

Palmarum – Sunday of the Passion  
St. Matthew 27:11-54

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

The Passion according to St. Matthew as you have heard it today begins with Jesus before the governor. There, He is on trial for no other reason than because the Jews want Him killed, and they cannot legally do that themselves. He stands before Pilate on some trumped up charge, that He claims to be a king, and if He is a king, then He stands in opposition to Caesar and is an enemy of the state. "Are you the King of the Jews?" "It is as you say."

Now, the governor must decide how to proceed. The chief priests and elders pressed Pilate, further accusing Jesus, and the King says nothing. Pilate marveled at Him for this. This was not how a Jewish king would respond to their accusations. This is not how an enemy of Rome would behave. He figured that something more was going on. Then he has a brilliant idea: He'll give the people a choice between a known evil man and Jesus.

Now at the feast the governor was accustomed to releasing to the multitude one prisoner whom they wished. And at that time they had a notorious prisoner called Barabbas. Therefore, when they had gathered together, Pilate said to them, "Whom do you want me to release to you? Barabbas, or Jesus who is called Christ?" For he knew that they had handed Him over because of envy.

The choice should be obvious—it would be more dangerous to release Barabbas; they just *have* to pick Jesus. But what do they shout? "Barabbas!" "What shall I do with Jesus who is called Christ?" "Let Him be crucified!"

While Pilate was sitting on the judgment seat, his wife sent word to him to have nothing to do with Jesus. She had a dream about Him, and things didn't turn out too well in it. Perhaps he should have listened to her. If he had, though, he would most certainly have had a riot on his hands. "If you let this Man go, you are not Caesar's friend," the crowd once told him. (John 19:12) Pilate could not risk becoming an enemy of Caesar, so he gave in to the crowd's demands. Before releasing Him, though, he took a basin of water and washed his hands; maybe this would appease his wife, for he did it to appear innocent. "I am innocent of the blood of this just Person. You see to it." "His blood be on us and on our children."

Pilate's innocence is not questionable. Sure, he was a man stuck between two hard choices. What would you have done in his situation? You don't need to answer or even think about that question, though, for you have certainly faced situations with unwanted consequences no matter the decision you made. As a result, the desire is present to find no fault in Pilate for the choice he had to make; however, as I said, Pilate's innocence is not questionable. He may have wanted to appear innocent of Jesus' blood and death, but no washing could recuse him of it...well, maybe one.

Pilate's guilt and hand in Jesus suffering and death is part of your confession, dear hearers. "[I believe] in Jesus Christ...[who] suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died and was buried..." Pilate has the distinction of being the only mere person besides Mary to be mentioned in the Creeds, and he's there for his part in Jesus' Passion and death. He is most certainly guilty of the blood of Jesus, despite having washed his hands.

What Pilate did is a common trait to fallen humanity. Faced with a hard decision like his, how apt are you to say, "Well, it was either this or something worse, I made the best choice possible, so I can't be blamed for what went wrong." That's putting it quite generally, but you get the point.

That's not the half of it, though. The desire to appear innocent is the fatal character trait which you share with Pilate. You want to show the world that you are a good person, doing whatever you can

to hide your trespasses and sins. So you lie in order to protect your reputation, hiding or keeping secret your faults or whatever it is you find shameful. Or you blame others for what is really your fault. "I am innocent of this Man's blood...His blood be on us and on our children."

You're no better than your first parents, Adam and Eve. Having just eaten from the forbidden tree, they hid from God as He took His walk in the Garden, because they knew they were naked. You might see it as an acknowledgment of their lack of clothing, and that very well is the case, but they also realized that they were completely exposed to God—that He would be able to see their misdeeds—so they hid themselves. "Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you that you should not eat?" "The woman whom You gave to be with me, she gave me of the tree, and I ate." "What is this you have done?" "The serpent deceived me, and I ate." The man blamed the woman; the woman blamed the serpent. (cf. Genesis 3:6-13)

Do you not see the silliness of it? "It's not my fault I ate what You told me not to eat." "I couldn't help myself, the serpent made You out to be a liar." "I'm going to beat and torture the Guy, have Him nailed to a cross, but I will not be held liable for His suffering and death." "It's not my fault...the devil made me do it...my sin isn't so great as it could have been." Hogwash!

Now, the hard part with Pilate was that if he had done the right thing, it would have been the wrong thing to do. The right thing would have been to release Jesus, but it would have been the wrong thing to do because it would have prevented Jesus from going to the cross at the appointed time. So, Pilate did what was necessary by having Jesus tortured and crucified, but that doesn't mean that he's not guilty of wrongdoing.

