

Third Sunday in Lent

Some early Christians considered Pontius Pilate a saint. They even named children after him. Augustine called Pilate a prophet. Eusebius said Pilate later believed in Jesus' resurrection. The biblical evidence is more complex. In John's Gospel, Pilate asserted the innocence of Jesus 3 times. He tried 3 different ways to change the crowd's mind: putting Jesus up against Barabbas, appealing to human compassion ("Look at the man"), and calling Jesus a king. None of it worked. Because he literally washed his hands of the case, we think of Pilate like Lady Macbeth trying to rub out the telltale spot. Every week in the Creed we name Pontius Pilate as the one under whom Jesus suffered. Luke mentions him twice before the Passion: once as a contemporary of John the Baptist and at the start of today's gospel where Pilate mercilessly mingled the human blood of some Galileans with the blood of their sacrifices. It eerily sets the stage for the Passion.

Pilate perhaps also sets the stage for the way Jesus interprets today's stories: these Galileans, the 18 people killed by a falling tower, and a barren fig tree. The questions posed then still survive today. When people suffer an act of violence, is it their own fault because they chose bad friendships or stupidly put themselves in harm's way? When people die from some accident, is it really an accident? Or is it God's way of getting back at them for their sins? Jesus saw no relationship between the size of the sin you commit and the size of the mishaps that befall you. But, he cautions, don't think you will therefore be spared. Catastrophe can still happen to you if you do not repent.

On Ash Wednesday we agreed to repent. How have you done? Do you wish that you were doing more for Lent this year? Or if you're doing enough, are your external observances leading yet to an internal renewal? Are you repenting well?

Good repentance avoids two extremes: One is to take all the blame. Many people who are victims, especially of abuse, blame themselves. It is hard for some of them to declare their innocence even when outsiders clearly see the guilt of the perpetrator. The other extreme is to take no blame for anything even when we know we are guilty of bad decisions, including ones that harm other people. In a culture that emphasizes self-worth, we are schooled to think of ourselves first and of everyone else much later. Some of us take the extreme belief that we do not need to repent because we have done nothing wrong.

Jesus steers this middle path: You may not be responsible for the violence and accidents that happen to you, but that doesn't mean you haven't sinned. Everyone has. I have; you have, and we ought to repent.

The fig tree gives an incentive: Even if your spiritual life hasn't born much fruit for years, God will patiently wait while you dig into the manure and give it another go. Consider what keeps you from being the kind of person you wish you were: the activities that harm yourself and the people who love you, the hate-filled thoughts you harbor, the loose spending of your money or time. What would it take for you to change some of that? Jesus offers a simple solution: Repent.

We have no hard historical evidence, but some Christians thought that Pontius Pilate repented and became a saint. If people thought he could change, they think anyone could change. Even me. Even you.

Sunday, March 24, 2019