

CLOSE ENCOUNTERS OF THE BEST KIND

6) The Roman Ruler

John 18: 28-40 / John 19: 1-16

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I should have known that it would end the way that I did. And while I am not surprised by the way that it all came to pass, I had hoped—desperately hoped—for a different ending than that of crucifixion. But, it was not to be and I was left to live with the ugly memory of it all—a memory that I could never quite assign to the past.

I realize that this confession might be surprising to you. After all, I, Pontius Pilate, Roman Governor of the Province of Judea, was no stranger to the brutality and violence that was needed to keep the Roman peace in Jerusalem. I had sentenced thousands to die by crucifixion for their unwillingness to abide by Roman rule. In fact, the road that led up to the great city gates was often lined with the crosses—crosses that served not only to punish those who had threatened Rome, but also, to warn those who might be entertaining similar ideas.

Even so, there was something about this particular crucifixion that I found deeply unsettling. A hundred times I have replayed those final hours in my mind and a hundred times I have wished for a different ending.

I had been hearing about the man from Nazareth for weeks, if not months, before our paths happened to cross. Caiaphas and his band of priests had warned me that this Jesus was a trouble maker to be watched carefully. They insisted that he was a threat, not only to their way of life as Jews, but also to our way of life as Romans. Yet, from the reports that I had received from my soldiers, I had concluded that Jesus was essentially, a Jewish problem who posed no real threat to Rome. He did not advocate violence and in fact, opposed it. As far as I was concerned, that was reason enough not to be too worried.

As it was, I had plenty of other reasons over which to worry—especially when it came to the Jewish feasts and festivals. Whenever pilgrims would stream into the city from the surrounding region, there would be an escalation of tension and violence. Whenever you combine large numbers of people with heavy doses of religious passion and anti-Roman sentiment, you have on your hands, the potential for the grass fire of a riot that can easily spread into the inferno of rebellion and insurrection. And that, of course, was my ultimate fear as the presiding Roman Governor.

To allow for such a violent outburst under my watch would be to doom any possibility of my career leading beyond this dismal Roman outpost. It would, in effect, finish my career before it had even started. I was determined to keep the peace at all costs—even if it meant relying upon the Roman sword to do it.

It was, as I recall, during the Feast of the Passover that there was more tension than usual on the street. On the one hand, there was excitement over the news that Jesus of Nazareth

was coming to share in the Feast. On the other hand, it was clear to me that Caiaphas, the High Priest and his cronies, did not share that excitement. Some of my men were insisting that these priests were up to something and that we had best be ready for any potential violence that they might try to incite. I decided to place my troops on “high alert.”

I can still recall Jesus’ entry into the City—the entry that you commemorate today with your Palm Sunday observance. It was, I must tell you, a strange sight to behold—so unlike the pomp and pageantry of a Roman parade. Why this was nothing but a rag tag group of peasants surrounding their leader on rode on the back of a donkey—of all creatures! While the crowds were excited, I couldn’t, for the life of me, see what Caiaphas was worried about.

It was soon thereafter that there came word about the disturbance at the Temple—the overturning of the tables and the angry complaints from the money lenders and priests. Hardly enough to get too worked up about, but these religious leaders saw it differently. Something told me then that this would not be the last of it. And, of course, it would prove to be just the beginning.

I was not surprised, therefore, when a couple of days later, one of my commanders informed me that Caiaphas and his priests wanted to see me. Rather than defile themselves by entering my headquarters, they asked to meet them outside, which I did. They proceeded to inform me that they had arrested Jesus the night before and put on trial. To no one’s surprise, they found him guilty of breaking their law and blaspheming the name of their God—a crime worthy of death.

I had little interest in getting drawn into their internal disputes and told them to handle the matter according to their law. They then reminded me that were not permitted to carry out an execution, that only Roman rule could do so. They needed my consent. Try as I might, it did not seem that I could avoid becoming embroiled in their petty politics.

So it was that with not a little reluctance that I agreed to question their prisoner—the peasant that I had been hearing so much about.

Naturally, I was curious about the talk that I had heard that Jesus claimed to be a king. So I began by asking him: **“Are you King of the Jews?”**

Jesus wanted to know if I had come to that conclusion myself or if someone had told me that he claimed to be King. To be honest, I was a little bit put off with this response. Here he was the peasant and I the Roman ruler and he had the nerve the question me!

I quickly replied that I was not a Jew and that it was his own people who had handed him over to me. **“What have you done?”** I wanted to know.

He then began to speak in ways that I am not sure I quite understood. He spoke of his kingdom not being of this world and that if it were, his followers would have fought to keep him from being handed over. **“My kingdom,”** he cryptically said, **“is not from here.”**

Trying to make sense of it all, I seized about that statement. **“So you are a king?”** I asked. Once again, Jesus answered in a way that I wasn’t sure that I understood.

“You say that I am king,” he said. **“For this reason 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.”**

To be honest, this response caught me off guard. He spoke with such clarity and certainty that I found myself a bit unnerved. Not knowing exactly what to say, I simply asked: **“What is truth?”** While he didn’t answer my question, I had heard enough to recognize that this man was not guilty of any crime.

