

Grace Lutheran Church, Hatfield, PA
April 15, 2022 + Good Friday, John 18-19
Pastor Nancy M. Raabe: "Bankrupt"

If you can imagine a land in which a veneer of peace thinly conceals a climate of brutal repression, you begin to have an image of life in first-century Jerusalem.

In the years shortly before and after Jesus' death, the Roman prefect Pontius Pilate ruled Judea savagely with an iron fist. The Roman government at that time had two priorities: to ensure the Peace of Rome across the empire, or what was known as the "Pax Romana," because war was expensive; and to ensure the steady flow of revenue into the Roman treasury, which was known as the "Tribute" or "Tax Romana." The tax collectors hired by Rome were notorious for gouging peasants as deeply as possible, which is why they were widely reviled. The ill-gotten profits were divided among the Jewish priests, the ruling elders and tax collectors, all of whom worked to keep things in balance for Rome.

The Roman tax system was not only a way of redistributing wealth from the poor to the rich. It also gave these three influential classes -- priests, elders and tax collectors -- a reason not to rock the boat of the Roman occupation. Why challenge a system that benefited their purses so handsomely? Plus, they knew that if a rebellion were to rise up against Roman rule, they would be the first victims of mob justice.

As local and religious leaders, those to whom the people looked for guidance and whose day-to-day welfare was in their hands, the charge, then, against the Jewish priests, elders, and tax collectors must therefore be: **Bankrupt**.

Then there is Pontius Pilate. Early Jewish historians tell us that he was extremely successful, if you equate success with savagery. He repeatedly provoked both Jews and Samaritans to riots by insulting their religious sensibilities and then, when they protested, had their demonstrations brutally put down. His brutality was so extreme that Rome had him removed in the year 36 because they feared widespread revolt. War, remember, was expensive.

This might seem to contrast with the more sympathetic portrayal of Pilate in John's gospel, but in fact that account reveals a moral emptiness of a different kind. Attempting to be equitable, Pilate summons Jesus to investigate the charges against him. At every step Jesus throws him off balance. Utterly confounded in his attempt to get to the truth and again rebuffed by the crowd, Pilate has Jesus beaten. Appealing Jesus' innocence to the crowd once again, the crowd morphs into a mob and shouts for Jesus' crucifixion.

Returning to Jesus, he tries once more for dialogue, but Jesus' silence provokes him to an outburst: "Do you refuse to speak to me? Do you not know that I have power to release you, and power to crucify you?" Which is of course turns out to be patently false. Just a few verses later the shouts of the mob shake Pilate to the core and, terrified for his own safety, he hands Jesus over.

As a Roman leader, as a Roman judge, as a seeker of the truth, the charge against Pontius Pilate must therefore be: **Bankrupt.**

Most devastating, though is the charge against the people themselves. After Pilate's last efforts to release Jesus, John tells us the Jews cried out: "If you release this man, you are no friend of the emperor! Everyone who claims to be a king sets himself against the emperor!" Representing the people's spiritual life, the chief priests make a horrendous admission: "We have no king but the emperor."

Horrendous, because *everyone* knew exactly what kind of emperor they really had in Tiberius--one whose very life was the definition of debauchery. For years Tiberius had tried to conceal his terrible proclivities, but finally moved himself to island of Capri, where his horrendous depravity ran unchecked. His drinking was legendary and he was addicted to every kind of grotesque perversion. All this was well known to the people, who loathed the very idea of him but could do nothing about it because the Pax Romana had to be preserved. War was expensive.

That Jesus' own people would shout their allegiance and sell their souls to this heinous figure, that they would betray their own Messiah while crying loyalty to Tiberius, is beyond comprehension. Jesus' own people had therefore judged themselves and spoken their own sentence: **Bankrupt.**

And yet...it all had to be just as it was. Pilate could not have won over the hearts of the faithless mob with his appeals for justice. The people could not have suddenly come to their senses to realize that this man with the crown of thorns and slashes across his back was truly the king that the prophets had long foretold. It had to be just as it was: On the very day that the priests in the temple were slaughtering the lambs for the Passover feast, this lamb too would be slaughtered.

Why, though? Why such a difficult story and a seemingly unhappy ending for all who loved Jesus, all those who stood off to one side watching the terrible spectacle?

Atonement is not the answer. To merely say that Jesus' crucifixion is atonement for our sin, that he took our sin upon himself, circumscribes this cosmic breakthrough far too narrowly. God's movement is always from Creator to creature, and with Jesus' death God moved into our realm--not just the land of the living but the land of suffering and dying. Jesus doesn't just put on our sin and die in our place, he enters with us into death, death being that process which defines us like no other, and in that dying we are reborn.

So let us receive the truth of this day not as a necessary evil so that Easter can happen. but as a lingering moment to stand at Jesus' feet and take in the fullness of the moral, ethical and spiritual bankruptcy through which God's great work of salvation was played out, as it continues to be; we will come face to face with this truth in a few minutes in the Solemn Reproaches from the Cross. For without the folly, suffering, humiliation, godlessness, and apparent finality of the cross, Easter can work no transformative action in our world-weary souls. Amen.