

Roman citizens in ancient times had three names: a personal name, a family name and a tribal name. Pontius Pilatus tells us the family name and the tribe of the fifth Prefect of the minor Roman province of Judea after Rome had deposed Herod Archelaus, son and heir of one third of Herod the Great's kingdom, and packed him off to exile in Gaul, but we do not know what his familiar name was; what his wife and his friends called him. In fact we don't know very much at all about the man who sat in judgement on a teacher from Nazareth around 33AD.

The Gospels are not impartial records. It was important for each evangelist to emphasise that the Roman Governor thought Jesus was innocent of any political charge. Christians had enough problems without their founder being thought of as an enemy of Rome. They wanted to show that there was no argument with the Empire; that the movement was not a political threat. So Pilate repeatedly proclaims Jesus' innocence, but pragmatic politics wins in the end.

John shows Pilate as a ditherer, moving in and out, back and forth between the prisoner and his accusers: the might of Rome represented by a shuttlecock. Two incidents during Pilate's prefecture support the Gospel's picture of a weak and artless man.

In his early days as Prefect Pilate had the standards of the Legions brought into Jerusalem at night. It was normal practice for the Legions to have their emblems close by; but to the Jews this was desecration of their holy place. The standards were graven images, against the first commandment. That Pilate had them brought in at night suggests he was not blind to the problem. However, he was deaf to the protests of the Jewish leaders. A delegation was sent to his residence at Caesarea on the coast (a much more pleasant climate than sweaty, Jerusalem with its religious maniacs). After six days of protests Pilate had the protesters surrounded by his troops in a local stadium and announced that they would all be killed if they did not stop their protest and go home. To man the Jews laid down and bared their necks ready for the swords' thrusts. Pilate backed down. The standards were removed. He had never encountered such resolution.

Jerusalem like all great cities required huge amounts of water. Pilate sought to improve the supply by building a new aquaduct - a Roman speciality. The Jews protested. Not at the improvement. They objected to Pilate using money from the Temple treasury. Pilate had some of his soldiers dress in civilian clothes and mix with the crowd. On his order they were to draw cudgels, not swords, and lay into the protesters. But these were not the crack well disciplined Roman legionaries who conquered all; these were volatile mercenaries. The bloodshed was great.

To be appointed Prefect of Judea cannot have been a welcome career move. A difficult climate and impossible people. The Romans real interest, as always, was taxation, getting as much out of their provinces as they could. The absence of conflict was desirable as that made raising taxes easier. On the whole this was a peaceful time. There had been much violence, especially in Galilee, after the death of Herod the Great; there would be a great revolt a generation later, which would be brutally suppressed, as was the Roman way. But this period was generally calm. No doubt much of this was due to a good working relationship that Pilate enjoyed with the High Priest, Joseph Caiaphas.

Caiaphas was High Priest for eighteen years. This was a remarkable achievement. The position should have been one for life but the Romans had assumed the right to appoint and to dis-appoint to the highest office. Many of Caiaphas' predecessors measured their tenure in months, sometimes days. Caiaphas was a survivor. He must have been an astute politician with nimble feet and a clever tongue. He was in post all the time that Pilate was Prefect. The two must have come to a mutually satisfactory accommodation. Soon after Pilate was called back to Rome (for an investigation after complaints about his brutal treatment of a madman who rallied some people to his cause - he claimed to know where Moses had buried treasures on Mount Gerazim in Samaria) soon after Pilate's fall and departure from History, Caiaphas was deposed.

The two leaders then had an understanding. If a detail from John's Gospel can be accepted as fact then the arresting party in the Garden was composed of police from the Temple and a guard of Roman soldiers. In other words some were under Caiaphas' authority and some answered to Pilate. In other words, the two of them had the whole affairs stitched up even before Jesus was in their hands.

There is nothing to suggest that Pilate or Caiaphas were evil men. The relative peace in Judea argues that they were both good at their jobs. Caiaphas, a subtle strategist, knew that Rome had to be accommodated because Roman wrath was bloody and irresistible. Later events would prove his fear was well founded. To the Jewish authorities Jesus' teaching was abhorrent blasphemy; he drew crowds and that made him a threat to *Pax Romana*. Pilate, a direct no nonsense soldier, ill-suited to the ways of diplomacy, wanted a quiet life so that he could amass a private fortune which was the accepted reward from an overseas posting. The two pragmatists could quickly agree on what must be done. The event that changed the history of the world will not have greatly troubled either of them.

Hannah Arendt, writing in the *New Yorker* famously spoke of the banality of evil when she described Adolph Eichmann in the dock in Israel in April 1961. Here was a man who was responsible for horrific crimes, sending millions of Jews to their deaths but to look at him, she said, he was an ordinary man, characterised not by demonic appearance but, to her eyes, by his thoughtlessness. He came across to her not as monstrous, nor stupid but rather with an authentic inability to think. I suspect, Pilate and Caiaphas, though cleverer men, brought the same vacuous, ordinariness to their

work that day, unable to see anything other than the superficial: a problem, a quick solution. On such dutiful thoughtlessness does evil thrive.