

Our Journey to Easter with Jesus and Pilate Matthew 27:1-2, 11-26

Over the last two weeks in the news there has been the continued reporting on the fate of two Australians Andrew Chan and Myuran Sukumaran who have been found guilty of heading a drug smuggling ring and importing illegal drugs into Indonesia. The appropriate and fitting sentence according to the Indonesian court and criminal justice system that they received was death by firing squad. They were removed on March 4th from the Kerokaban jail in Bali to what is called, "Death Island" or Nusakambangan island a prison location where executions are carried out. Once there, prisoners on death row at any time can be given 72 hours notice of their execution. Lawyers appealed to a court on Thursday to have their case for clemency considered to which they will receive their answer this week.

This pair have spent the past 10 years in prison during which time Andrew Chan came to Christ. That's right he is a Christian, a reformed drug smuggler who behind bars has even become a pastor ministering to inmates, guards and visitors in the prison. Sukuraman has also reformed and trained as an artist, even teaching other inmates how to paint. Now, while both of them await the death sentence by firing squad to be carried out, the world cries out through politicians, global businessman, church's and humanitarian organisations and many others with a loud single voice, release them from the death sentence, do not execute them, release them from being sentenced to execution because this crime that they have knowingly committed, confessed to and been found guilty of, according to the rest of the world, is not worthy of the death sentence.

There is a loud cry for mercy by the crowds, release them from the death sentence, even release them to us in Australia to a prison here in exchange for three Indonesian prisoners. All the appeals are now primarily being made to the one and only person in Indonesia who can grant this request for clemency, the President of Indonesia Joko Widodo. On March 4th an appeal was made to him in by the Australian government. His firm and final answer was pronounced, 'NO'. There will be no 11th hour reprieve or change of heart because Widodo systematically has ruled out clemency not just for Andrew Chan and Myuran Sukumaran but for all drug traffickers whose offenses warrant a sentence of execution. He has no care or concern for the appeal of the growing crowd in the world that cries out for their release from the death sentence. He has made his decision final and washed his hands of this case.

In Indonesia if you are a drug user you pay the market rate for the illegal drugs you want to use. There is also a price to be paid if you are caught for importing and smuggling certain quantities of illegal drugs. This crime carries with it the sentence of death. Everything has its price, no matter how, when or where we buy it. In a sense, nothing is free because there is always going to be a price to be paid, monetary or otherwise.

Let us consider this with regards to our salvation, given to us by God's grace, which cost him the death of his Son. During our journey through Lent we've learned so far why Judas betrayed Jesus, how Peter denied him, and why Caiaphas condemned him. We today have learnt of the Indonesian President's power in the case relating to Andrew Chan and Myuran Sukumaran. And as we contemplate our own walk to the cross with Jesus, his suffering that he experienced along the way which culminated in death by crucifixion, the characters who were involved and where their stories cross over with ours, while we do this may we spare a thought for Christians like Andrew Chan who face imminent death around the world?

We in our own minor way as we fast or give something up in order to identify with the suffering of Jesus during Lent are seeking spiritual transformation. For Andrew Chan, and others like him, their Lenten journey may not extend as far as Good Friday, so will be experientially more real as his Lord and Saviour meets with and identifies with him guiding him through these extremely trying times to his death. We will now turn to the one man who had the power to execute Jesus, and learn why he did and how his story crosses over with ours in how we are tempted to be Pilate like today.

Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea from AD 27-37, coming to his post only two years before Jesus' arrest. It had been a turbulent time for him from the moment he arrived in Jerusalem. When he and his soldiers first entered Jerusalem, he required them to carry their ensigns with the image of the emperor, even though he knew that earlier Roman rulers had removed these images so that they would not incite the Jew's because of their notion of idolatry. So when Pilate did this the Jews reacted with an immediate five day protest which Pilate simply ignored and would have nothing to do with which delayed any initial first meeting or communication with his subjects. On the sixth day though, Pilate decided that he would allow the Jews into his presence and when they came he surrounded them with his soldiers and threatened to kill them if they did not drop the issue. The Jews defiant response was to right there and then was to lean forward

and bare their necks to the soldiers' swords, at which Pilate immediately backed down.

This had been a very a bad beginning to his relationship with the Jews and it was not to change or improve because not long after this Pilate decides on a Roman plan to improve the infrastructure of the city. He set about expanding the aqueducts which brought water into Jerusalem, but, he decided to fund this project by taking money from the temple treasury to pay for it. And of course the Jews revolted against this 'user pays' by rioting to which Pilate sent in his soldiers to quell by armed force- and they did!

Pilate as Governor continued in his indifference to the Jewish people and their religion by having a number of shields dedicated in the palace of Herod in honour of Caesar. On this occasion the Jews decided not to riot but to formally ask him to remove the shields with their reason that they were inscribed with the names of donors which to them was idolatrous. Pilate refused, so the Jews went above his head and appealed to Emperor Tiberias who on this occasion sided with the Jews and ordered Pilate to take down the shields. So Pilate was what we could call, skating on very thin ice as far as his Jewish subjects were concerned which has an important bearing on the events of that were to play out on this particular Friday. He himself couldn't afford to upset the Roman emperor who had the power to not only sack him but of life and death over him as well.

So, from our scripture reading this morning why then did Pilate try to release Jesus?

It was now the day we call Good Friday. Caiaphas and the Sanhedrin had condemned Jesus as a blasphemer, a capital crime. But Rome had taken from them the ability to execute criminals, so they had to bring Jesus to Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor of the region.

