

Questions Pilate Asked

2. “I am not a Jew, am I?”

John 18:35-38

1 Samuel 16:1-13; 2 Corinthians 5:14-21

When Jesus was being interrogated, Pilate asked him, “**Are you the King of the Jews?**” Jesus responded by asking Pilate if the question arose out of his own curiosity and struggle about who Jesus was, or was he only following up what had been told to him by others.

“**I am not a Jew, am I?**” It has such a sneering, superior tone to it. It sounds so contemptuous toward Jews as a people and towards Jesus as a person.

“**I am not a Jew, am I?**” Can’t you hear Pilate laughing? Here is this peasant standing before him thinking that Pilate would take seriously any talk about Jesus being a king.

It’s a response not unlike Nathanael’s who ultimately did become a follower of Jesus, but not without first laughing off the idea: “**Can anything good come out of Nazareth?**”¹

It’s a response not unlike all those people in Jesus’ hometown of Nazareth who took offense at him when he taught in the synagogue.² “Who does he think he is? Isn’t this Joe’s boy?”

It’s not unlike the response of some teachers to a young black girl in the early days of school integration. They were astounded by her scholarship. Instead of that shattering their prejudices, it only confirmed their prejudices. “You may have black skin but you have a white mind.”

Is it possible that one of the factors that contributed to the crucifixion of Jesus was good old-fashioned human prejudice? Had Pilate taken Jesus more seriously, he might have believed, or at least he might have set him free in the name of justice. As it is, Pilate doesn’t take the controversy between Jesus and the religious leaders the least bit seriously. He laughs off the whole matter because it’s just a “skirmish among those Jews,” made even more ridiculous by the peasant’s claim to be a king.

Because of these prejudices, the reality of Jesus was invisible to Pilate. Do you remember Ralph Ellison’s first novel published in 1952?

I am an invisible man. No, I am not a spook like those that haunted Edgar Allan Poe; nor am I one of your Hollywood-moving ectoplasms. I am a man of substance, of flesh and bone, fiber and liquids – and I might even be said to possess a mind. I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me. When they approach me, they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination, indeed, everything and anything except me.

One day, when King Saul's leadership no longer served the divine purpose, God told the prophet Samuel to go to Jesse and anoint one of his sons to be future King of Israel. Along the way, Samuel stops by Barnes and Noble to pick up a copy of *Men's Health Magazine* so he could scope out pictures of the ideal man. Then he starts to measure Jesse's boys against the glossy pictures in the magazine – how their pecs and abs and biceps and triceps compare, for example. God warns Samuel. "Don't do that. You're looking at them from a human point of view. I look at the heart."

Samuel must have been disappointed because he would have chosen the very first boy to walk down Jesse's runway. He worked out with weights every day and was really built for the job. But that's not who God wanted. Then another one passed by. "He'll do, won't he?" "No," said God. Then another, and another and another. "Do you have any more," Samuel asked. "Just the youngest. He's a shepherd boy, probably not qualified," Jesse might have said. David came before Samuel. He was handsome, but a bit puny. "He's the one," God said.

St. Paul confesses of a time when he was guilty of judging Jesus from a human point of view. That is, of a time when he paid more attention to such standards of physical appearance, place of birth, life-style, the company he kept, the perpetual conflicts with the religious leaders, not to say anything about the hideous way in which he died. It was also during that time when he judged Jesus according to human standards that Paul openly persecuted the church.

How many times have you received these words by James A. Francis on a Christmas card?

Here is a man who was born in an obscure village, the child of a peasant woman. He grew up in another village. He worked in a carpenter shop until He was thirty. Then for three years He was an itinerant preacher.

He never owned a home. He never wrote a book. He never held an office. He never had a family. He never went to college. He never put His foot inside a big city. He never traveled two hundred miles from the place He was born. He never did one of the things that usually accompany greatness. He had no credentials but Himself...

While still a young man, the tide of popular opinion turned against him. His friends ran away. One of them denied Him. He was turned over to His enemies. He went through the mockery of a trial. He was nailed upon a cross between two thieves. While He was dying His executioners gambled for the only piece of property He had on earth — His coat. When He was dead, He was laid in a borrowed grave through the pity of a friend.

