



## Lukas Vischer: Pilate, the Empire, and the Confession of the Church

### 1. Place and Date of Publication

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### 2. Historical Context

Churches around the world prepared themselves for the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Calvin's birth (2009). In this context (November 3<sup>rd</sup>-6<sup>th</sup>, 2004), an international consultation on Calvin's economic and social witness took place in Geneva. Lukas Vischer contributed this biblical meditation on Luke 13.1-5.

### 3. Summary

Pilate, a governor in the Roman Empire, had told his henchmen to kill a group of Galileans who were bringing their offerings to the Temple. This story, told in Luke 13.1-5, reports a power play which goes very well with Pilate's harsh image of the time and with his image in the Passion story of the New Testament. From the Passion, Pilate's name gained access to the creeds of the Church: *Jesus Christus—crucifixus sub Pontio Pilato*. Many people think that the intention behind the mentioning of Pilate was to establish Jesus' crucifixion in historical time. But certainly that is not all. The Apostles' Creed which has been repeated to this day in the Christian church reminds us that there is a *conflict* between Jesus and Pilate, between the message of love and the political power of the empire which is built upon violence (John 19.10: *Do you not know that I have power to release you, and power to crucify you?*). The confession confronts the church with this power. As the witness to God's love in every age, the church must always count on coming into conflict with the destroying power of imperialistic thinking.

The people who brought the news of Pilate's latest crime to Jesus were no doubt expecting him to take a position on it. Jesus, however, does not even get excited about the violence, nor does he discuss the guilt or innocence of the Galileans. While the commentators remain in the grip of this world and its laws and machinations, Jesus looks in a different direction. He is focusing on the people who brought him the news.

In his view, violence can only be met with love. A community is forming around him which does not reach for its sword. Jesus calls for conversion: opening the eyes to God's kingdom, which – as a kingdom of love - can become reality here and now.

This new way to true life is not exempt from persecution and oppression; Jesus' disciples will perhaps even die like Jesus himself. But they won't die *just as they did*, not like the unfortunate Galileans. The disciples will have become witnesses who stand head and shoulders above the events. - Jesus reminds them of an accident. A tower by the pool of Siloam had collapsed, burying eighteen people under its ruins. Why were they the ones to whom this accident happened, while others escaped? In any case there was no moral reason why they should die. - What interests Jesus again is whether the "onlookers" hear, through that accident, God's call to repentance.

Who are we? Are we just onlookers or observers of the events which come one after the other? What is our answer?

# REFORMED WORLD

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How to celebrate the 500th anniversary of Calvin's birth in 2009?

Towards an alliance of Protestant churches?

Oriental Orthodox-Reformed dialogue

Adventist-Reformed dialogue

African Independent-Reformed dialogue

Pilate, the Empire and the confession of the church

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The Catholic Presbyterian (1879-1883) The Quarterly Register (1886-1936) The Presbyterian Register (1937-1948) The Presbyterian World (1949-1955) The Reformed and Presbyterian World (1956-1970) Reformed World (1971)

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Odair Pedroso Mateus

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## Editorial

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**The refugees and the pastor** - They were thousands fleeing persecution because of their faith. One of them was a widow “still stunned by the murder of her husband and anxious about providing for their three small children”. The pastor not only prayed for them and offered them the strong hand of solidarity. He also wrote letters and made a long journey to seek diplomatic intercession for them. They were French Protestants. He was John Calvin. As churches around the world prepare themselves to celebrate the 500th anniversary of Calvin’s birth in 2009, an international consultation on Calvin’s economic and social witness, held in Geneva late in 2004, urges the Reformed family to rediscover Calvin beyond the tenacious stereotypes of Calvin. The statement adopted at that consultation is published in the present issue.

