I had to pardon Barabbas.

What do you want me to do with this Jesus then? I asked. "Crucify him!" they screamed. It seemed that Caiaphas and his cronies had done their work with the crowd all too well. So I made a show of washing my hand of the whole matter and sentenced this Jesus to the death. And I was still governor.

A few years later I was recalled to Rome and I dropped from the pages of history. What happened to me there is not known. But I can tell you that my decision that day to put Jesus to death haunts me still. I made the common sense decision. I made the correct political decision. But I made the wrong moral decision.

Some battles are not worth fighting. But some battles definitely are worth fighting.

What would you have done?

Amen.