

# Pilate

*Matthew 27:11-26; Mark  
15:1-15; Luke 23:1-25; John  
18:28-40*

*Year B Christ the King ;  
Year C Christ the King  
(Episcopal)*

copyright © 2014  
Freeman Ng  
www.AuthorFreeman.com



## Parts by scene

■ = large part   ▲ = medium sized part   ● = small part

		1	2	3
▲	Claudia	▲		▲
■	Pilate - Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor of Judea, an intelligent and thoughtful man trying to do an impossible job	▲	▲	
●	Jesus		●	
●	Caiaphas - the high priest of Israel, a skilled and ruthless politician who nevertheless cares only about the good of the nation		●	
▲	Servant - a servant in Pilate's house			▲
▲	Judas - possibly the deepest thinker and best organizer, the one who usually sees the big picture most clearly, and also the disciple with the best sense of humor			▲

## Scene 1

Claudia , Pilate

*{Evening at Pilate's home.}*

**Claudia**     *[frantically]* Husband! Husband!

**Pilate**        *[affectionately]* There you are! How was your -

**Claudia**     *[interrupting fearfully]* Where are you going? What are you doing?

**Pilate**        *[simply]* To the palace. I've been called in for a special case. I would have told you, but you were napping so peacefully.

**Claudia**     *[painfully]* "Peacefully!" Gods!

**Pilate**     *[suddenly concerned]* What's wrong? Are you all right?

**Claudia**   *[urgently]* Don't go! Stay home! Let your deputies judge the case. Stay home with me!

**Pilate**     *[gently explanatory]* You know I can't do that for no reason. And besides, Caiaphas himself has called for this session. I'm sure it's for some frivolous reason -- it's always a life or death crisis with these people! -- but do you know the trouble he can make for me if I don't personally attend to it?

**Claudia**   Let him! He can't do worse than...

**Pilate**     Than what?

**Claudia**   *[despairing]* Oh Gods! I can't say it. I don't know how to say it!

**Pilate**     *[gently but with a little impatience]* Well...I really have to go now. We'll talk tonight.

*{He begins to leave.}*

**Claudia**   *[desperately]* No! No! Wait! I...I had a dream!

**Pilate**     A dream?

**Claudia**   A terrible, terrible dream! The man you're going to judge...you mustn't! You mustn't have anything to do with him!

**Pilate**     *[skeptically]* Because of...a dream?

**Claudia**   I know! I know it's crazy. But the dream was so vivid, so...different. It was a message from the gods!

**Pilate**     *[disappointed]* The gods? We've had this talk before. Do we need to have it again? You're welcome to believe in whatever deities and superstitions you wish. I have no inclination to live my life that way.

**Claudia**   *[in anger and anguish]* Well you should! The gods are real! They are bright and transforming - and dark as vengeance. They make us, and they break us! They are stone, they are the sea. They are the hawk, beautiful and cruel, circling the sky. They wait for you in your chambers as we speak! It is not *you* who will judge *them*.

**Pilate** And what exactly will they sentence me to? Is it a threat to my life that you dreamed? If so, you know that we live with this danger every day...

**Claudia** *[interrupting]* No! It's not your life they will take. That would be too painless! It is your soul!

**Pilate** *[dismissively]* Oh really, dear, my *soul*? As I have asserted many times, the soul is an illusion, a trick of the light, our need to believe we are more than we are. They can have it!

**Claudia** *[desperately]* All right, then not your soul, but your *name*! Your reputation, the memory of you through the years. You will be the one who executes him!

**Pilate** How can you be so sure that's what I'll rule?

**Claudia** *[wildly]* It's fate! The gods have spoken! Your only choice is whether you will be their instrument!

**Pilate** *[with a sudden burst of loud assertiveness]* Then I will choose to be myself!  
*[quietly and compassionately]* Listen, maybe you're right. Maybe the universe is not as reason and clear sight make it out to be. Maybe I go to my own doom at the hands of that to which I have never been able to offer my belief. But if that's the case, then I'll go as myself, the man you married, and not some patchwork doll of fear and desperation. If I did anything else, wouldn't *that* destroy me just as utterly?

*{A long pause.}*

**Claudia** *[in resignation]* Go, husband. And may...may the light be with you.

**Pilate** *[lovingly]* You are my light.

**Claudia** *[with love and grief]* And you are the man I married.

*{Pilate exits.}*

## Scene 2

Caiaphas , Jesus , Pilate

*{In Pilate's judgment chamber.}*

*{Note: almost all of this scene comes verbatim from a scene in "Jesus of Montreal", one of my ten favorite movies of all time, which I've watched once a year around Easter for over 20 years now. I highly recommend it!}*

**Pilate** *[beginning with a tone of bemused curiosity]* What are you accused of?

**Jesus** *[replying earnestly throughout]* You tell me.

**Pilate** Are you a member of a sect? *[waits for a response but gets none]* Another prophet?

**Jesus** Do you think so? Or is that what you've heard?

**Pilate** You speak of founding a kingdom.

**Jesus** A kingdom not of this earth.

**Pilate** A sort of Elysium? After we die? *[waits for a response but gets none, then continues more seriously]* Did you preach against Caesar and Rome?

