

*Luke 23:13 Pilate called together the chief priests, the rulers and the people,
¹⁴and said to them, “You brought me this man as one who was inciting the people
to rebellion. I have examined him in your presence and have found no basis for
your charges against him. ¹⁵Neither has Herod, for he sent him back to us; as
you can see, he has done nothing to deserve death. ¹⁶Therefore, I will punish him
and then release him.”*

Dear Friends in Christ,

It’s a tried and true story line. An innocent man is accused of a crime he didn’t commit. There are endless variations. Sometimes, because of false allegations, the innocent man ends up doing time or even dying and your are left in tears. (Though this isn’t how it usually turns out because tragic endings don’t sell many tickets.) Sometimes the innocent guy beats the rap, and at the end you breathe a huge sigh of relief. Sometimes he manages to even the score and you get to engage in a little bit of gleeful vicarious revenge—which is something we probably should not be doing.

Recently Jacob and I, just flipping through the television channels one Sunday evening, stumbled across an entertaining movie I had never heard of. It was from 1932, *20,000 Years in Sing Sing*. There, an innocent man accused of murder willingly went to the electric chair. You see, he did it willingly because if he didn’t take the rap, his girlfriend was going to be indicted.

The story of an innocent man wrongly accused can turn out so many different ways. As Jesus stands trial before Pilate, we see

INNOCENCE—IMMATERIAL, YET ESSENTIAL

In Luke chapter 23, something ugly was happening. An innocent man was being railroaded: Jesus. If you are a veteran of mid-week Lenten services, you know a whole lot more happened in Pilate’s courtroom than we have in these four verses. From what we can put together from the Gospels, it went like this: Jewish religious leaders brought Jesus to Pilate, the Roman governor, accusing Jesus of capital crimes. First, Pilate questioned Jesus outside his palace, in the presence of the accusers. Then, Pilate summoned Jesus inside for a personal audience. When Pilate found out that Jesus was from Galilee, King Herod’s jurisdiction, Pilate dropped Jesus like a hot potato and sent him the quarter mile walk over to Herod’s palace. There, Herod questioned Jesus, quickly lost interest and soon sent Jesus back to Pilate, no charges attached. Which is where our reading comes in. Through it all, no one substantiated a single thing against Jesus. And so Pilate, preliminary investigations concluded, declared in verse 14, ***“I have examined him in your presence and have found no basis for your charges against him. Neither has Herod, for he sent him back to us; as you can see, he has done nothing to deserve death.”***

This was not just an opinion; a “Well, I think…” sort of thing. This was the judge

declaring, “I find the defendant innocent.” The accusations just didn’t hold up in a court of law.

That was sort of important in the first couple centuries of the Christian Church. You see, early Christians did this thing that struck everyone else as more than odd, as almost lunatic fringe. They proudly proclaimed the central person of their religion as Christ crucified. Crucified! They freely admitted it. They didn’t try to downplay it or to hide it. That was more than a little suspect. People didn’t just get crucified. There were reasons they got crucified, and those reasons were a pretty big deal like trying to overthrow the government or mass murderers and the like.

And so God made sure that this trial by Pilate was recorded in some detail by all four of the Evangelists, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. In fact, all four of the Gospels devote more space to Pilate’s courtroom than any other place except Calvary itself. More space than Gethsemane, or the Sanhedrin, or the courtyard with Peter. Each records that Pilate didn’t just whisper, “Off the record, I just don’t think there’s anything here.” He said it officially. He declared, “***He has done nothing to deserve death.***” Asserting Jesus’ innocence was a pretty big deal for the early Christians.

Jesus’ innocence should have made a big difference to Pilate. It didn’t. In fact, Jesus’ innocence appears almost immaterial. It was immaterial because of the other factors in play. The religious leaders of the Jewish faith had decided that Jesus had to be snuffed out. To them it was totally immaterial whether he was innocent or not. And in the end it didn’t matter to Pilate either. Sure, it mattered a little bit to Pilate. He would have *preferred* to let Jesus go free. But when you have half a million religious zealots in town for the weekend (yes, Passover in Jerusalem was that big a deal), number one on Pilate’s to-do list was “Keep the Peace!” One man’s innocence, when compared to that, was basically immaterial.

And so it was that sinful men trampled on Jesus’ innocence. They got what they wanted out of the situation. The religious leaders got rid of Jesus. Pilate kept the peace. But Jesus, even though innocent, died.

Jesus’ innocence isn’t important for Christians only so that we can say that we don’t worship a criminal. It is bigger than that. It is bigger than any court or judge or anything. While immaterial to some, Jesus’ innocence is essential, essential for us.

Some people kind of give the Old Testament short shrift. I sort of understand that. After all, we meet Jesus in the *New* Testament. In the *New* Testament we see what Jesus did to save us. But when you learn about the Old Testament, you always find yourself learning about the New Testament—sort of like how when you learn about your parents’ lives, you unexpectedly learn things about yourself.

So let’s look at the OT just a little. If you know anything about the Old Testament, you know that people made animal sacrifices for sin. I don’t know how much you know about those sacrifices, but the sacrificial code was more complex than we often think. There were actually four types of blood sacrifice, plus the Passover sacrifice which was a sacrifice all its own. When God described the rules for these four-plus-one types of sacrifice, in all five

classes God required that the animals be “*without defect*” (Ex 12:5; Lev 1:3; 3:1; 4:3; 5:15). That was a precise phrase, actually, in Hebrew a precise word. There could be nothing wrong with the sacrificial animals.

That’s why they had those animal markets in the temple area. Farmers and shepherds would bring their Passover sacrifices and other sacrifices into Jerusalem to the temple. But before they could be sacrificed, the animals had to be inspected and certified as “*without defect*.” If they failed the test, the animal was unacceptable and you had to find another one. So, not only would the animals’ blood have to be shed, but it would have to be an animal without defect: holy, perfect.

Of course, no animal could be an adequate sacrifice for human guilt, but it was a picture, a teaching tool. Those animal sacrifices tell us something about the Messiah! The blood atonement for our sin, your sin, my sin, could only be made by one who was “*without defect*.” The Apostle Peter, in describing our salvation, tied it to those pictures of the Old Testament when he wrote, “*You were redeemed with... the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect.*” (1 Pt 1:19).

The guilt, the shame, the infamy, the abandonment because of our sin could only be visited upon one who had no guilt. Jesus had to be counted guilty of sins he did not commit. He would be punished for them. He would die for them. Willingly.

And so we see a striking parallel between God and Pilate. Yes, strange as it sounds there is a parallel between God and Pilate. Pilate takes his place upon the judge’s seat at a place known as the Stone Pavement (which in Aramaic is Gabbatha) (Jn 19:13). Pilate looks at the defendant, whom he knows is innocent, yet condemns him to death on a cross for crimes he did not commit. Even as Pilate speaks, so it is happening in heaven. The Father condemns the Son, innocent of all sin, to death on a cross for crimes he did not commit.

Yet we realize the difference. Pilate ruled so for his personal convenience. The Father ruled so that you and I might be acquitted, set free, saved, forever.

Thank you, Jesus. Thank you for willingly—I can’t even stand to say it—thank you for willingly going to your innocent death. Amen.