

Pilate

Being a public official in the Roman Empire has its benefits, but in many ways is much like being a slave. You answer to an Emperor who has no obligation to be fair or logical and are simultaneously subject to the insoluble problems of governing the masses. The conquered people are not pacified as easily as the parasitic mob of Rome and although deterred by executions and floggings, the Jews are particularly troublesome. It must have something to do with their strange religion and conviction that they are the chosen people of a supreme god. They resist assimilation or even accommodation to the reasonable demands of the state. Although there are cooperative individuals who respond to financial rewards to collect taxes or administer local policy, the general public is convinced that they will be rescued from outside rule by a conquering king, prophesied since ancient times. This of course is treason, but to eradicate the belief might require the destruction of the entire nation, rarely a wise choice.

My years of faithful service to the empire and delicate handling of countless potentially explosive situations will probably be overshadowed by one unfortunate circumstance, the Jesus incident. It happened after a period of "messiah hysteria". ("Messiah" is the name they give to their mythical liberator.) I was brought this man in the early morning hours over a violation of their law. True to form, they had broken their own rules by trying him at night and came to me -- in a big rush -- only because they wanted to execute him. Some incomprehensible technicalities of their law would not let them enter the palace and they asked me to come out to them, which I did because to refuse might have caused a riot that could even reach the ears of the Emperor.

Of course I would not just approve such a judgment and examined him myself. He was obviously not a fighter but rather a philosopher -- a very Jewish philosopher, at that. He spoke of "Truth."

I saw an escape when I learned that he was a Galilean, for Herod was in town. But that decadent Idumean was as useless as ever, although he understood my dilemma. He lacked any sort of subtlety and solved all his own problems by killing people.

My wife, both superstitious and wise, told me that she had been warned in a dream about having anything to do with this man. But, of course, I was already involved. I hoped that since the charges were inflated and the real motivation was some sort of personal jealousy of his popularity that the annual tradition to release a prisoner for the feast would be a good escape. I think the people would have gone for it but the leaders were skillful at manipulation and got the crowd to call for the release of a genuine public menace.

I symbolically washed my hands of the affair, but, of course, that did not change either facts or feelings. The flogging was intended to defuse their lust for revenge and arouse sympathy but it had no such effect. Instead it seemed to stimulate a thirst for more blood. Then they played the "Caesar Card," threatening to inform the Emperor. On a good day, he might see it as a frivolous irritation on the ragged edge of his realm but in a paranoid mood, he might see me as an enemy. I gave permission and ordered the execution.

So that should have ended the whole affair and let me return to the usually boring task of governing the province. But first the leaders objected to the sign I had ordered to be placed on the cross, "King of the Jews." I was done with compromise and refused to change it. As the execution proceeded, I received reports of strange things happening. This unusual man said more to the people around the cross than he said to me in the trial. I also felt the earthquake and saw the eerie midday darkness.

Then, that very afternoon a most unlikely man came to ask for the body -- one of the wealthy Jewish leaders, not a commoner like the typical follower. I was most amazed that the man was already dead as it usually took days. But I confirmed it with the Centurion, who, by the way, looked absolutely

shaken, despite having taken part in dozens of crucifixions.

As if that were not enough, the rulers came to me asking for a guard and Imperial Seal on the tomb because of claims that he would come back from death. After granting this incredible request, the guards came back, and reported that the body was missing. Not only that, they claimed -- they could only do it if they had been bribed -- that it had happened while they slept! What they were asking for was execution for dereliction of duty. And so, they must have been expecting that I would also be bribed to commute the sentence.

I did not want anything more to do with the Jewish leaders and could not stomach any more executions so I pretended I heard nothing and let it go, hopeful for the whole thing to just go away. But it did not go away and the followers of Jesus increased, convinced that he had come back to life. And my name is forever linked with the whole confusing story. I still wonder, "What is Truth?"

Matthew 28, Mark 15 and 16, Luke 23, John 18 and 19