Nineteen long centuries have come and gone, and today He is a centerpiece of the human race and leader of the column of progress.

I am far within the mark when I say that all the armies that ever marched, all the navies that were ever built; all the parliaments that ever sat and all the kings that ever

reigned, put together, have not affected the life of man upon this earth as powerfully as has that one solitary life.

Those words are offered as an expression of faith, but they also reveal our prejudices. It's just so hard to believe that any one man could have such influence. Even harder to believe that a man such as Jesus would have such influence. It's hard to believe only because of our human points of view. God always sees things differently. **“For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.”**³

Prejudice is a disease that results in death. It's a disease that is alive and well, the protests of the 1960's didn't put an end to it. You don't have to go too far before you see it raise it's ugly head – Mel Gibson's tirade against Jews; Michael Richard's calling some African-American men the “N” word while doing a comedy routine; former NBA star, Tom Hardaway and his rant against homosexuals; and more recently Ann Coulter referring to John Edwards with the “F” word. “C'mon, it was a joke,” she said. “I would never insult gays by suggesting that they are like John Edwards. That would be mean.” Call me not very hip, but it doesn't sound funny to me.

If only we had those occasional outbursts by people in the public eye, we could almost ignore them as not being representative of the rest of us. However, the subtle and serious conversations we have belie that thought. We have a long way to go. Why else are we still debating whether or not the country is ready for a woman president, or a black president, though some now accuse him of not being “black enough.” Or is that some kind of a joke, too?

There's a big controversy in a small community in Hernando County, Florida where many don't want a private Bosnian cemetery in their rural neighborhood. One person objected to a Muslim cemetery where he wouldn't be able to be buried.⁴

It's not all racial or religious prejudice, either. There's the economic factor. I heard someone say this past week, “I'm sorry but I have no soft spot in my heart for homeless people. They're all out to milk the system for whatever they can get out of it.”

At a school workshop to teach tolerance, the leader brought two girls up to the front of the class to illustrate a point about homelessness. “Imagine that both girls are adults and fast friends,” she told the class. “Then they both lose their jobs. One of them falls back on her parents to get back on her feet. The other has no family in town, loses her apartment and is forced to live in her car.” As the circumstances of each person changed, one for the better and the other for the worse, the instructor told the girls to step away from one another. “When you think about someone who's homeless, who literally has nothing – add the additional stigma and comments we then make about these people,” she said, “then they can't help but to be further pushed down the line.”⁵

Call this disease a pandemic! There is no one of us who is in a position to point fingers at someone else. It infects all of us. Last year's Academy Award for the Best Picture went to “Crash,” a portrait

of simmering racial and cultural tension among blacks, whites, Hispanics, Asians and Arabs. What makes it a powerful and provocative film is the confounded experience that just when you have figured out who are the bad guys and who are the good guys, the bad guys turn out to be not so bad after all and the good guys turn out to be much worse than you thought. That is, everyone is indicted by their prejudices. As the Bible puts it, **“All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”**⁶

“I am not a Jew, am I?” joked Pilate. “I am a Jew,” Shylock in Shakespear’s *Merchant of Venice* proudly affirms.

Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions; fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, healed by the same means, warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer as a Christian is? If you prick us, do we not bleed? If you tickle us, do we not laugh? If you poison us, do we not die? And if you wrong us, shall we not revenge?⁷

Well, there was a Jew who was wronged and who did not revenge. He absorbed all the world’s prejudices and forgave. Through that forgiveness he captures the affections of our heart and the allegiance of our lives. This is the incredibly good news of the gospel!

“From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view.” We adopt a new point of view, God’s point of view – everyone is a person; everyone is to be taken seriously; everyone is a child of God.

1. John 1:46
2. Mark 6:3, Luke 4:22
3. Isaiah 55:8-9
4. *St. Petersburg Times*, February 16, 2007
5. *Signonsandiego.com*. February 21, 2007
6. Romans 3:23
7. Act II, Scene 1.58.