

Passion Sunday - Washing Hands*Matthew 27:11-54*

Pilate looked around him on that Friday morning before Passover began. He much preferred the coastal residence at Caesarea Maritima, nearer the sea for a quick getaway if the Jews became restive, as they were bound to be at Passover. He'd been Governor in this backwater province of Judea for seven long years. Balancing Rome's need to keep the peace in this febrile area, where the great trade routes from Egypt to Asia Minor and Syria and beyond swept through. Palestine's only intrinsic value to Rome, as it had been for Alexander the Great before, was as a super highway for merchants and armies.

This morning he was in Herod's Palace, in the northwestern part of Jerusalem. One of old King Herod's many grand residences, Pilate used it as his Praetorium or headquarters. It was a fortress, but also a place of comfort. It had two main buildings, each with its own banquet halls, baths and accommodations for hundreds of guests. In the centre of the palace were gardens with porticoes. The grounds included groves, canals, and ponds fitted with bronze fountains.

It was the great Feast of Passover, and Pilate knew it was a celebration of Hebrew freedom from slavery in Egypt. It wasn't much of a stretch for the Jews in his time to equate Egypt with Rome. They resented Roman overlordship despite the relative calm of the Pax Romana enforced upon them. Local kinglets like Herod Antipas, son of Herod the Great, was the presenting face of governance. But it was Roman authority that enforced the peace. The religious leaders, the High Priest Caiaphas and other chief priests were not to be trusted. Pilate held the power to appoint the chief priest, and he watched them tread the thin line of maintaining religious independence alongside unwilling subservience to Rome.

This morning the place is in uproar. A few days before he had led his procession of imperial cavalry into the city. They were there to reinforce the Roman garrison stationed in the Fortress Antonia. How he hated this insular, provincial and hostile place. Trouble always simmered, as it had when he heard of a peasant procession entering from Galilee the same day he had arrived. Stories of a teaching, healing rabbi, and riding on a donkey, so very unlike his own war horse, had reached him.

Now the peasant Galilean was brought in front of him, accused of the gods knew what by the Temple crowd. Pilate sat on his raised platform, guarded by his 500 troops, and knew what the Jewish crowd thought of him. He was an out of his depth and only maintained power by violence, theft and endless executions. He looked at the badly-treated man. Arrested the night before in an olive grove outwith the city walls. Whatever friends He had scattered in the dark Jerusalem streets or out into neighbouring villages. They say His Name is Jesus. Taken to the chief priests, taken to Herod, and now back here, for Rome to resolve.

Pilate had been in politics long enough to know he was being set up by the priests and the Jerusalem. They feared the crowds from Galilee in the city, and others who'd been taken in by the teaching and the tricks of this troublesome rabbi. Pilate knew *he* was afraid of another revolt in Galilee. He'd recently ordered the killing of Galilean rebels. He'd already imprisoned a political terrorist, Barabbas, stirring and plotting. And two so-called thieves were also due for trial and conviction, having likely been associated with Barabbas.

Pilate turned over in his mind what he'd been told by Jesus' enemies: that He'd claimed the title 'king', a political charge. "**Are** you the King of the Jews," Pilate asked, slightly cynically. "You have said so", Jesus replied. And then no another word, despite the accusations and threats. The silence

was eerie. The questioning was over. No witnesses; no clarification of the charges; no oaths; no verdict; not even a convinced judge, for Pilate was unsure.

What about the possibility of using that custom he'd invented which allowed the release of a prisoner to the people on the occasion of the Passover, and so appease his difficult subjects? "Do you want Barabbas or," and maybe the Governor smiled, "this Jesus Who is called Christ." Was that it? The priests were bristling at this self-styled Messiah from Galilee, envious that Jesus had assumed He was their God's chosen One.

As he sat on the judgement seat, a servant came in. His wife, after a disturbed night, had dreamt of this man, and warned Pilate against having anything to do with the Man from Nazareth.

Pilate started again with the crowd. Is it to be Barabbas, or Jesus, the Christ? They wanted Barabbas. And Jesus? The chief priests and elders had primed the crowds. 'Crucify Him.' You could see the hatred in their faces, you could almost smell it rising like a miasma of fear from the priests and the crowd. Was a riot about to begin? Pilate feared a riot worse than he feared the injustice of killing an innocent man. He'd already faced the Barabbas rebellion that week. There must be no resurgence.

They weren't going to pin the death of this strange man from Nazareth on him, though. He was gaining nothing by prolonging the interaction. A servant was standing nearby. "Go and fetch a bowl, with some water." A bowl was brought and the water poured in. Pilate looked at the priests, and the crowd, and lastly Jesus. In the heated atmosphere as he sat on the judgement seat the water felt cool and soft, or was it slippery, on his hands. He washed them. He remembered something of an old Jewish tradition, from one of their songs, "*All in vain have I kept my heart clean and washed my hands in innocence.*"

With his hands still wet Pilate reached for a cloth to dry them. Then he said to his soldiers: 'Release Barabbas. And as for Jesus, this pretend-king, this so-called Messiah, flog Him. And crucify Him.'

On this Passion Sunday we might read the Bible story and hear its words. We might note that the washing of hands detail is only recorded in Matthew's Gospel. And we might wonder, in our imagination, as I have done, what the scene might have been like. We are some days from Holy Week, from Palm Sunday, and the cleansing of the Temple, and the Last Supper, and Gethsemane. We are some days from the betrayal, and the arrest, and the passing around of Jesus from hand to hand, from disciples, to Judas, to guards, to chief priests, to Herod, to Pilate. We are some days from the cross and the abandonment, and the agonizing death and the burial. We are some days from...the Sunday, and its garden tomb.

On this Passion Sunday the image is of the washing of hands. What it meant for Pilate, and Pilate's wife, and the servant bringing the water, and Barabbas, and the chief priests, and the crowd, and the disciples. What it meant for Jesus, when the bowl was brought, and water was taken, and the hands were washed. And what it might mean for us and our world today.

Where today in our world, and the people of power, and the people who elect those who hold power, and our countries, our Church, our community - where today is there a washing of hands? And what, or who, is washed away? Because they are awkward, or difficult, or make us feel uneasy, or ask too much, or seem beyond our control, or should be the responsibility of someone else, not us. Oh please, not us. Is it the case that Pilate's washed hands are not so very far away from our own, when we look away, or pretend not to hear, or cross to the other side, or say that it has nothing to do with me?

When Pilate washes his hands it is a moment that passes from proverb to cliché, and becomes part of the vocabulary of self-justification. But it must not be forgotten that it is a charade. Pilate wants the crowd to believe that Jesus' death is no responsibility of his. But he is the Governor. He has absolute power. Jesus came before him, and he disposes of Jesus. "Really, there is nothing I can do", sighs Pilate; and washes his hands. But there is plenty Pilate can do - and did. He destroyed Jesus. Washing his hands was just a cynical smokescreen.ⁱⁱ

Hands that do nothing, even when washed, stay dirty.

And what of us? Where does this queasy story from long ago leave us? Nervous? Shifty? Feeling guilty? Or determined that there are things for which we are responsible, and things which we might do, and be, to make our world, where we live, better.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit

Amen

ⁱ *Psalm 73:13*

ⁱⁱ *Samuel Wells, Hands that do nothing stay dirty, in The Print of the Nails, Holy Week and Easter Collection, p43*