

Message for Good Friday – April 10, 2020

Matthew 27:11-26

John 13:1-9

There are many stories and legends associated with Pontius Pilate but perhaps the most famous one is about his ghost. It is said that after his death Pilate's body was thrown into a lake outside the city of Lausanne in Switzerland. It is further claimed that from time to time Pilate's ghost emerges from the depths and when it does it can be seen rubbing its hands together. Even now, 2000 years later, Pilate is still trying to do the impossible and wash his hands of the responsibility for Jesus' death. But while Pilate was undoubtedly responsible for ordering Jesus' death, was he bad or was he weak? Did he really want Jesus to die or not?

There is no consensus. Some people say that Pilate was a cruel and heartless man. By way of example they point to the time he cracked down on a Jewish demonstration in Jerusalem with a great loss of life. If he was willing to kill numerous demonstrators, then what was the death of Jesus to him? And as for Pilate's attempts to save Jesus? It was all a sham. He was just playing with the Temple authorities reminding them that he was in charge. When he finally tired of the game he quite literally washed his hands of the whole affair and ordered that Jesus be crucified.

Other people though are kinder to Pilate. They say that Pilate was a good and kind-hearted man; that is shown by his repeated efforts to try and save Jesus. The problem is that he was weak and lacked the courage of his convictions. When the pressure finally became too much, he gave in and washed his hands of the whole matter.

Now which interpretation is right? Was Pilate cruel and heartless or was he good-intentioned but weak? Perhaps at the end of the day it doesn't really matter because either way he ended up at the same spot, washing his hands. And as it was with Pilate, so it can sometimes be with us too.

When we say or do something wrong, whether it be on purpose or through thoughtlessness or weakness, how often do we try and justify ourselves, washing our hands as if it were? But that doesn't always work and we are left with that nagging sense of regret and the burden of a guilty conscience. And that is the message of Pilate's wash basin. No matter how hard we try, we cannot always wash our hands clean but thankfully another basin was used the night before.

It was the Last Supper and the disciples were arguing; when Jesus finally ushered in the kingdom in all of its glory, who among them would be the most important? The room was filled with jealousy and tension. Indeed such were the hard feelings that no one was prepared to carry out the most menial, degrading yet necessary task of all.

Back then of course people did not wear socks and shoes; they went barefoot or else wore sandals. Not surprisingly during the course of a day, people's feet became very dirty and smelly. Whenever a person went indoors their feet had to be washed and dried and this unenviable job was normally the task of a servant. Since the Last Supper however was a private meal there weren't any servants present. The upshot was that none of their feet were being washed. They weren't because none of them were prepared to do it or even take turns doing it. It was beneath their dignity!

When Jesus realized what was going on, he must have wondered, "What am I going to do with these people? I've spent three years with them and they still don't get it, arguing about who is the most important and refusing to serve one another". Jesus being Jesus though, he didn't get angry. Instead he decided to teach them a lesson that they would never forget by washing their feet himself. I like the way a preacher of days gone by envisioned it:

"He, who truly was the greatest, humbled himself. His hands gripped the basin and the towel and he calmly and lovingly began to wash their feet. The silence screamed in their ears. Shamed and shocked they watched as their Lord carried out the menial task. In this act Christ became the

servant. Imagine; God on his knees because of the arrogance of the disciples!”

This wash basin episode, the washing of the disciples’ feet, captures what Jesus and his ministry were all about; serving others, putting others first and even dying for them, dying for us. But the wash basin episode, or the Last Lesson as I prefer to call it, isn’t just about Jesus, it is also about us.

If what we remember on Good Friday with all of its meaning; that God loves us, forgives us and redeems us has any real meaning then we will respond. We will respond by trying to be servants like Jesus; we too so-to-speak will respond by picking up our basins and towels and washing the feet of others. We will ask “what can I do for you” rather than “what are you going to do for me?” This is certainly a lesson that a group of future ministers were once taught.

Back in 1973 the principal at a Baptist seminary challenged the graduating students to follow Jesus’ example and serve others. In an effort to encourage them to do this, he announced that he wanted them to line up and then come forward one by one; they were all going to be given a special gift. As they lined up, the students were filled with anticipation; what would the gift be? A cross to wear around their necks or a Bible perhaps? To their surprise, each person was given a small white terry cloth towel. It was a small insignificant gift but it had an impact. As one of the graduating students later said, “We were commissioned to go out into the world as servants. That small piece of towel, now frayed and grubby is a constant reminder of our call to serve.”

In Jesus’ last days two washbasins were used for two very different reasons. One was used by Pontius Pilate to try and absolve himself from all responsibility for Jesus’ death. The other was used by Jesus to make a statement about what he, and by implication, what we his disciples should be all about. And I wonder; figuratively speaking how do we use our wash basins? Do we use them to wash our hands of all responsibility for our own actions and the needs of others? Or do we strive to use them in the

service of others? Are we like Pontius Pilate or do we at least try and be like Jesus, secure in his love and forgiveness when we fail? This is a very pertinent and challenging question in light of what is happening around us in the world today. If what we remember on Good Friday has any meaning or impact on us then the answer is obvious. To close with the words of a well-known Good Friday hymn:

Were the whole realm of nature mine,
that were an offering far too small.
Love so amazing, so divine,
demands my soul, my life, my all.