

Pontius Pilate.

St John Ch19 v 22. “What I have written, I have written.”

I never wanted the Judaeian posting. Jerusalem is a great city to see, and the Temple in the middle is a magnificent building, even for a Roman accustomed to fine temples. But to be put in charge of the place – the gods must have really had it in for me.

As the imperial administration, we did our best for the “Children of Israel” which is what they like to call themselves. We let them keep have a king in Jerusalem, under our control, of course, and we've never really cracked down on their political priests. But if they are not quarrelling among themselves as to who is the “Chief Priest” in Judaea, they are having a go at each other over whether Samaria or Jerusalem should be their main centre. On top of that they reckon that theirs is the only real God, that there is only one, and that they are his Chosen people. Then there's those bandit prophets who seem to appear every year or two, stirring up revolution, to say nothing of the strange people living in caves in the eastern mountains.

Our great Emperor Augustus, is recognised as a god, and although Tiberius, our present Emperor has not been acclaimed as one, this puts just about all the Jews on the wrong side of the law, whether they call themselves Judaeans, Samaritans or followers of some prophet or other. Imperial policy is to be tactful about this – but we know Tiberius does not like them, and where our duty lies if they make an issue of it.

The “Passover” as they call it, is always a difficult time. The “Children of Israel” come together from all over the world to celebrate their so-called escape from slavery in Egypt centuries ago – and to note, of course, that they would like to be “liberated” from our rule as well. We like to humour them, and release a prisoner as a symbol that we acknowledge their aspirations, but we also have to be on our guard lest they take it all too seriously. We don't want trouble when there are huge crowds about, but we have to make it clear who is in charge here, so the legion is kept on high alert.

Today has been particularly trying. Last week, a popular prophet came riding into the city on a donkey with a lot of noisy supporters. We had been keeping an eye on him for some time as he had upset the top brass in the Temple before, and he was soon at it again. Late yesterday evening, when the city was quiet after the Passover meal, the Temple guards picked him up and put him on trial in their own courts – but, as usual, they couldn't

decide whether it was a matter for the High Priest's court or the king's. So who gets called in to sort the matter out – me, the Governor, having to deal with religious business which really has nothing to do with me and which I don't believe in anyway. The priests say that the man has blasphemed and so, according to their law, he ought be stoned to death – but my agents tell me that he has already escaped that fate at least once, and, excuse the pun, stoning is a bit of a hit and miss business when there is an unruly crowd which includes a lot of his supporters.

So I throw the priests out and have a quiet chat with him. He knows I can have him executed, and he has been roughed up pretty badly both by his Jewish enemies and by my own soldiers. But he doesn't plead for his life – in fact, he doesn't seem sorry for himself at all. He is so cool, so calm and treats me as an equal – actually, more like he's my teacher. I'd like to think that he is deluded, but he is not like any of other crazy prophets that I've seen from time to time. He seems to have had a lot of followers, but he is no firebrand and I've had no reports that any of them have been armed or violent like the Barabbas gang. If anything, he's a pacifist – and that is not a capital offence in my book. Just to confuse things a bit more, my wife tells me that she has had strange dreams about him and that I should quietly help him escape.

And then I hear the crowd outside my headquarters – the last thing I want over their Festival is a riot when thousands of people are on the streets. It's not that I mind killing a few of them – truth to tell, I'd happily slaughter the lot of them and retire to my farm in Tuscany, but another insurrection would look bad on my c.v. and on my budget statement to Rome. “Keep the peace and sustain the revenue” - those were my orders from the Emperor.

So, what to do? If the crowd can see what a harmless and pathetic figure he is after my soldiers have beaten him up, maybe they will relent. Maybe I can make him the prisoner traditionally released to celebrate their “Passover”. But whatever happens, it isn't my fault. So, on with the armour and governor's toga, get the troops lined up and let's face the mob. We'll try the Passover trick first - “Whom should I release for passover - Jesus, the nice guy, or Barabbas, the bandit?” No luck – that just makes things worse and we can see that the agitators are whipping up the crowd even more. Well, too bad – don't they have some saying of their own about one person dying for the good of the people. So I wash my hands in front of them and tell them, “I can't find this man guilty of any crime, but since you insist, you can have him.” I make sure that we have a squad of troops to escort him to the execution site and see that the job is done properly without any interference. My agents tell me that there is some story about him claiming that he would rise from the dead after three days, and we don't want any

mistakes or those tricks that the Jews get up to. Their priests even came to complain about the charge my chaps nailed above his head. “Jesus of Nazareth – King of the Jews.” They wanted it changed to “He said he was King of the Jews” as if that makes any difference when the man is dead. I told them that what the Governor says, goes – and they would just have to put up with it. As Governor, I can't execute any old claimant – but by recognising his kingly authority in the colony, I had a case for removing an admitted threat to Rome, if not a very good case.

And that was that – I went inside, had a bath and a decent bottle of Italian wine with my wife. I'm not proud of what I did today. I really do believe that as a Roman Governor, I should administer Roman law – and I didn't. Jesus of Nazareth, or whatever they called him, should not have been killed like that, because he did nothing wrong as far as our law is concerned. But I did probably save us the cost of a riot – and sometimes one just has to be practical. No doubt the Judaeans will be at it again, maybe not next year but fairly soon. With luck I'll be drinking the new vintage from my own farm on the Tuscan hills by then and everyone will have forgotten all about what happened today, and my part in it.

Prayer.

Merciful Father,

We come before you today mindful of our own sins and failures. Pride, selfishness, confidence in our own goodness and virtue, have blinded us to our own responsibility for so many of the miseries and evils that beset the world. Open our eyes, we pray, to the glory of your truth, and so direct our hearts and minds that we may become agents of your love towards all mankind rather than collaborators in the destruction of your creation and the suffering of our fellow men.

This we pray in the Name of our master and our friend, Jesus Christ, your own beloved son.

Amen.