

## Pilate's Choice

Pilate narrowed his eyes as he sat on his Judgement Seat. The Jews, the people he oversaw, were chanting loudly down in the square below. 'Crucify Jesus, crucify Jesus...' They were looking unhelpfully rebellious.

'What happened to the quiet life I signed up for, Marcus?' he said to the centurion on his right-hand side. ' "Take on this unremarkable outpost of the Roman Empire," they said. "Nothing happens out there. Piece of cake." '

He roused himself and stood to address the crowd.

'So whom would you like released? Barabbas or Jesus?'

He liked that 'whom'. Dignified. He felt certain what the reply would be, and indeed, it came back shouted by several thousand voices. 'Give us Barabbas!'

*Bollocks*, thought Pilate. This was the Jewish festival of Passover, and on this date the tradition was that the ruling forces took some incarcerated ne'er-do-well out of his cell and gave him back to his people. Barabbas was a murderer and a rogue, and releasing him would be par for the course. But that meant Jesus would have to be... Pilate sat back down.

'What do you make of this Jesus, Marcus?' Pilate asked.

'He's guilty of... what exactly?' Marcus asked back.

'Blasphemy, apparently, but is that a crucifixion offence? I just can't see it.'

A nervous sentry approached Pilate with a note. He opened it and read the contents.

'That's all I need,' he said glumly. 'My wife Magia has entered the discussion. It seems she's taken a shine to this Jesus – via a dream? I'm not to harm him, apparently. So if I want my supper tonight...'

A flash of anger crossed his face. The Jews were putting him into a nasty corner. He looked over towards the bowl of water beside his seat, and he felt a vast temptation to just wash his hands of the whole business. Literally. He reached out for the bowl, but paused, suddenly feeling trapped by some immense wheel of history turning... what should he do? There was a snap in his head, and with a superhuman effort he put his shoulder to that wheel, stopping it just for a moment.

He stood before the crowd once more. 'You can have Barabbas,' he shouted to the masses. 'But Jesus - I reserve judgement. Come back here tomorrow, and I'll tell you what I've decided. Same time.'

After hours of whipping up the masses, the Jewish leaders found themselves cursing; they knew when they'd been tricked. As Barabbas stumbled out into the crowd, some cheered but others fell silent. Gradually, the people dispersed.

Pilate smiled grimly. 'Take him to that new cell,' he said to yet more soldiers. 'Treat him with decent kindness; get rid of this,' he said scornfully, pointing at Jesus's crown of thorns. 'Find him a cloak, and keep him warm. Give him some food and drink.'

The soldiers, who just a few hours earlier had been sarcastically asking for prophecies from Jesus as they scourged him, went off muttering at this change in direction. 'This damn Jew's turned our master's head,' they whispered.

Nevertheless, they carried out Pilate's wishes. The new cell had been added to the dungeons just the day before, and the walls were still damp in places. Its single window was set high in its outer wall. The soldiers found Jesus clothes and food, but when they handed them to him they received not a word in reply.

'A bit quiet for a messiah?' said one to another. They scratched 'The King of the Jews' onto the cell's lintel and walked off chuckling.

That night Magia kissed Pilate in thanks. 'That was a big ask, Pontius,' she said. 'I appreciate it. Time will prove us both right.'

Pilate shrugged, but he was secretly delighted to have pleased his wife. Maybe good things would come from that too...

The next day, he sat once more upon his Judgement Seat, and surveyed the square below. There was a moderate crowd, perhaps a third of the number that had attended yesterday, and they were looking confused.

'Jesus is held securely,' Pilate shouted, as he laughed inwardly. 'His future remains in the balance. I'll pass judgment upon him in due course. Return at this same hour tomorrow, and you'll hear his fate.'

The crowd muttered. Pilate could see their minds turning to other things: a field to plough, nets to mend, grapes to press. He wouldn't see them again.

The following day, Pilate kept his appointment, and there were but a handful of Jews together in the square. Once more Pilate, enjoying his routine, said to them, 'Come back again tomorrow, friends!'

That evening, Magia looked at him thoughtfully at the end of their meal. 'Pontius, you're not going to like this,' she said.

'Not another one of your dreams,' he said, concerned.

'Maybe,' she said. 'It was an angel this time. Said his name was Michael.'

'So - what happened?' asked Pilate, incredulous.

'He said...' Magia burst into tears. 'He said I would conceive.'

Pilate looked to the floor, and then back to his wife. They'd tried for so long...

'Wishful thinking, Magia,' he offered glumly. 'It's just a dream.'

'Well, I've told you, there, do with it what you will,' she said, drying her eyes before picking up their plates.

The next day, a man of his word, Pilate arrived at his Judgement Seat to talk to the Jews at the appointed time. There was no one to hear him. He dismissed his men, and sat there alone.

His soul fell silent, and he looked to the sky, and as he listened to the song of the birds, he could feel the cruelty that lay in his heart slowly began to melt. He seemed to hear a voice; 'Behold, Pilate, you have chosen.'

He flinched. 'Magia's damn dreams are catching,' he muttered. But as he stood to go, he thought of Jesus and felt a strange sense of vindication.

*Better see how he's doing*, he thought. As he descended to Jesus's cell, he heard the two jailers discussing their captive as they played dice outside his door.

'They say he worked miracles, but is he going to work another here?'

'Doesn't look like it. He saved others, but he's not exactly saving himself at the moment.'