**Break the wall!** - The Scottish theologian William Blaikie wrote about the Alliance in 1884 that “if we get our hearts large enough to embrace all our Presbyterian brethren, the proofs of enlargement will go on, and we shall begin to long earnestly for wider fellowship”. Blaikie would probably be surprised to learn that more than one century later the Alliance would be not only alive and active but also fully committed to the spiritual and ecumenical vision of seeking “wider fellowship” that he had put forward. In the past thirty-five years WARC has been involved in ecumenical dialogue with a wide range of Christian churches and Christian world communions. This issue of Reformed World includes the reports of several years of theological and ecumenical conversations that the Alliance has had with the Oriental family of Orthodox Churches, with the Organisation of African Independent Churches as well as with the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Christianity in the African context, the service of women in the church as well as the mission of Reformation churches in a world of widespread injustice and environmental destruction are some of the themes addressed by these ecumenical conversations.

# Pilate, the Empire, and the Confession of the Church

Lukas Vischer

*"...was crucified under Pontius Pilate..." The name of the governor of the Roman Empire in Judea is mentioned in statements of faith - such as the so-called Apostles' Creed - made by Christians who lived in areas under Roman domination. Was it mentioned just to establish the crucifixion in historical time? This is not all, argues the Reformed theologian Lukas Vischer in this biblical meditation. By mentioning Pilate, the confession reminds us that there was a conflict "between the message of love and the political power of the empire".*

**Luke 13.1-5:** "At that very time there were some present who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. He asked them, 'Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? No, I tell you, but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did. Or those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them - do you think they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did.'"

Pontius Pilate, a governor in the Roman Empire, had ordered a power play. He had told his henchmen to kill a group of Galileans who were bringing their offerings to the Temple. The precise circumstances are not given in the text.

Were these people acting suspiciously somehow? In any case, their own blood was mingled with that of the animals which they were bringing as sacrifices to God.

The figure of Pilate is familiar to us from the Passion story. Jesus was brought to him as an accused person. He tried to keep from getting involved in the affair. The Jesus movement was, in his eyes, an "internal Jewish" matter, which should have been brought to a Jewish court. But finally he gave in and condemned Jesus to die on the cross, which was the Roman way of executing rebels. Pilate is portrayed as a holder of power who is forced to exercise his office and who finally, with some reason, is able to "wash his hands of" Jesus' blood.

From other sources we know that Pilate could be harsh. A Roman knight of Samnite

descent (a southern Italian mountain tribe), he had become Procurator of Judea in 26 AD. His way of discharging his office soon earned him hatred. He was openly suspicious of the Jewish religion. To make clear whose word was law, he did not hesitate to use provocation. Soon after taking office, he sent Roman troops on the march, carrying the image of the emperor which was particularly objectionable to the Jews. In Caesarea he had a temple built in honour of Emperor Tiberius. He illegally took money from the Jerusalem Temple treasury to finance a water main, and when a group of Samaritans carrying arms gathered at the foot of the Gerizim in 36 AD, he had them seized immediately; some were put to death on the spot, some later. Shortly after this event, he was recalled to Rome, and is said to have committed suicide there. This news which was brought to Jesus therefore fits very well with Pilate's overall image. He was a governor who thought his power entitled him to take drastic measures, and did not hesitate to risk making himself unpopular.

And *this* is the governor whose name has been repeated to this day in the creeds of the Christian church: Jesus Christ - *crucifixus sub Pontio Pilato*. In the gospel of Matthew we are told that Pilate's wife intervened on behalf of Jesus: "Have nothing to do with that innocent man, for today I have suffered a great deal because of a dream about him" (27.19). Legend tells us what she had dreamed: she had heard voices calling, *crucified under Pontius Pilate*, voices swelling to a mighty chorus, repeating

together again and again, *crucified under Pontius Pilate*. Thus she foresaw the astonishing fact that her husband, a governor in the Roman Empire, would have a central place in the confession of the Christian Church.