They knew that Pilate would ignore their religious charges so they had to come up with an extremely serious one [vv11-14]. Sedition was the unpardonable sin against Rome. To claim to be a "king" in opposition to Caesar was a crime against which Pilate must act or face the wrath of Rome. So Pilate asked Jesus: "Are you the king of the Jews?" If Jesus accepts this title, then he would be guilty of insurrection against Rome. Jesus in his reply simply reflects Pilates own words back to him, "You have said so" and from then on remains silent.

We heard last week and have the reference to it today [vv15-18] before the gathering crowd at the trial that Pilate knew that it was out of envy and self-interest that Caiaphas and the Jewish Rulers had handed Jesus over to him. Pilate knew that Jesus and his followers were no real threat to himself or Rome, as Jesus' disciples' actions showed throughout their ministry and even fleeing from his detachment of soldiers involved in the arrest of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane. Politically and Physically Pilate gave Jesus and his followers a very low threat rating indeed. Which is why he wanted the crowd to choose him to be released instead of the notorious criminal Barabbas, as was his custom at the festival. He's shrewd. He knows what Caiaphas and his cronies are up to. He knows how to save himself before his own Emperor and how to get Jesus out of this. But he has to get the crowd on side with him. But he may not have known that Caiaphas and Co. had always been planning and working hard in the other direction to affect the vote [vv19-23]. Something like what is happening with regards to the National Party which the upcoming by-election in Northland. Winston Peters, NZ First and the other political parties have been effectively working to try and prevent the crowds voting another National MP in.

So, Pilate remains motivated to help Jesus because even his wife knows the truth about the innocence of Jesus, something which I'll be able to remind you about for the rest of your life. With all his motivation and understanding, knowing that there was no basis for any charge against Jesus and motivation, sitting on the judges seat in front of the crowd, it was the influence of the chief priests and religious rulers who held sway on the day and persuaded the crowds to vote for Barabbas and ask Pilate to release him, and not only that but to also demand that Jesus be crucified. To which he answers, "Why? What crime has he committed?" While Pilate seems desperate to want to set Jesus free. He gives in and agrees to the crowd's demands. He had tried his best but he knew that if he went against the crowd's choice and released Jesus the Jews would report his action to the Emperor which he had to temper with the thought that for the governor to release an accused insurrectionist could lead to his own removal as governor and even execution. It was a very difficult and serious decision he had to make to crucify Jesus.

Pilate knew now that he could not win whatever way he goes. To prevent a riot he takes water in front of the crowd and washes his hands publicly of the matter of Jesus' blood [vv24-26], while the crowd remains insistent that Jesus be executed. Pilate finally gives up and collapses beneath the

crowd's pressure to their delight which extended to them believing and accepting that Jesus' innocent blood would be their responsibility, finally he condemns Jesus, has him flogged and then handed over to be crucified, but not without having one final dig at the Jews. The charge posted at Jesus' execution having been written on a sign and nailed to the cross above his head was the very accusation of insurrection which caused Pilate to consent to Jesus' death v37 THIS IS JESUS THE KING OF THE JEWS Under its words, Jesus would soon die.

Where does Jesus, Pilate and our story cross over?

Pilate found Jesus innocent. As an aside even his rival Herod Antipas who ruled Galilee found him innocent. When you combine the fact that Pilate's wife considered him innocent too- Why, then, did the Roman governor crucify him? The answer is, to do the best to try and save himself. "I think I'll be alright with the Roman Emperor if I decide to go with the Jewish crowd on this one." It was peer pressure that caused Pilate to keep a prisoner that he along with even Herod, knew to be innocent. So we can ask ourselves: "How does peer pressure tempt me to reject Jesus today?"

Each of us should take the time to quietly reflect on this during our Lenten journey of spiritual transformation with Jesus to the cross. Along with the likes of Andrew Chan, we each before God must answer for ourselves. And as we do, if God's spirit would reveal to us and convict us with regards to sin, then we should confess it and as an act of repentance, turn and take it to the cross for Jesus to take on himself in our place for our forgiveness for through his blood we have the redemption of sin- it is on his head. And if you think that there is nothing wrong with me or that maybe I don't need Jesus to take my sin on him to be forgiven and made one with God. If you are having trouble entering into or taking part in this kind of spiritual exercise you can always challenge the flesh of your own human pride with Statement's or truth's like these:

Why do I deny Jesus? In order to try and save myself!
 Why do I fail him? I do it to try and humanly benefit myself.
 Why do I lie, gossip or slander? To help myself of course.
 Why do I submit to private sin? To please my fleshly self!
 Why do I commit public sin? To advance myself!

And finally we can all note that 'there is no sin we cannot commit'. Be sure that what tempted Pilate back there and then still tempts us today.

To wrap up:

Back in January 2013, rumors were abound in all the Hollywood news that the actor Brad Pitt had auditioned and would star in a newly planned and upcoming movie *Pontius Pilate*, a Warner Brothers film that was to be released in 2015. There were all these rumours about Brad Pitt who would have the leading role starring as Pontius Pilate in the movie to which there ended up being no actual evidence that they were true.

However, when we think about it, we each audition for this same role in the biblical story every day. It is easy to condemn Pilate for condemning Jesus, but you and I face his dilemma every time we must choose between Christ and ourselves. When we choose ourselves, the people we meet in our world find nothing different about us. When we choose Jesus, those same people have the potential to see or at least catch a glimpse of the transforming difference the risen Christ can still make today.

So may we not vote with the crowds and give into peer pressure but choose wisely.