

Easter Reflection for NFWM – Pontius Pilate – Tobacco

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“If Jesus was to preach like he preached in Galilee / They would lay Jesus Christ in his grave.”
–Woody Guthrie, “Jesus Christ”¹ –

For some time, the NFWM, FLOC, and other farm worker advocacy organizations have been putting pressure on R.J. Reynolds. This past semester I attended a meeting with several R.J.R. managers and a variety of farm worker advocates. The meeting was held so that R.J. Reynolds could hear the concerns of people of faith about the living and working conditions of tobacco farm workers, who are the backbone of R.J.R.’s supply chain. Much of the meeting included observations and questions from advocates to the R.J.R. executives, who kept shirking any responsibility.

With great fear, I finally voiced my idea. I pointed out that the constant ‘blame game’ the management was playing the modern role of Pontius Pilate, one of the characters in the four Gospels who was responsible for the death of Jesus. While I was speaking I used rubbed the palms of my hands together and then moved them apart, to show how these managers were wiping away responsibility for their laborers (farm workers). Quite angry, the two R.J.R. employees suggested that my words were inaccurate and offensive. But, as many of us know, when truth is spoken to those in power, it is rarely ever received well.

When looking at all the Synoptic Gospel accounts of Pontius Pilate, Mark, Matthew and Luke make him seem to have his hands tied.² He’s just doing his civil duty. Pilate is a neutral and flat character. Arguably, this is what the R.J.R. management were doing and how they wanted to be seen. After all, as they implied, how could they be responsible for growers’ ill treatment of workers or individuals? Even if they were to acknowledge the harsh treatment and labors of farm workers, as one R.J.R. manager briefly did, they have no fault in it.

But, the Gospel of John provides a deeper image of Pilate: Pilate the manipulator. Pontius Pilate was the man who was taking care of the Jewish state in the Roman Empire. He is the figurehead of the Roman Empire within Israel. He is a man of prestige and power, who cannot make a decision on his own. When Jesus was arrested (18:12-13) and brought to Pilate by Jewish leadership (18:28-40), Pilate does his very best to extricate himself from responsibility.³ Like the meeting I attended with R.J.R., the tobacco companies are trying to claim innocence. They claim

¹ Woody Guthrie, “Jesus Christ,” *This Land is Your Land: Asch Recordings Volume 1* [CD], Smithsonian/Folkways Recordings, 1997. Guthrie’s song rails against bankers, priests, landlords, soldiers, and many others in his context. He thinks Jesus would not recognize the modern, capitalist society as being morally okay or Christian. He suggests in “Jesus Christ” that Jesus came on behalf of workers and slaves; if Jesus was to reappear, he thinks that many who claim to respect or follow Christ would be the ones to kill him. For this reflection, it seems important to realize the connection to Pontius Pilate and one of its many modern appearances, in the tobacco industry.

² To read each account, see Mark 15:2-15; Luke 23:2, 3, 18-25; Matthew 27:11-8, 20-23.

³ N.T. Wright, “Paul’s Gospel and Caesar’s Empire,” *A Royal Priesthood? The Use of Bible Ethically and Politically: A Dialogue with Oliver O’Donovan*, ed. by C. Bartholemew (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, Inc., 2002), 178. Noting that the Jews themselves are not at fault, nor should they be held accountable for Jesus’ death is crucial. Historically, the Gospel of John has been utilized to support Jewish persecution and anti-Semitism. In a post-Holocaust world, New Testament scholar N.T. Wright has argued that Paul’s reading of Jewish involvement (Romans 9-11) is not an anti-Judaism or anti-Semitic religious text.

to not control the growers who interact most with their laborers. They know the issues of the fields but refuse to acknowledge their power to change them.

When reading the text like a drama unfolding on a stage, it's clear that Pilate is the one undergoing trial.⁴ Pilate is rushing back and forth, from the crowd to Jesus and back several times. If you take a few minutes to re-read the text, you can chart the back-and-forth movement of Pilate. Such a powerful man is reduced to an irresponsible, nervous figure. He's rushing between the crowds and the Christ, looking for anything to get out of this bind. Contrarily, Jesus remains cool and collected, waiting his imminent flogging and death by crucifixion.

Therefore, when Jesus is spoken to he asks Pilate questions: he takes back power and puts Pilate on trial. According to Atechmeier, Green, and Thompson, "Pilate's powerlessness is illustrated by his role in the drama of the passion. In passing judgment on Jesus, Pilate unknowingly passes judgment on himself."⁵ The defining moment of their conversation is in verse 37, when Jesus says: "You say that I am a king. In fact, the reason I was born and came into the world is to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me." Pilate, who has effectively named him as king, asks what the truth is (v.38) – it sounds like a last ditch effort for Pilate to blame and to keep himself exonerated. Then, according to the crowd's cries and his own decision-making, Pilate sentences Jesus to be crucified, after flogging and shaming him with the satirical crown of thorns and purple robe (19:13).

Gerard Soloyan writes, "Pilate's guilt is that of a tool of the real culprit, the one who did the handing over."⁶ Readers of Scripture ultimately find him to be the guilty one, not Jesus or the Jews. Sadly, the management of R.J.R. are not truly sitting with their guilt. Moreover, they are denying and ignoring the facts that they are responsible for many societal (and physical) ills. Pilate's leadership and irresponsibility still exists, continuing to do insatiable harm to the crowds and the innocent. Companies like R.J.R., Phillip Morris, and other tobacco groups, prey on the worker, control the ignorant consumers, and accumulate great wealth. And this is why the NFWM, FLOC, and others must relive the drama of John 18-19. We must put this Pilate to trial through economic and political pressure. The tobacco empire needs to be judged and tried for their irresponsibility. Thus, Pilate needs to be brought to trial in court, through our wallets, and by the religious community and associated press.

With Jesus and his church taking the lead in fighting the Pilate-like figures that exist, my prayer is that change will come for consumers and farm workers alike. The men and women I have met deserve dignity, a union, adequate compensation, respect, and care. As Guthrie asks in the guide quote from "Jesus Christ," would Jesus recognize Christians supporting tobacco corporations, which prey on both farm workers and our wallets? At this moment, I am not confident that Christ's church would totally be recognizable. But fortunately, like many stories in our Gospels, there are always glimmers of resurrection and liberation on the horizon.

⁴ Thomas A. Boogart, "Drama and the Sacred: Recovering the Dramatic Tradition in Scripture and Worship" *Touching the Altar: The Old Testament for Christian Worship*, ed. Carol M. Betchel (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2008), 38.

⁵ Paul J. Atchmeier, Joel B. Green, and Marianne Meye Thompson, *Introducing the New Testament: Its Literature and Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2001), 196.

⁶ Gerard Sloyan, *John*, Interpretation (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1988), 209.

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