

## Sermon: Dear Pontius Rev. Mark Bigelow

Scripture Reading: Luke 23:1-25

Written to Pilate to be delivered in late 37 C.E.

Dear Pontius,

Sorry, I suppose I've offended you already. I know that Pontius isn't your given name, but is a title. I use it in my greeting as an indication of why I'm writing to you. You see, you're quite famous in 2000, in fact you've been very infamous since your death. You might be wondering why. Remember a man you sentenced to be crucified for plotting to overthrow the government? I hear there were a lot of men that would fit this description. I speaking here of Jesus of Nazareth. The chief priests brought him to you around the time of Passover. He had upset the tables of the money changers in the Temple. Do you remember him now? Well, he was right--he was the Messiah. At least his followers have thought so since then. I'm one of them. We're called Christians, since we believe Jesus was the Christ. I can imagine this comes as a big surprise.

You, Mr. Pilate, are talked about a lot this time of year. We commemorate the crucifixion of Jesus and you are an intricate part of the story. Since I have this opportunity to write I decided I should first describe how we see you. Kind of like holding up a mirror which has been shaped by 2000 years of history. I suppose this could be as accurate as if someone held a mirror to me and I saw reflected by the image of the lead singer of a rock and roll band. But, since Jesus is so important to us we spend many, many hours trying to figure out what really happened. We have some stories written by some of his followers, but our Bible actually has four different accounts of what happened so it opens the door to interpretive efforts.

In addition to our bible we have stories about you from Jewish and Roman historians of your period. The predominate image I have of you is a tragic figure who was in a tough place in history.

I understand that you were appointed governor of Judea in the year 26. (The calendar has also been changed since your time, we now begin the years with Jesus' birth. I told you he is important to us.) You seem to have assumed office in a particularly volatile political climate. Now I know that politics is always difficult to decipher, I have a hard time figuring out the motives of the politicians in office now, but you were taking on a particularly dangerous job. You were to govern the lands of Judea and Samaria. This was land that had been part of the powerful kingdom of Herod the Great, but had been divided according to his will to three of his heirs. The section which you came to lead was willed to Herod's eldest son, Archeleus, but Archeleus was a brutal dictator who so alienated the populace that Emperor Augustus deposed him and downgraded the position from a kingdom to a province and sent in a Roman governor. By the time you began your position Judea was a powder keg ready to go off. The Jewish population was tired of being ruled by Rome and one faction, the Zealots, were beginning to plot to overthrow the government. In addition to your local problems you had to contend with Herod

Antipas. Antipas, another of Herod the Great's heirs, still controlled the Northern half of the old kingdom, that is Galilee. Antipas, as we understand him, was jealous that his brother had received the lion's share of the kingdom in his father's will and was not reluctant to report any of your problems to Rome.

And, Mr. Pilate, I understand you had problems. Most of them seem to stem from the fact that you were an outsider. I mean you weren't a Jew, and you were from Rome. This is most evident soon after you assumed your position when you secretly, in the night, hung standards with the Emperor's image in the Temple. Did you really not know how the Priests would feel? The Jewish leaders were outraged because their law doesn't allow any graven images. Perhaps you wanted to upset them.

Your notoriety in history stems from your role in the death of Jesus. Here's what we're told happened: Jesus was arrested at night by the Temple soldiers. They took him to the home of the chief priest where he was mocked and beaten. Jesus then appeared before the Sanhedrin, the council of the chief priests, they found him guilty of claiming to be a false prophet and they turned him over to you, insisting that Jesus was a revolutionary. I'm sure that if Jesus was organizing against Rome it was your duty to execute him. Your first move was a wise one. Knowing that Jesus was a Galilean and since Herod Antipas was in town you turned him over to Herod. Jesus was from his jurisdiction, and besides, Herod had killed John the Baptist, you would suppose he didn't mind getting rid of religious extremists. But, Herod would have nothing to do with Jesus and sent him back to you. Luke writes that you thought Jesus was innocent and it was only after the crowds of Chief priests and their followers objected that you agreed to crucify Jesus.

The million-dollar question here is, did you really think he was innocent? Who was responsible for Jesus' death: you, or the Sanhedrin? The Bible is clear in placing blame on the Jewish priests. But, we have our doubts. For you see, Mr. Pilate, our writers didn't begin to record this information until 60 or 70 and by that time they would have some powerful incentives to paint the Roman authorities in the best possible light. For after you are gone the Zealots will mount a revolution against Rome in 70. This led the Roman authorities to despise the Jews. So the Christians would certainly want to distance themselves from the Jews and seek favor with Rome. You become a tragic character who unwillingly participated in the death of Jesus.

I think, and many others agree, that Jesus wasn't executed because he upset the chief priests, but because he was a threat to Rome. We think this for several reasons. First, Mr. Pilate, you have a reputation as being a nasty sort of a guy. Sorry, but you did kill quite a few people. And, clearly, Jesus was executed by your soldiers under your orders. Second, you may have been wary of the chief priests, but I doubt that they controlled you. In fact the Sanhedrin is notorious for being a puppet of the governor. So they may have been doing what they thought you wanted--but that is pure speculation. Jesus died because he, like you, found himself at the intersection of many different conflicts. Rome versus the Jews. You versus Herod Antipas. The wealthy opposed by the peasants.

The ironic aspect of all this is that we Christians understand this as part of the divine unfolding of the sacred into our world. For Jesus didn't remain in the grave. I'm sure you struggled to find out what happened to his body when it was reported missing. So you, Mr. Pilate, are part of God's continual drama.

That's what I like about you. You may have been a Roman governor, you certainly were violent, but you were still a man. You made mistakes. You were confused a lot. You were indecisive. You tried to do what was right for the state that put you in your position, but you often failed.

As I think back to who you were I'm glad that you can't write back to me. The ambiguity fits our faith.

For our faith isn't dependent on picture perfect facts. Our faith is dependent on our interpretation of God's unveiling in history. A process which can redeem even someone like you into a participant in the sacred process. That gives me real hope. Look at me. Or look at the society around me. You thought it was unsettling in your world, you wouldn't believe the conflicts we have today. Yet, we Christians continue to insist that it is God's intent that is most important. And that it is God's hope which will persevere to the end.

Now, Mr. Pilate, if this letter does find you in the year 37, you're facing your lowest point. Your violent solutions to the region have finally caught up to you and even Emperor Caligula couldn't accept the massacre of all those Samaritans at Mount Gerizim.

May God's peace be with you,  
Mark

(Pilate, having been deposed by Caligula, committed suicide, as was customary among Roman aristocrats convicted of a crime.)

Preached on Palm Sunday April 16, 2000.