

## **CONVERSATION WITH CRUCIFIXION**

*Sermon for Good Friday A- Jn 18:1-19:42*

LPC, 4/18/14

We just heard the story of the Crucifixion from the point of view of John the Evangelist. John has many aspects that set him apart from the three other Gospel-writers: Matthew, Mark and Luke. John in particular is a recorder of conversations.

Unique among the Gospel-writers, John relates several lengthy exchanges between Jesus and one other person. If you've been at church through Lent, you'll have heard of Jesus having heart-to-hearts: with Nicodemus about new life, with the Samaritan woman about living water, and with the man born blind about the difference between physical and spiritual blindness.

Here on Good Friday we have another one-on-one exchange: this time with the Roman governor Pontius Pilate. No other Gospel relates presents Jesus' words with Pilate as a private conversation.

Pilate combines elements of Jesus' previous partners in conversation. Like Nicodemus, Pilate can make no sense of Jesus' words. Like the Samaritan he's an outsider, a foreigner. Like the man born blind he starts from a place of spiritual blindness. Of course, unlike the man born blind, Pilate does not receive enlightenment.

I wonder if Pilate never got over his encounter with Jesus. John's account suggests that Pilate found Jesus profoundly unsettling. Here was one person Pilate couldn't intimidate, even with the power of empire behind him.

We don't know a lot about Pontius Pilate. He was a petty bureaucrat for the empire who evidently dead-ended in Palestine. He was eventually removed from his post for excessive cruelty. Given this is the Roman Empire we're talking about, that really says something. His career never took off, and tradition holds that he eventually committed suicide in Gaul, where he'd been exiled

Contemporaries describe Pilate as bad-tempered and arrogant. John's account portrays him as cynical. Despite these attributes, it seems Pilate sees something in Jesus he can't name. This something seems to haunt him as the dreams of Pilate's wife haunt her. But he lacks whatever it takes to see beyond what Jesus calls "the kingdom of this world."

Pilate tries to remain in his comfort zone, drawing on the power of his office and his well-documented contempt of the Jews. Sensing the potential train wreck this case may be for his career, he tries to shrug off responsibility for it and can't. In his own mind he chooses the lesser of two evils (one being the execution of an innocent man and the other being a Jewish riot.)

The Very Rev. Cynthia Byers Walter

In what lies Pilate's sin? It's not simply the sin of expediency. It's not just the sin of punishing the innocent. Pilate's sin is in not recognizing the truth when it stands right in front of him.

Unfortunately for Pilate, being closed to the truth does not ensure his safety. His self-protective measures end up being for naught.

The story of the Crucifixion is hard to bear. Such cruelty. Such suffering. Those who voluntarily enter into conversation with this story are making themselves vulnerable in a way that Pilate never quite achieved. Being open to truth makes a person vulnerable.

As difficult as the Crucifixion is to contemplate, shielding oneself from it will not protect from pain. As Pilate shows, protecting oneself from it will only blind one to the truth.

As difficult as the Crucifixion is, we are invited to enter into conversation with it. John, the master of conversations, would surely approve. What does it say that an innocent man refuses to cave to the forces of evil? What does it say that he does this for love's sake?