How are we to understand this? Many people think the intention, at this point in the creed, was simply to establish the Crucifixion in historical time. Jesus' death took place at a specific moment, for reasons verified by historical sources. But certainly that is not all. The confession reminds us that there was a conflict between Jesus and Pilate, between the message of love and the political power of the empire. Jesus represents the kingdom of love, Pilate the empire, to the extent that it is built upon violence. Jesus refrains from offering any resistance. Pilate bases himself on his power: "Do you not know that I have power to release you, and power to crucify you?" (Jn 19.10). The confession confronts the church with this power. It tells us, like Jesus, you too are confronted with empires built upon violence. The church, as the witness to God's love in every age, must count on coming into conflict with the destroying might of imperialistic thinking.

But let us return to our text. The people who brought the news of Pilate's latest crime to Jesus were no doubt expecting him to take a position on it. What should we think of the death of the Galileans? What will Jesus say about this worsening situation? Is there going to be an uprising? How will he and his disciples react? Will he call on them

to resist? Or did these Galileans cross some line that they should not have crossed? Were they guilty, did they deserve to die?

Jesus makes no “comment on the situation”, and he also makes no statement on the relative guilt or innocence of the Galileans. He is focusing on the people who brought him the news. He tells them that it is not a question of how this situation should be evaluated. The question is rather, what consequences does the criminal action of the Roman governor have *for your life*? To do justice to the worsening of the situation, you have to make a decision.

No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did.

Evidently there are two ways of dealing with this event. We can observe the event and analyse it. We can comment on it. We can discuss the guilt or innocence of the Galileans, get excited about the violence of those in power, consider whether our cup is full and active resistance will break out. But fundamentally, everything stays the same. Commentators are still in the grip of this world and its laws and machinations. They are carried like driftwood with the stream of events. And possibly they will indeed, like the Galileans struck down by Pilate, also become victims of the spiral of violence, and will perish *just as they did*.

Jesus is looking in a different direction from the outset. Acts of violence, like the criminal act of Pilate, can also serve as a sign to us that our life needs to change

direction. They can move us to turn back. Jesus’ approach to imperialistic thinking goes deeper. In his view, violence can only be met with love. A community is forming around him which does not reach for its sword. Whether or not these persons are guilty or innocent remains to be seen. In any case they are no more guilty than any other Galileans. The real issue is what will be our witness. “Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth” (Mt 5.5). In the turmoil of the times, Jesus calls for repentance and conversion, opening our eyes to God’s kingdom of love, which can become reality here and now.

No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did.

This does not mean that, after we have repented, we shall be safe from violence and persecution. It does not mean that, while “others” lose their lives, we shall save our own skin. The whole emphasis is on conversion as the way to the true life, a life in love in the midst of the vicious circles of this world. This new way is not exempt from danger. Like Jesus himself, his disciples will be exposed to persecution and oppression. Perhaps they will even die, but *not just as they did*, not like the unfortunate Galileans. The disciples will have become witnesses who stand head and shoulders above the events.

As if to make his point clear, Jesus reminds them of an accident which had recently taken place. A tower by the pool

of Siloam had collapsed, burying eighteen people under its ruins. This time there was no crime - it was chance, an accident. Perhaps there was some carelessness involved. Perhaps the tower had not been well designed. Today there would immediately be calls for investigation by a committee. But even if charges were brought against somebody, it would not change the fact that eighteen people unintentionally lost their lives. Why were they the ones to whom this accident happened? Why did other people escape? Here as well, Jesus does not enter into such questions. The degree of these persons' guilt or innocence does not interest him, in this context. In any case they were no more guilty than other persons, and there was no moral reason why they should die. What interests Jesus is whether the "onlookers" hear, through this event, God's call to repentance.

No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did.

Who are we? Are we just observers of the events which come one after the other? Newspaper readers? Television watchers? People who are well-informed about the crimes and accidents which happen in our world? Have you heard what just happened? What do you think of that?

What happened today? Another house in the Occupied Territories of Palestine was levelled. Another suicide bombing in Israel. The bombing of Fallujah; another series of attacks on American convoys in Iraq, and on Iraqi police stations. Another earthquake under the sea, but less interesting than the first tsunami, because it only killed hundreds of people instead of thousands, and none of them were tourists from rich countries.

And what is our answer?