

## Second Sunday in Lent

**1<sup>st</sup> Reading: Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16**

**Psalm: 22:24-32**

**2<sup>nd</sup> Reading: Romans 4:13-25**

**Gospel: Matthew 27:24-31**



In a first look Chris Wood's picture of Jesus picking up his cross, we might be struck by the stylised juxtaposition of images - the soldiers in business suits and red power ties, with angry visages, intent on removing this disruptive or accusatory and alien figure. The modern setting of Vancouver, not unlike the Sydney Opera House and our finest architectural and artistic achievements, juxtaposed with this oddly wooden figure gazing heavenwards and attempting to lift a wooden cross, which itself is totally at odds with the concrete and brick antiseptic surroundings. That cross is soon to be sullied with dirt and sweat and blood and agony, but it is still pristine and representational here in a way that confronts me, and perhaps you, with my own complicity in the sinfulness of my shared humanity – a humanity capable of wonderful achievement and horrendous destruction.

All of us, every one of us at one time or another, have looked the other way, walked by on the other side, cried crocodile tears, voted for self-interest rather than the common good, chosen non-involvement, kept our mouths closed instead of speaking the truth, ignored blatant evil or disguised it with fair-favoured words.

“He took some water and washed his hands before the crowd” (Matthew 27:24).

The image of Pontius Pilate washing his hands and declaring his innocence is one which has been etched into our consciousness over centuries. Pilate, the Roman Governor or Procurator of Judea from AD 26 to 36 (10 long years) was a political appointee of Emperor Tiberius, probably influenced by Sejanus, who was said to be an anti-Semite and who therefore may have wanted an anti-Semite in the post. It would appear that Pilate was not a great success as governor and failed to gain promotion and his long tenure in a turbulent appointment may have been due to his lack of judgement and success in keeping the Province peaceful and productive. Pilate was not too keen to blot his copybook and fall further from grace, so he tried hard to defuse the Jesus-problem, but failed. It may not have been his last failure, as tradition has it that he suicided early in the reign of Caligula, Tiberius' even more insane successor.

So Pontius Pilate, the civil servant, presiding over the execution of Jesus, had a habit of dropping the ball and upsetting the Emperor. But like most civil servants, he had developed the knack of

shifting the blame - in this case, by a bowl of water and ceremonial hand washing. "See to it yourselves", he told the crowd.

There is a little bit of Pilate in many or most of us. In fact, Pilate represents us whether he would have admitted it or not. Whether it is his indifference to Jesus and total self-centredness, as in Mark's gospel (Pilate, wanting to satisfy the crowd, had Jesus flogged and handed him over to be crucified), or in Luke, buck-passing to Herod Antipas, but finally giving in under pressure, or in John, trying to divorce himself from the drama, but inevitably and fearfully caught up in it, and giving in to a threat to report him to Tiberius, or in Matthew, washing his hands and walking away from responsibility. We can all share a little in the guilt of Pilate, just as we share in his all too human failings.

We too can be indifferent to the plight of others in the world around us, and totally self-centred. We can be guilty of trying to be popular and go along with the crowd, even when we know that the fashion is demeaning or destructive. We are quite capable of fearful compliance under actual or implied threat as witnessed by the many and varied conspiracies of silence cloaking the unethical, inhuman and destructive behaviour of those in power. There are many instances of injustice within our society – some of which are highlighted in the election campaign in which we find ourselves. And we can be very good at washing our hands - doing a Pontius Pilate - disowning our responsibility and absolving ourselves, blaming another or others, refusing to take responsibility and walking away.

Every time we ignore human suffering, we as Jesus pick up the cross and carry it out of the city. But it is our cross, and our sin, our shame, our guilt on which his blood is shed. We plait the crown of thorns, we scourge the back of the helpless Saviour of the world, we walk alongside with the hammer and the nails. We force him to carry our cross, because we cannot do it ourselves. We need a power higher than ourselves to carry the cross of our human frailty, to bear our sinfulness in his own flesh, to stand for us and with us, as our failures are weighed in the balance.

And they are weighed in the balance, but the balance is weighted our way, in our favour. Jesus picked up his cross and carried it to the hill outside the city where he prayed for our forgiveness as we nailed him to the wood, and he made it possible for us to pick up our own personal crosses of suffering, broken relationships and blighted lives, transforming us into the image of his own glory in this world and the next.

Let us pray that in this Lenten season we not only acknowledge those times when we have been silent in the face of injustice and need, but we seek to repent of our ways and commit ourselves anew to seeking wholeness for all people... instead of simply washing our hands and declaring 'someone else can have this fight'.