The same could be said of Peter, and especially Judas, who both, in their own ways, betrayed Jesus to get Him into this situation or while He was going through it. Peter thrice denied knowing Jesus. Judas betrayed Him into the hands of the chief priests, scribes, and elders. These things needed to be done, especially on the part of Judas, but that does not mean that both he and Peter were not guilty of sinning against Jesus.

The same is true of you. There have been and will be time where you have no choice but to sin. Then my advice to you is to sin boldly, in the words of Father Luther, then confess what you have done and be absolved of it. For instance, you may have to disobey the authorities that God has placed over you in order to make the best attempt at keeping the Word of God; so disobey those authorities and confess that you have broken the Fourth Commandment and be absolved. Perhaps you need to take a life in order to protect family and property or in defense of the country; you have done what was necessary, but confess that you have broken the Fifth Commandment and be absolved. I could go through the rest of the Second Table, but suffice it to say that your hand may be forced to break a Commandment, but that doesn't mean that you are not guilty of sinning—you have, after all, broken one of God's Laws.

So, what are you to do? Be like Peter, who confessed his sin and was restored. We do not have the words with which Peter repented, but we do see His contrition, as he goes on his own to weep bitterly following the third crow of the rooster and a look from Jesus. (cf. Matthew 26:74-75; Luke 22:60-62) And we are clued in to his restoration, as Peter is singled out by name when angel tells the women that Jesus is risen from the grave as well as the interaction between Jesus and Peter on the shore following His resurrection, where Peter is told three times to feed Jesus' sheep. (cf. Mark 16:7; John 21:15-17) Judas was contrite, too, throwing back the silver coins he was paid to betray Jesus, but he went out and hanged himself in his sorrow, never seeking absolution, and ending up going to the place he deserved. (cf. Matthew 27:3-5; Acts 1:25) Pilate was never contrite, putting on a show of self-justification with his hand-washing.

Again, no washing could take away his guilt, except one. It wasn't the one that Pilate sought or used, though. He washed his hands as only a show of innocence, but you have been washed in the

water and the Word which joined you to Christ's suffering, death, and resurrection. It may have been only a few drops of water on your head, or you may have gone swimming in it, but in both cases, because it was included in God's command and combined with God's word, it conveyed to you the very innocence of the One to whom by baptism you are joined. Your sins, committed intentionally or unintentionally, whether your hand was forced into them or not, have been washed off of you and onto your Savior, Jesus Christ, who went to the cross with them and there died with them. He rose again from the grave to seal to you the forgiveness you need, which you were given in the waters of Holy Baptism, and to which you are turned again and again every time you confess your sins and receive Holy Absolution.

Yes, you are guilty of sinning whether you have a choice to do so or not. You are guilty of sinning in those times when you try to hide your guilt and shame. You are guilty of sinning when you blame others for your trespasses. In these last two cases, doubly so. But, you are justified by the blood of the Lamb—"His blood be on us and on our children."

How ironic that Pilate sought to remove himself from blood-guiltiness, but the Jews wanted responsibility for the blood of Christ, yet both rejected Him and the innocence that comes by way of His blood. Pilate was guilty of shedding the blood of God, yet by show washed himself of the responsibility. It was the blood of the Lamb that would have actually cleansed him from his sin, but He wanted nothing of it. The Jews sought the guilt of murdering an innocent man—they reveled in the sin and rightly proclaimed that the guilt should fall on them and their children, should those children not reject the actions of their parents. The blood of Jesus would have removed from them the guilt of shedding it, but they sought the blame for it instead.

His blood is on you, dear Baptized, and you are washed clean by it. His blood be on you and your children for the remission of your sins because, "[W]ithout shedding of blood there is no remission." (Hebrews 9:22b) Jesus shed His blood for you. Yes, the Jews and Pilate and Judas and Peter were all instruments in Jesus shedding His blood, but Jesus went to the cross willingly for you. There, He gave His life over to death and shed His blood to buy you back from sin and death to remission and life. And, in fact, Jesus now gives you of His very blood to drink in the Sacrament of the Altar as medicine against your sinful flesh, the sin and trouble of this world, and the temptations of the devil.

Water and blood, the signs of your redemption. More than that, these are the very means by which your sins are forgiven, even and especially your secret sins. They wash your scarlet, sin-stained robes a sparkling white. In fact, they cover your nakedness with the robes of Christ's righteousness. They make you right with God. They not only cover your guilt and shame, they remove them from you as far as east is from the west. Pilate and the Jews sought to use them to deny the Savior, but the Savior uses them to forgive you for all of your sins.

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.