

## **SUFFERED UNDER PONTIUS PILATE**

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**Leo Douma**

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Like a bright sign in the night, the name 'Pontius Pilate' stands out in the Apostle's Creed. A pagan Roman governor is mentioned, by name, in the summary of our Christian faith. Do you ever wonder by what right that spineless, hand washing judge, deserves a place in the Creed? Every time we recite the creed, we mention that Jesus '*...suffered under Pontius Pilate.*' Why should we mention this infamous name constantly? Well, Pilate is mentioned here in the Creed for the sake of Christ. We are not making a confession about Pilate. We are confessing our faith in Jesus, who '*...suffered under Pontius Pilate.*' The Creed's mentioning Pilate is a way of saying the sufferings of Jesus are an historical fact. It is something that really happened. Pilate was a real person. He came from Spain, found himself in Rome and married the daughter of the Emperor Augustus. Pilate asked for the job to be the governor of Judea. Mentioning Pilate helps to date the event of Jesus' crucifixion. Christianity is a religion based on historical events. Christianity is not just based on some grand ideas. Or some mythology dreamed up way back whenever. There are plenty of folk around who will say the Bible, and even the stuff about Jesus, is all just made up by the church. But the reality is that what we believe is based on God's acts in history. Acts done in public, eye witnessed and recorded.

The suffering of Jesus can be tied down to a definite time, place and persons in history. Today we would date events by the year, because we have an agreed-on calendar. That's the Gregorian Calendar used in the West. But back in Jesus' day, and earlier, events were dated by the rule of the king or governor of the time. In the Old Testament we often see the prophets were dated by the kings of Israel and Judah of the time. For example (Isaiah 1:1) "*The vision concerning Judah and Jerusalem that Isaiah son of Amoz saw during the reigns of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah, kings of Judah.*" We see the same thing in the New Testament to date the time John the Baptist started his ministry (Luke 3:1-2) "*In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar—when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of Iturea and Tracoonitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene, during the high-priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness.*" So, for the Apostle's Creed, the infamous name of Pontius Pilate gives a stamp of authenticity. Under a real man, at a real point in time Jesus was really hit, whipped, spat on, and

worse. It's an historical fact Jesus suffered, cried out, bled and died. The exact place and time are known.

When we look at the answer (A38) to the Catechism question, we see that it takes the reference to Pilate further and deeper. It implies God was acting in that historical setting ensuring Jesus was publicly tried before Pilate. It had not been the intention of the Jewish leadership for Jesus to have a public trial. Matthew 26:4-5 tells us that the chief priests and elders intended "...to arrest Jesus in some sly way and kill him". They wanted to avoid "...a riot among the people." But God did not want Jesus struck down in some back alley, quietly removed from the scene. Jesus' death was to be brought about by a public trial. It was to be a public event for all to hear and see. That was important because Christ's suffering and death have ramifications for all of humanity. In fact, it has ramifications for all of creation.

So, in God's plan, Jesus is brought before Pontius Pilate. Pilate represents a human court of justice. He represents the voice of world law passing judgment on Jesus. Now remember, Pilate was not a self-styled, self-appointed, ruthless dictator in some failed state. He was the local arm of the legitimate Roman authority. What Paul wrote later was true of Pilate (Romans 13:1,4) *"Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God... For the one in authority is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for rulers do not bear the sword for no reason. They are God's servants, agents of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer."* Pilate was in fact, the representative of one of the highest forms of civilization and justice. The Roman system of law is regarded as one of the best and most equal order of justice the world has known. Even Martin Luther and John Calvin spoke highly of it. It is still studied by law students today. The principle of Roman law is what is known as 'suum cuique'. That is, 'to each his own', 'to each what rightly belongs to him' or 'may all get their due'. In other words, all people are equal. Everyone can expect justice, equally. Roman law forms the basic framework for civil law, the most widely used legal system today. The fact that so much of today's legal language is in Latin shows the historical importance of Roman law. The Bible sees judges as servants of God as Romans 13 points out. Jesus himself said to Pilate (John 19:11) *"You would have not power if it were not given you from above."* God gives judges the power to over a person's freedom and life. Roman law was represented by Lady Justitia, blindfolded and beaming the scales. It implied justice without partiality. As such the Roman system came as one of the closest to God's ideal.

Now also remember the religious involvement here. Jesus came into contact with Pilate because the Sanhedrin did not have the authority to lay down the death sentence. The Sanhedrin was the highest governing body of the Jewish faith. It included Caiaphas, the high priest. The Jews were, of course, the covenant people of God. They were of the true faith, the worshippers of the one God. They were the people of God. The promise of God was that from the Jewish people would come the Messiah, the Saviour of the world. So, you see, Jesus' suffering was not a whimsical happening by an ignorant or semi demented dictator. Nor by a backward cult in the backwaters of the world. He was not run down by a tribe of savages. Jesus suffered under the auspices of some of the highest and best systems of government and religion the civilized world has produced. So, we cannot complain that we did not put our best foot forward when Jesus was 'condemned by a civil judge'. The reference in the Creed to Pontius Pilate, the representative of human justice, is thus a reference to the world.

