

Homily for Wednesday, July 2, 2025 – Luke 23: 1 - 12

I think most of us are old enough to remember when empire and imperial were terms held with great respect. You may not know that there is a uniquely Canadian verse to God Save the King: *Our loved Dominion bless/ with peace and happiness/ from shore to shore/and may our Empire be/ united, loyal free / true to himself and thee, forevermore.* I haven't heard it sung in years. If you think of it, how often in recent years have you heard two of our large banks referred to by their full names. We hear of RBC and CIBC not the Royal Bank of Canada and the Canadian Imperial Bank of Commerce. I suspect, if you were to ask anyone under 50 what the initials stand for, most would be stumped. Today, imperialism, colonialism, and empire are terms associated with discrimination, genocide, and exploitation with very good cause as the findings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission made abundantly clear.

That dramatic change in the connotation of words associated with empire is an important lens through which to read our Gospel reading this evening. Another important lens through which to read the story of Jesus before Pilate is the impact of imperialism on the imperialists particularly those in the lower ranks. Pilate as Prefect or Governor of the Roman Province of Judea was such a lower rank official. Galilee was under the Tetrarchy of Herod. Herod was recognized by Caesar Augustus as ruler of Galilee and Perea as a client state of the Empire. Both Pilate and Herod operated under the authority of the Roman Legate of Syria and held their positions entirely dependent upon the support of the Legate and of the Emperor. That support was only available if they were able to keep the peace with no threat to Roman dominance in each of their provinces. One can easily imagine a difficult interview with the Legate or the Emperor using a 1st century version of the question, "What have you done for me lately?" Keeping the peace was the only reason Pilate was in Jerusalem. He normally lived in the Gentile city of Caesarea. But at Passover and other major Jewish feasts he needed to be near the Temple where Roman dominance over a subject people needed to be displayed to forestall rebellion.

Another major player in our passage is the Council or the Sanhedrin – the priests and the scribes. Just as Pilate and Herod were beholden for their positions so the Chief Priest was beholden to Pilate. The Sanhedrin's ability to operate the Temple without interference from Rome was entirely dependent on being no threat to Roman Power. The Priests, Herod, and Pilate all in very much the same way had an extremely tenuous grip on the power they valued so dearly. That is why Jesus was such a threat. The Governor, the Tetrarch, and the Sanhedrin could not imagine a clearly disruptive individual such as Jesus as anything other than a threat to their power. Put yourself in Pilate's place, can you imagine asking the question, *Are you the King of the Jews?* and getting back the answer, *"You say so."* I imagine you who are parents can recall a time when you got back such an insolent answer from your

Homily for Wednesday, July 2, 2025 – Luke 23: 1 - 12

teen to a question, that you wanted to slap the face of your thankless progeny. But give Pilate his due, he replies to the Sanhedrin: *I find no basis for an accusation against this man.* But as the most threatened and perhaps the most corrupt of the major actors, the members of the Sanhedrin are adamant, so Pilate punts the issue to Herod. Herod gets no answer from Jesus, so he and his soldiers mock him and send him back to Pilate. At this point, it is apparent to Pilate that perhaps the greatest threat to order would be to release Jesus.

The 19th century historian Lord Acton, famously said, *Power tends to corrupt. Absolute power corrupts absolutely.* Well, fragile holds on power corrupt in a way that the power holder has to place holding on to their position beyond any interest in truth, justice, or compassion. So while concern for the victims of imperialism is entirely well-placed even the imperialists are victimized in systems of dominance of one people over another.

I trust you all realize that the Gospels, and indeed, very little of the Bible are histories. They are narratives to illustrate humanity's relationships with God and with each other and how those relationships can go awry. It is interesting to contrast our passage in Luke with the accounts of the same meeting with Pilate in the other three gospels. Remember Mark was written around 65CE just after the martyrdom of Peter and Paul at the hands of the authorities in Rome, so Mark's discussion of the contact with Pilate is almost perfunctory with no sense of reluctance on Pilate's part to condemn Jesus. Matthew, written between 80 and 90 CE after the destruction of the temple, in the midst of a series of Jewish rebellions, is softer on Pilate, saying *he realized that it was out of jealousy that they had handed him over.* Shortly after our passage from Luke, Pilate says that neither he nor Herod can find reason to hold Jesus. While in John, written between 90 and 110 CE, Pilate actively tries to acquit Jesus in face of the hostile crowd whipped up by the Sanhedrin yelling crucify him. Why the change in Pilate's position as relayed in the 4 Gospels?

Between 66 CE and 130 CE there were successive violent rebellions in Judea against Rome. At the same time, the followers of Jesus among the Gentiles grew greatly, so it was in the interest of the early Church authorities and writers to distance the followers of the way from the rebellious Jews, and, therefore, from the Roman punishments for those rebellions. Increasingly many of the Gentile followers identified less and less with the Jews. The church wished to present itself as no threat to Rome. That is the beginning of a process that led in the 4th century to the church becoming the state religion of Rome and some 1700 years and counting of the church becoming corrupted by power and making its own Pilate-like decisions. Let us rejoice that those days of power are largely past. We are now free to truly follow our Lord and Saviour, because to powers and principalities we no longer really matter. And that is freedom! Thanks be to God. Let us pray that we can embrace power to serve and repudiate power to dominate. Amen