I quickly went back out to the religious leaders who were waiting for my verdict and told them that I could find no case against this man. As a way of placating them and honoring a Passover tradition, I offered to release Jesus. But Caiaphas, of course, did not want the release of Jesus. He and the other priests called, instead, for the release of Barabbas, who was, to put it generously, a bandit. The truth of the matter was he was a common thug.

I could see that I was beginning to run out of options. In an effort to placate the growing crowd in my courtyard, I ordered my soldiers to flog Jesus and place a crown of thorns upon his head and a purple robe upon his body. I somehow hoped that this humiliating sight would somehow change their minds. **“Here is the man!”** I announced to the crowd that had gathered. I could see, however, that Caiaphas and his men were busy at work, inciting the crowd as they called for his crucifixion. **“Take him yourselves and crucify him: I find no case against him.”**

Still unwilling to give into this travesty of justice, I decided to have one final conversation with Jesus.

“Where are you from?” I wanted to know. When he didn’t answer, I began to lose my temper. **“Do you refused to speak with me—the one who has the power to release you or crucify you?”**

Jesus replied: **“You would have no power over me unless it had been given you from above; therefore, the one who handed you over to me is guilty of the greater sin.”**

Once again, I found his calm clarity and certainty a bit unnerving. I was inwardly amazed at his composure. It was obvious that he was not, in the least, intimidated by me. I had never seen or heard anything like this. I returned to the courtyard and tried yet again to release this innocent man. But the crowd would hear none of it. As the call for his crucifixion grew, one man cried out: **“If you release this man, you are no friend of Caesar!”**

It was that charge that cut me to the quick...a charge that I could not allow to be made if I was to have any hope of advancement in my career. Caesar would not look kindly on suggestion that I was working against him. And so it was that I gave into the crowd and their blood thirsty calls for crucifixion. I was not willing to risk my career merely to save the life of this peasant. I felt as if I had done all that I could.

I ordered an aide to place a bowl of water before me then then proceeded to wash my hands as my last act of protest. **“I am innocent of this man’s blood! See to it yourselves!”** They then angrily shouted back: **“His blood be upon us and upon our children!** And that was that. Emotionally spent, I handed Jesus over to be crucified...and in a matter of minutes the courtyard had emptied. While the excited mob made their way to Golgotha for the crucifixion that they were so determined to have, I was left alone with my own painful thoughts.

I was not proud of what I had done. In fact, I was ashamed. You see, I was the one who had the authority and the power to ensure that justice was done and it was I who had refused to use that power and authority. I took the coward’s way out. I gave into the mob mentality and to the manipulation of Caiaphas. As a result, an innocent man would die that day.

In our brief conversation, I had asked Jesus, **“What is truth?”** There is, in your gospel account, no recorded response. Yet, Jesus did, in fact, answer my question—not with his words, but with his witness. You see, Jesus embodied the truth that he had been called to proclaim, the truth of the kingdom that he had come to establish—the truth that the power of love is greater than the power of the sword...greater than even the Roman sword. The remarkable thing is that Jesus not only proclaimed that truth, he not only lived that truth, but he was willing to die for the sake of that truth. And I could not help but admire his courage and conviction.

As I think back upon what took place on that fateful day, it is ironic to realize that the one on trial that day really wasn’t Jesus. The one on trial was actually me. And I have had to live with the verdict of history that it was I, Pontius Pilate, who was found guilty...

Guilty of choosing that which was comfortable over that which was courageous...

Guilty of opting for that which was convenient over that which was just...

Guilty of placing my career aspirations over the life of an innocent man.

That is my confession and I make it without reservation. But before you judge me too quickly or dismiss me too lightly as some extraordinary villain of human history, allow me to ask if my story, in some, way might resemble your own?

While the context, of course, is completely different, I wonder if some of the choices that you confront are not somewhat similar. Knowing the human condition as I do, I wonder if there have been times in which you have “washed your hands” of the responsibility of doing the right and needed thing in favor of that which was comfortable and expedient? I wonder if there have been times in which you allowed your own self-interest to pre-empt your willingness to risk sticking your neck out for someone else—a friend, a co-worker, a client, or perhaps, a mere acquaintance? Maybe you can think of those times in which you have given into the mob mentality by remaining silent when your voice was needed.

While it may be easy to write me off as a somewhat cowardly villain who failed to save the life of an innocent man, I hope that you might be willing to recognize that we are not as different as you might be tempted to believe.

Rest assured, however, that my hope, in sharing my story with you, is not to shame you or saddle you with guilt. That is not at all what is needed! What is needed, I believe, is a clear understanding of what truth really is and what it is that it calls you to do, how it calls you to live and, if need be, how it calls you to die.

In looking back upon it all, I can tell you that my deepest regret is that I didn't have the courage to recognize the truth that stood before me...bleeding profusely, dressed in a purple robe and a crown of thorns...willing to suffer the most excruciating form of death imaginable—all for the sake of love; a love that was stronger than the sword, a love that was greater than the greatest empire...a love so great that it could forgive even me.