The judgement he made is very representative of the world's attitude. It is the typical response of the sinful human race which has rejected God and his laws. In condemning the Christ, the Son of God, Pilate was representing the world in its consistent rejection of God. So, we cannot just look critically at the priests and Pharisees, the Jewish crowd or the Roman magistrate. There was a lot of fuss made with Mel Gibson's film, 'The Passion'. It was criticized as stirring up anti-Semitic sentiment. That reaction occurred because the Jews have been persecuted for centuries as being 'God-killers'. And that too often by those who call themselves Christian. But that is plain wrong and hateful prejudice. The Christian church should be the first to realize that. Because we know that what happened to Jesus is a criticism of all of us. All of humanity is involved in this condemnation of Jesus. In 'The Passion' Mel Gibson appears in only one scene, though you wouldn't know it. As Jesus is being nailed to the cross, a man's hand appears, making a fist, holding the nail above Jesus' outstretched palm, showing the soldiers how to do their grisly work. The hand holding the nail is Mel Gibson. It's the only place he appears in the film, and his fist is all you see. He wanted it that way so the world would know that it was his sin that nailed Jesus to the cross. When asked by an interviewer who killed Jesus, he said 'we all did'. As our Catechism says, Jesus bore the *"...wrath of God against the sin of the whole human race"*. And Isaiah said (Isaiah 53:5) *"...he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities."* Bernard of Clairvaux again captured the issue well with the second verse of his hymn 'O Sacred Head Now Wounded':

'What thou my Lord has suffered was all for sinners gain;  
mine, mine was the transgression, but thine the deadly pain.  
Lo, here I fall my saviour! Tis I deserve thy place;  
look on me with thy favour and grant to me thy grace.'

That verse captures the problem of the whole human race: 'mine, mine was the transgression.' Yes, the fault is all ours. Yet Jesus was the one condemned by Pilate as judge. And in that condemnation of Jesus the world condemned itself. When a system of justice condemns the innocent, that system condemns itself. It reveals its loss of integrity and its corruption. When the Sanhedrin accused Jesus, when the crowd cried "Crucify him" and when Pilate sentenced him to death, we see very clearly the symptoms of the sin and corruption of the 'whole human race'. For there was no unfortunate mistake here, some sort of misunderstanding. Jesus' innocence was well established. The Catechism clearly says "...*though innocent, might be condemned...*" Several times Pilate declared (Luke 23:4) "*I find no basis for a charge against this man*". So, by public trial, after carefully reviewing the facts, Jesus is declared innocent. And everybody knows he is. Yet Jesus is condemned because he threatened the Pharisees and their religious dominance. He didn't fulfill the expectations of the crowd. And he threatened Pilate's position with Caesar. Jesus challenged their way of life. Before the innocence of Jesus, the sinfulness and selfishness of the world is revealed. Our real nature is exposed, and we all stand guilty. We still find ourselves challenged by Jesus and the way of life he calls us to. We are still selfish, self centred, power grabbing, hateful and abusive. Every time a person watches the news there is enough to make us sick with disgust at what humans do to each other. Honesty makes us admit we deserve "*...the severe judgement of God*".

And yet, yet, the irony is, that despite the proven innocence of Jesus, God agrees with the judgement passed by Pilate. When we read the Catechism answer, it seems that God and Pilate are working in agreement. "*Why did [Jesus] suffer 'under Pontius Pilate' as judge? So that he, though innocent, might be condemned by a civil judge, and so free us from the severe judgment of God that was to fall on us.*" Notice how the one is linked to the other. As we said earlier the position of the civil magistrate is a God ordained position for bringing about God's justice. Through this crooked official God is officially, publicly, condemning his Son. So, who ultimately is responsible for the death of Jesus? The amazing answer is God. As Isaiah put it (Isaiah 53:10) "*Yet it was the Lord's will to crush him and cause him to suffer.*" God says 'My son is innocent, as has been declared. But he has taken on the 'sin of the whole human race' which has become plain by this trial. Therefore, Jesus stands condemned. The innocent will pay for the guilty, so the guilty may be declared innocent.' Pilate, by first declaring Jesus innocent and then condemning him, is in fact declaring Jesus is carrying the guilt of another. That is, the guilt exposed by his crooked judgment, his own guilt, and the world he represents. Pilate sees only a man in front of him. But God sees his Son, whom he is giving for the salvation of his people. Oh, the irony of God's work in history. Man condemns the innocent Christ and condemns himself. But God condemns the innocent Christ and

brings forgiveness to the guilty. *"God frees us from the severe judgement that was to fall on us."* Not only did Jesus take our place. But we also took his place. We take on his innocence.

Some of you might remember the 1957 film 'The Bridge on the River Kwai'. It was based on the book by Ernest Gordon a Scottish POW in World War 2. He wrote it to tell of his experiences at the hands of the Japanese as he and fellow soldiers were forced to work on the Burma Railway. He writes: 'At the end of each day the tools were collected from the work party. On one occasion a Japanese guard shouted that a shovel was missing and demanded to know which man had taken it. He began to rant and rave, working himself up into a paranoid fury and ordered whoever was guilty to step forward. No one moved. "All die! All die!" he shrieked, cocking and aiming his rifle at the prisoners. At that moment one man stepped forward. The guard clubbed him to death with his rifle while he stood silently to attention. When they returned to the camp, the tools were counted again, and no shovel was missing. An innocent man had been willing to die to save the others.

Much has changed since the years of the governorship of Pontius Pilate. But one thing has not changed a bit. We must all still respond to the question 'Who is Christ to you? How do you judge him?' Today Jesus still unsettles our lifestyles and challenges our selfishness, demands and ambitions. So, will we reject Jesus, as so many have done? Will we suggest we have got it right and Jesus is wrong? That it's expedient to put him aside as Pilate did? Or will we repent and acknowledge our guilt and his innocence and serve him as Lord? By that decision we are not passing judgment on Jesus but ourselves. By that decision we are either condemned or saved. Which one are you?