

Good Friday Three Hours' Devotion
Three Hours Devotion: Pontius Pilate
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Matthew 5:7

Matthew 27:11-26

Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy. — The gospel according to Matthew, the fifth chapter, the seventh verse.

I wash my hands;
I wash my hands of this;
I am innocent of this man's blood.

You killed him. You wanted him dead, because it is better for one man to die than for a whole nation to perish.

Your cost-benefit analysis killed him, as it so often does. It is better for Muslims to be bullied, than for you to feel unsafe. It is better for women and children to suffer in poverty, than for you to pay more for your gadgets and garments. It is better for ecosystems to collapse, than for you to

give up your favourite meals. It is better for one man to die, as long as it's not you. That is a price you are willing to pay.

I gave you a choice, and you chose Barabbas. You chose this brigand, this murderer. You chose violence, as you so often do. I don't blame you. God knows I would've done the same. It is a dog-eat-dog, eat-or-be-eaten kind of world, red in whip and dagger. No one makes it in this world without some ruthlessness, not least Roman governors. We're not so different: you and me.

See to it yourselves, then. Let his blood be upon your hands. And if you like, let it be on your children too. No sense letting the welfare of future generations get in the way of our immediate gratification.

I wash my hands;
I wash my hands of this;
I am innocent of this man's blood.

Yet here's a spot. The smell of blood still.

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Are you their king?

Dear God, say no.

Just say what you're meant to, the politically expedient: there is no king but Caesar.

You have to help me to help you. I need a reason to pardon you; an excuse for mercy. That's how it works, in such a world as ours. There is a price for everything. There is one for your head, and if you don't pay it, someone else will have to, and it sure isn't going to be me.

Do you not hear? They accuse you of blasphemy, which I don't care about. Why should I? Your god seems no more real than mine. They don't do me any good; and, you, well, let's just say I'd have switched allegiances a long time ago. And they accuse you of treason, which I must care about. Perils of the job. Let's be frank: we have no *god* but Caesar, but power, but steel. Say you are a god, if you want: there are pills for that kind of thing. But, by Jove, don't claim to be king. Don't you dare dabble in politics. Separation of Church

and State, and all that. Keep your moral theology in kitchens and bedrooms, or better still, in good intentions, never to be expressed in the real world. Leave that to the grown ups: government and law and war and money.

My wife, she had a dream about you. She thinks you are a righteous man. And maybe you are, but what has that gained you? Nothing. It doesn't pay to be righteous. Not here, anyway. Just look at where it's landed you. Mocked and beaten, spat upon, dressed up in blood and bruises. And worse, you've managed to upset my wife.

Maybe it's your own fault, then, this mess you have gotten yourself into. Why did you come into the city? There are bad people here. You should've known better. And if they manage to ensnare you, maybe you deserve it. Were you drunk when you made that decision? You have a reputation for that kind of thing, you know? And why did you arouse these men's fury? What did you expect would happen? You were asking for it. Don't look to me for mercy. You should've taken the proper precautions. You should've known

your place, and stayed there. Don't look to me.
Heal yourself.

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Then what shall I do with this so-called Christ?
On one hand, I could let him go. I could find him
not guilty by reason of insanity, seeing as he
thinks he's the Son of God. So does Caesar, I
suppose, but Jesus is not nearly rich and
powerful enough for it just to seem like an
affectation.

Or I could just give him back to you lot, and *you*
can stone him to death, or whatever it is that you
do to your unfashionable prophets these days.
But you want him crucified. And the customer is
always right. The people have spoken, and their
word is *crucify*.

But why? What evil has he done? What is the
crime whose just deserts is death upon the cross?
I like to think I am a just man, fair in my
expressions of imperial might, my meting out of
punishment and, less frequently, reward. Not

kind, by any stretch of the imagination, but just. So, give me a crime. And don't just scream treason. I need proof, and he has said nothing about being king of anyone. Clearly, he's not as dumb as he looks.

But OK, OK: crucify, crucify. And for good measure, a flogging. And for even better measure, a mocking: enter a reed for a sceptre and a crown of thorns. Exit clothing, and dignity. *A panto macabre*, if you will and for your viewing pleasure. You can't say I withheld anything from you. Vox populi; and your wish is my command. Not kind—certainly not to him—but generous, in a twisted sort of way. Remember now, next election, how I capitulated to your bloodlust. Don't forget to sign up to my newsletter; and consider buying some branded merchandise while you're there. I would like a promotion. Legate of Syria, would be a nice step up.

But remember also:
I wash my hands;
I wash my hands of this;
I am innocent of this man's blood.

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I have taken a life, and it feels like nothing. This isn't my first rodeo, and won't be my last. Jesus of Nazareth is a statistic, to be forgotten just like the others. I'm not even the worst offender. Some people say that when Varus was in charge of Syria, he crucified *two thousand* Jews at a go. Pesky rebels, after Great Herod died. Varus: what a mensch.

People are killed all the time, and none of us so much as pause to pray for their souls. These men I lead—boys, really—only their mothers know them from Eve. Here they are, fighting for freedom or glory or security or whatever it is that we're putting on the ads these days. Most of them won't make it home for anymore Christmasses. And the men they *kill*? Who cares what their names are? Frankly, I don't want to know. It's too upsetting.

And then there's the slaves. I haven't the faintest where they're from. I suppose I could find out.

There are probably records. I bet I could even make their lives a little easier, and not just the ones in my residence: even those poor cretins out in the fields and mines. I could fight for a living wage for them: a jubilee, even. I could reunite them with their families. I could, but I probably won't. Who has the time?

Mercy is always the good that is left undone.

And so it remains, ever and always: slaves, soldiers, men on death row. All just statistics to be forgotten, conveniently abstract and anonymous.

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Just give them the body. It is the very least I can do. An act of mercy, even kindness, at the last, in this morass of unjust violence I have perpetuated. It is too little, too late, of course, after so long a career in this bloody business. Too little, too late: the man is dead, and I have killed him. There are not two ways about it. I tried to

wash, but even all the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten these guilty hands.

This is what I would like to be remembered for, actually, this final act. I could have had his corpse thrown into a pit, an unmarked grave like the fate of so many in his station. But I didn't. They asked for the body, and instead of turning them away or worse, I let them have what they wanted. I let them bury their king, their friend. Too little, too late, I know, but it's not nothing.

I know my place in history is sealed. *He suffered under Pontius Pilate*, people will say. I will not be remembered as a good man, but as the *hegemon* who, by cruelty or cowardice or both, murdered God. It seems silly now to complain that history so often so unforgivingly lacks nuance, but it does. It paints people into heroes and villains, and I know which side of the ledger I occupy. Were it that I had listened to my wife; thus saith countless men like me.

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I don't know if I would have remembered you. There were so many rebels, so many sages. There was always religious squabbling that may also have been political squabbling; these things always gets so tangled up. Strange places, these backwaters of the empire. Maybe there should have been cultural sensitivity training at the military academy, or something. Yours was not a typical case, to be sure, not in my experience, anyway: if you were meant to be like the other messiahs, you did a spectacularly poor job at it. All the same, I can't say that I would've remembered you for sure. There were so many of you. I cared so little.

I can't imagine that you'll forget me, though. The man who could have set you free, but didn't, who instead gave into the shrieks of the mob, and sent you to your death. And I don't know if I want you to forget, as terrible as the memory must be. It is more terrible to be forgotten. No: remember me, you tragic and holy fool. Remember me, even in your prayers. Pray for me, you king of the Jews, friend of sinners, sinners like me. Forgive me. Have mercy.