

April 14, 2017 – Good Friday
Pastor Erin Bouman, Irving Park Lutheran Church
John 18:1-19:42

Minor and Major

Pontius Pilate would have remained a minor character in the historical consciousness—but for his part in the major movement in Christian faith. Pilate should have been long forgotten not long after he died—but for a job transfer to a troublesome outpost of the ancient Roman Empire. Pilate was nothing more than a bored bureaucrat in a backwater province, at best a middling politician, but he became a one hit wonder—or disaster. Pontius Pilate should be unknown to us, instead he cues a song of love unknown.

Pilate enters the song early on a Friday morning, when religious authorities bring a man named Jesus to his door. For religious reasons, they cannot come inside. So Pilate has to go out to talk to them. You can almost hear the irritation in Pilate's voice as he has to get up and go outside to see them, early that morning, roused once again by some racket, summoned to settle what is no doubt a trivial dispute. Pilate is tired already though the day has just begun.

He embarks on what soon becomes a series of questions, most of which are functionally rhetorical. Pilate asks the religious authorities what it is they want, why they have brought this man to see him. They want something done to Jesus—but they want Pilate to do it. Politician that he is, Pilate is used to this sort of thing—which doesn't make it any less wearisome. Pilate goes back inside, he'll do the summoning now, he has them send Jesus in to see him, and begins his own investigation. Pilate is doing his job, but almost by rote, still irritated, now directing it at Jesus. Pilate repeats the charge, asks Jesus a question, and is caught off guard by the response.

Perhaps Pilate was expecting bitterness and anger. Perhaps Pilate was expecting Jesus to cower, to be a man outmatched by forces beyond his ken. Instead, Jesus speaks with calm control. Jesus turns the questions around, back on Pilate, speaks of forces beyond this world. This tune is unknown to Pilate. Underneath his ennui there appears a tinge of curiosity. He has never heard such a song; he is not sure he likes it—it seems opposed to his office. And how can attend to it with the clamor of the crowd?

Johannes Sebastian Bach captures all of this, musically, in the great piece he based upon this text, the St. John Passion. Pilate is a key character of its second part, his voice both bored and probing as he inquires of Jesus, the accused, it is the accused who sounds forth in tones deep and warm, and strangely, powerfully confident. Throughout the Passion and especially at the inquisition proceeds, the modes shift, from major to minor and back again. And not just the modes, the key signatures, from flat key signatures to sharp ones. One musical interpreter remarks that “the very look of the notation on the page might be symbolic: sharp signs resemble crosses ...” So it is, lyrically, harmonically, that “At each transition, Jesus' seeming defeat becomes an emblem of his power.” He stands before Pilate, exposing the emptiness of earthly authority, saying “You would have no power over me, if it were not given to you from above,” and as this exchange takes place, “the tonality is yanked from D minor, with one flat, to C-sharp minor, with four sharps.”¹

What song is this? Who is on trial? What is on trial?

¹ Quotes from “Bach's Holy Dread,” by Alex Ross in *The New Yorker*, January 2, 2017, accessed online at <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/01/02/bachs-holy-dread>

Humanity's capacity for disinterested injustice? The discord between the work we've been given, and the work we do? Truth? "What is truth?" Pilate asks. In response, silence. The question is left hanging in the air. They proceed with the hanging.

Yet throughout it all, the one called the King of the Jews is perfectly composed, from the prelude with Pilate to the final solo. In the account of Christ's passion, according to John, Jesus is at a trial, but he is not the one being judged, and there is never a doubt about who is in charge. In John's account of the passion no passerby is impressed upon to carry the cross. In John, Jesus carries his cross, himself. And then hanging from it, dying on it, he attends to his mother, he seeks after her well-being, after he is gone. It is only after that that he asks for a drink—no demands a drink—he says "I thirst," the assertion less a physical, than a scriptural, need.

In the Good Friday gospel, Jesus is crucified, but it is not a defeat. This is a song of victory, for on this day God changed the key. What wondrous love is this?! On this day God took what was minor, and petty, and inhumane, and evil, and transposed it. On Good Friday God wrote a new song, a song that echoes through the ages: "For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate, he suffered death and was buried, and on the third day he rose again."

Darkness and malfeasance and sin may have the day, but they do not have the final note. God in Jesus does: It is finished.