'He managed to escape the cross two days ago, but now he seems to be crucifying himself.'

Pilate turned the corner, and the men stood hurriedly, scattering their dice.

'Has he taken anything?' Pilate asked.

'Some fish and honeycomb, my Lord. He's drunk some water with vinegar.'

'Have you conversed with him?'

'He's not said a word, my Lord. He seems to be... praying a lot.'

Pilate entered Jesus's cell and shut the door. He saw with relief that Jesus's wounds were healing well, but his face was pale, and he seemed to be wrestling with something. His eyes seemed huge in his face, and they stared directly at Pilate as if in agony.

'Are you distressed?' Pilate asked. Jesus said nothing.

'Is there something you need?' Pilate tried again, but got no response. He felt irritated.

'You rest in my power,' he said. 'You sit in the palm of my hand. Your life could be snuffed out in a single breath of mine. And you say nothing to me?'

Jesus gazed into Pilate's eyes. He slowly cradled his arms one on top of the other, and rocked them from side to side. Shocked, Pilate turned and left the cell, leaving the jailers in his wake.

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Nine months later, Magia and Pilate sat with their new daughter, consumed with joy.

'It was the night you saved Jesus,' Magia laughed. 'That's when it happened.'

'A name, Magia,' said Pilate. 'Do you have one?' He remembered his doubts over the visit from angel Michael, and knew that when it came to a name, he would defer to his wife's choice.

'Her name is Abigail,' Magia said simply.

Pilate groaned inwardly. He knew enough Jewish history to know that Abigail had been a wife of David, the greatest ever Jewish king.

'Are you sure, Magia?' he asked. 'Not a Roman name?'

'I'm sure,' she said smiling.

The next day, Pilate sat again on his Judgement Seat, gazing out on a quiet square. He remembered that voice he had heard right here, nine months before, coming out of a blue sky; this time it was Pilate who spoke to the open air.

'Thank you,' he said. When was the last time he'd said that? Not exactly a governor's style - that would sound weak. And to whom was he speaking?

*The angel Michael, Jesus rocking his arms, the name Abigail* – Pilate realised in terror that he'd been speaking to the God of the Jews. In his heart, he felt his cruelty dissolving still further. 'What then is truth?' he whispered to himself as his thoughts rested on the silent man wrestling in prayer in his dungeon.

In the months that followed, Pilate allowed kindness to enter his governing style, not all at once, but in small acts of charity. He nodded towards the Jewish Sabbath and its observance. He moved, at least as far as it was in his power, to give the poor a better deal. Taxation was largely out of his hands, but where he had a say, there was a shift towards fairness. He saw it as some kind of thanks offering for his daughter.

The Jews gradually noticed these moves, were astounded, and were swift to respond in kind. This unexpected harmony began to pay dividends, and Pilate's sphere of leadership did indeed become closer to the quiet yet prosperous corner of the Empire he'd been promised.

Jesus, meanwhile, had been more or less forgotten about by the Jews – a man of no words does not generate much publicity. Jesus's jailers moved on, to be replaced by other jailers, and then others, who knew nothing about Jesus's past. They occasionally looked in at this pale, thin man with ever-lengthening hair, racked in prayer day and night, with never a word spoken, silent as the grave. The words scratched over his cell door, 'The King of the Jews', were now covered in dust and completely illegible.

Fresh would-be prophets arose from time to time, preaching repentance and their own brand of the path of righteousness, but if they kept off Pilate's patch and didn't draw awkward crowds, he was happy to let them be. Magia was wrapped up with Abigail, and spoke of Jesus less and less, but Pilate's thoughts often turned to his prisoner, and each time he felt a shiver of fear run up his back. The powerless man in Pilate's power who had Pilate in his power.

One day Pilate sat once more, alone on his Judgement Seat. Could he hear that voice again? It seemed to him to be saying, 'Be ready.' He woke from his dream to see a man enter the square, and walk in his direction. To Pilate's surprise, once he'd crossed the square he climbed the stairs below his seat until he stood but thirty yards away. This was impertinence indeed. Pilate wondered about calling for his bodyguards, but the man before him bowed.

'Lord Pilate, just and fair ruler of this province, I come to you from Galilee with good wishes.'

'What is your name, and why are you here?' asked Pilate gruffly.

'My name is John, a disciple of the man Jesus, carpenter of Nazareth, whom you hold in your prison. An angel has sent me to request a meeting with him.'

'To meet with him? Do you realise what you ask?' said Pilate. He paused. 'Your angel – what was his name?'

'His name was, his name is, Michael,' John replied.

As he remembered his wife's dream nine months before, Pilate's soul leapt. Suddenly the fear in his heart disappeared.

'Come with me,' he said to John urgently, and he led him down to the cells.

They reached Jesus's dungeon, and they heard a groan. Pilate turned to the jailers.

'Has he spoken before?'

'No, my Lord, not a word,' said the jailers, as they jumped out of their seats.

'Open the door!' Pilate said quickly. The key turned, and Pilate and John walked in. The sun was high and pouring through the window, and Jesus was standing with arms outstretched, his face turned towards the sun as it illuminated his clothing. He said just three words; 'It is finished.'

Pilate turned to John in alarm. 'What does he mean, "It is finished"? So what will happen next?'

***Jonny Griffiths, [hello@jonny-griffiths.net](mailto:hello@jonny-griffiths.net), April 2020, 2100 words.***

