

Why it's so Easy to Relate to Pontius Pilate

Who would sympathize with the Roman official who had Jesus crucified?

Even among many who don't consider themselves Christian, Pontius Pilate is a cultural symbol of an abusive, authoritarian power.

But there are a few movies, such as Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*, that present him as an almost sympathetic figure. That's not just artistic license, because the Gospel according to John seems to do the same. One of the reasons for that is also quite contemporary in its significance.

John makes it seem that Pilate's main concern, as the local "procurator" under the Roman governor of Syria, is just keeping things orderly in Jerusalem during the Passover. That annual feast was when many Jews from Palestine and elsewhere came flooding into the city. Thus Pilate becomes frightened when a mob whipped up by Jesus' Jewish opponents calls for Jesus' crucifixion and Barabbas' release. Pilate doesn't want a riot to break out because, if things get out of hand and many are killed, Rome might decide that he can't handle the troublesome province and recall him. And that would have been the end of his political career.

So Pilate's attitude is perfectly understandable during any historical period. But the real interest of Pilate for today lies in this exchange between him and Jesus ([John 18: 33-38](#)):

Then Pilate entered the headquarters again, summoned Jesus, and asked him, "Are you the King of the Jews?" Jesus answered, "Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?" Pilate replied, "I am not a Jew, am I? Your own nation and the chief priests have handed you over to me.

What have you done?" Jesus answered, "My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here." Pilate asked him, "So you are a king?" Jesus answered, "You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice." Pilate asked him, "What is truth?"

"What is truth?" indeed. I have heard many people in conversation ask that question without realizing who is first recorded in literature as having asked it. And I believe Pilate asked it for the same reason they do: It's far easier to think and choose in terms of one's worldly interests than in terms of a Truth-with-a-capital-T that some weird if fascinating people might or might not know.

Sound familiar to you, too?

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