

### 13<sup>th</sup> July 2025, Reflection – The Creed (5): ‘...suffered under Pilate, crucified, died and buried’

In 1961, a stone was discovered by Italian archaeologist Maria Teresa Fortuna Canivet in Caesarea Maritima, an ancient port city on the coast of the eastern Mediterranean, and now a small fishing village. The stone was roughly three feet high and two feet wide, and was part of a staircase behind the stagehouse for the Herodian theatre, which was the main attraction being excavated. Not terribly auspicious, but it *was* old, dating back to the first century AD. However, it was not its age which made it a find which attracted worldwide attention, it was the Latin inscription on it: *DIS AUGUSTIS TIBERIÉUM, PONTIUS PILATUS, PRAEFECTUS IUDAEAE FECIT EDICAVIT*. Or, in English: *To the Divine Augusti, [this] temple to Tiberius, Pontius Pilate prefect of Judea has dedicated [this]*.

For the first time, it was proof that there really was a governor of Judea in the first century AD called Pontius Pilate. The Pilate mentioned in our creed; the Pilate who questioned Jesus and tried to free him; the Pilate who ultimately agreed to enact the sentence upon Jesus longed for by the chief priests, that of death by crucifixion; the Pilate who washed his hands in disgust, but nevertheless did so to preserve the peace and save his political career.

Jesus suffered in many ways throughout his life. He suffered exile as a young child, and in all probability whispers and gossip as to his parentage his whole life. He suffered in the desert being tempted by the devil. He suffered rejection by his home town and had to move to Capernaum. He suffered threats and abuse from corrupt leaders. He suffered the pain in Gethsemane of knowing what he was about to face, so intense that his sweat was like drops of blood. He suffered the indignity of wrongful arrest, and false accusations.

He suffered all of those things – but the only one which the Creed records is the very last: he suffered under Pontius Pilate. Why? In part, it’s a summary – it encapsulates everything else. All of the rejection, misunderstanding and rage, all rolled into one. In part, it’s Pilate who instigates the moment of his crucifixion, the place of atonement, the heart of our faith. But it’s also because, in many ways, **Pilate is a representative figure**. He embodies all the traits of humanity, all of *us* in other words. When we say: he suffered under Pontius Pilate, it’s not just a historical declaration, which it is; or a theological entry point to our salvation, which it also is; it’s much closer to home. **He suffered under people like me: weak, vain, conflicted people who need a Saviour. And yet still he went through with it...**

So let’s examine this line in the Creed today, by looking at Pilate, and the account of his meeting with Jesus in the early hours of Good Friday. Pilate went through a range of responses to Jesus, and it starts with this: **Pilate was curious**. The religious leaders brought Jesus to him, basically because they had no power to condemn anyone to death, they needed Pilate to do it for them. And Pilate’s first response is to ask Jesus questions. Mark records his first as being: ‘Are you the King of the Jews?’ He then asks a second: ‘Aren’t you going to answer?’ In fact, John records four other questions Pilate asks Jesus directly – basically, he’s intrigued, he’s curious. He probably knows a certain amount already about this troublemaking rabbi, it’s his job to know that stuff. And he wants to know more.

Is this Jesus really a threat to him, or to the Roman authority in Palestine? That’s why he asks whether he’s a king *first*. And Jesus isn’t playing the game. He was very clear to the chief priests that he is the Messiah, but he’s not going to claim to be a political king. Pilate’s first encounter is like so many people – they know a bit about Jesus and they’re curious to know more. Who is Jesus really? And the more they find out, the more drawn they are to him.

Just like Pilate, in fact, His second response is **to be amazed**: ‘Jesus still made no reply, and Pilate was amazed.’ Even in his final hours, exhausted, sleep deprived, being interviewed for his life, Jesus still has the capacity to amaze the most powerful man in the country. *Even the captive Jesus is captivating.*

It was enough for Pilate to be sure this rabbi posed no threat to him or to Rome. And here the politician kicks in. Pilate has a bright idea – he has the power to free someone during the Passover festival. He can avoid a confrontation with the people that brought him, by both condemning Jesus and then freeing him. The sort of calculation that so many of us make when we're put under pressure. Work the odds. Try to find a way out. And Pilate tried it: he brings Jesus out and asks the crowd if they want to free Jesus.

But he's underestimated the religious leaders. They've got there first and whipped up the crowd to ask for someone else, a real thug, a proper threat: Barabbas. Now Pilate is cornered, and although Mark doesn't record his emotions, we see it in the other accounts in Matthew and John. He takes Jesus back inside, and gets a message from his wife – don't get involved. He questions Jesus again, and Jesus finally starts talking, and comprehensively outfoxes him. And now **Pilate is afraid**. That's the word John uses. Jesus is altogether more amazing, but the situation is altogether bigger, than he bargained for; he's got someone whom he's now convinced is innocent, but to stand by him will cost him a lot – his career, a return in disgrace to Rome, and more immediately, a possible riot.

Jesus is awesome – not just in the modern sense of the word, but the original one. Pilate is now in awe. But there's a choice. What will he give up for Jesus? Which leads to his final response: he's been curious, amazed, afraid – **and now conflicted. He wants to save Jesus and save himself.** The cost to Jesus is infinitely greater than the cost to him – but he can't have both. He has to choose.

**What would I choose? What would you choose?** That's the power of this phrase in the Creed. In a sense, we are all like Pontius Pilate, with a choice to make. One day Jesus will come back in glory to see that choice – but for now, the choice is ours.

Pilate, of course, took the politician's choice. He chose his survival, his comfort and prosperity – and so the second phrase of this part of the Creed became fact: Jesus was crucified, died and was buried. Pilate's two little acts of rebellion against his own decision were that he insisted that Jesus was named the king of the Jews at the burial site, and that a brave man called Joseph could take Jesus' body and give him a decent burial, not the tipping into an unmarked grave which criminals usually got.

In the West, many of us don't have to sacrifice our comfort for Jesus – though this is not the experience of hundreds of millions in other countries, where to follow Jesus demands a much higher cost than Pilate would have had to pay. But we will still feel those same moments of internal conflict. We know what the right thing to do is, the thing Jesus would do, and yet we choose the alternative. And sometimes we ease our consciences by adding a couple of little acts to justify it to ourselves.

Jesus suffered under Pontius Pilate, a man so like us. Curious, amazed, afraid, conflicted. He was crucified, died and was buried. But as I close, **let's remember what that death achieved.** Yes, he was the victim of so much corrupt human nature: wrongful arrest, false accusations, whipping up the mob, political manipulation, maintenance of power, self-preservation – and it was for precisely all of this, and all of our other oh-so-human failings, that he died. He took all that junk upon himself, that we might go free. Amazing love, O what sacrifice. The Son of God, given for me. **My debt he pays, and my death he dies, that I might live!**

Jesus died not just for the Barabbas's of this world, not just for the Pilate's – but for all of us. His suffering was immense, but not without great reward. Next week we'll look at what happened next – but let's reflect today on what our inner Pilate cost Jesus – and the forgiveness and salvation it led to.

I believe that Jesus suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died and was buried – for all of us. For me. Amen.