

Isaiah 55:1-9
Psalm 63:1-8
1 Corinthians 10:1-13
Luke 13:1-9

Notes on the Gospel Lesson

There is a common misperception about Pontius Pilate. It holds that he was a good and well-intentioned although weak individual. The truth is far different.

Pilate is mentioned in several first century sources in addition to the New Testament. (The inscription to the right bearing his name was found in Caesarea.) Most of the information about him comes from the Jewish historian Flavius Josephus. He writes that Pilate's first act as procurator infuriated the population of Judea: his troops marched into Jerusalem bearing standards that proclaimed Tiberias Caesar as a god. On another occasion, there was a demonstration against Pilate for taking money out of the Temple treasury. Pilate sent soldiers dressed as civilians into the crowd. At a signal, the soldiers pulled out clubs and began severely beating the protesters.



To our knowledge, in the history of the Roman Empire there was only one governor who was removed from office because of his excessive cruelty. A few years after Jesus' execution, there was a demonstration on Mount Gerizim by a large number of Samaritans. Pilate ordered his cavalry to attack the crowd. Many of the Samaritans were slaughtered. After word of this incident came to Roman officials, Pilate was recalled to Rome in A.D. 36.

In this week's Gospel Lesson, Jesus does not express shock that Pilate had slaughtered a number of people who had come to worship in the Temple. No one would have been surprised at another act of cruelty by Pilate. Instead of using the news as an opportunity to condemn Rome or Pilate himself, Jesus takes on the common perception that tragedy was God's way of punishing sinners. Throughout the gospels, Jesus continues to deny the link between sin and suffering. Unfortunately, that belief persists to this very day.

We have no knowledge outside the New Testament of the tower of Siloam or of the incident to which Jesus refers. The Pool of Siloam was a well-known landmark in the southeastern section of Jerusalem and we can assume that the tower was nearby. For centuries, the small pool at the end of Hezekiah's Tunnel was thought to be the remnants of the Pool of Siloam but this was shown to be incorrect when the Pool itself was uncovered in 2004 (see photo right).



Jesus used these two tragedies as a call to repentance. It is important to note that repent does not only mean to feel regret for one's actions. The Hebrew word translated as "repent" is *shuwb*, which literally means "to turn around". An example used by a seminary professor is helpful. He says that if one is in Dallas, Texas and wants to drive to Shreveport, Louisiana then they should drive on Interstate 20. If after driving two hours the person finds that instead of approaching Shreveport, they have headed west and are on their way to New Mexico, they then have a choice. They can regret driving west instead of east and continue on until they reach California. The other alternative is to get off the interstate, *turn around*, and drive back east until they reach Shreveport. Repentance requires a change in action in addition to regret.