**Jesus** No.

**Pilate** Then...what do you teach?

**Jesus** "Greater love hath no man than to offer his life for friends."

**Pilate** *[gently condescending]* Isn't that a bit...optimistic? You wouldn't last a week in Rome.

*{Pilate withdraws to speak privately with Caiaphas}*

**Pilate** He's harmless.

**Caiaphas** *[firmly contradicting him]* He's a menace! A fanatic!

**Pilate** If I tried every fanatic in the Middle East, half the population would die.

**Caiaphas** He rails against the priests.

**Pilate** *[breezily]* I've always held priests to be either idiots or profiteers.

**Caiaphas** *[with the first hints of an edge]* The priests support Rome. You wouldn't want rumors spread. Tiberius is a suspicious ruler. We want to help you govern, but...one must set an example.

*{Note: my own addition to the movie scene.}*

**Pilate** *[quietly]* You know, that's the second time I've been threatened today.

*{Note: back to the movie.}*

**Caiaphas** *[in a milder tone]* He attracts crowds. He has disciples.

**Pilate** *[interrupting]* Who are unarmed.

**Caiaphas** He claims to perform miracles. He's caused riots in the temple.

*{Note: my own addition to the movie scene.}*

**Pilate** Many have done worse. That murderer Barabbas, for example. Suppose this year's pardon could only go to one of them?

**Caiaphas** You know who I would choose!

**Pilate** *[gesturing to the crowd]* Who would *they* choose?

**Caiaphas** *[coldly and a little smugly]* They will choose the Nazarene as well.

**Pilate** *[with some uncertainty]* You seem very certain.

**Caiaphas** *[with a real edge of threat]* You think I don't know my job?

*{Note: back to the movie.}*

**Caiaphas** *[earnestly and urgently]* Crucify him! It's better to sacrifice one man than for the whole nation to be destroyed.

*{Pilate returns to the court.}*

**Pilate** Why are your enemies so set against you? Your own family has all but disowned you. In Nazareth you're an outcast. Here in Jerusalem, the establishment opposes you. How did you turn them all against you?

**Jesus** They hate me for no reason. Simply because I revealed the truth.

**Pilate** What is truth?

*{There's a long pause while that question hangs in the air unanswered.}*

**Pilate**      *[with firm but sympathetic finality]* My soldiers will take you. They're brutes, of course. We don't get the elite. You'll be whipped, then crucified. It won't be pleasant. You're not Roman, but try to be brave. *[waxing philosophical, slowly and a little sadly]* Who knows? I may be doing you a favor. A philosopher once said, "The freedom to kill oneself during hardship is the greatest gift man has." In a few hours you'll cross the Styx, the River of Death whence no one has returned except Orpheus, it is said. Perhaps your kingdom lies on the far shore. Or maybe Jupiter awaits you, or Athena, or the god of the Germans, or the Franks. *[with a combination of defiance and world-weariness]* There are so many gods. *[after a pause]* Perhaps the river has no other shore and vanishes into darkness. You at least will know.

### Scene 3

Claudia , Judas , Servant

*{Later that night, back at Pilate's home, Judas barges in, followed by the servant.}*

**Servant**      Sir! You can't come in!

**Judas**        *[frantically]* I have to see him!

**Claudia**      *[imperiously]* Who's that? What's happening?

**Servant**      Sorry, ma'am! He forced his way in.

**Judas**        Where is he? I've got to speak with him!

**Claudia**      My husband is at the palace. What do you want with him?

**Judas**        *[grimly]* The palace! *[frantically]* What about Caiaphas? Is he here?

**Servant**      *[to Pilate's wife]* I'll call the guards, ma'am!

**Claudia**      *[to the servant]* Wait! *[to Judas, suddenly, soberly suspicious]* He's at the palace, too. What's your business with them?

**Judas**        *[in despair]* Oh, God! I've got to reach them. I've got to stop them!

*{He begins to runs out, but she stops him.}*

**Claudia**      Wait! *[with dawning realization]* I *know* your business! *[harshly]* You're too late. My husband has been gone for hours. He has certainly already...done what he went to do.

**Judas**      *[painfully]* No! *[then in sudden surprise]* Wait: how do you know what my business is?

**Servant**    Ma'am, I think he's mad! Let me call the guards.

**Claudia**    *[ignoring the servant and speaking to Judas in a gentle but ominous tone]* The gods spoke to you today, too, didn't they? Did they do it through a dream as well? Or did they appear to you directly, in all their ghastly splendor?

**Judas**      *[evasively]* What do you mean, "the gods"? What are you talking about?

**Claudia**    *[with growing certainty]* You're involved somehow. Like my husband. What did you do? What was your role? Were you one of the priests who schemed against him, or just one of their spies? What did you do to Joshua of Nazareth?

**Judas**      *[freaking out that he has been discovered]* Nothing! I was his follower! He couldn't have gotten this far without me! But I had to...I thought I had to...*[trails off, then starts up again apparently randomly in anguished cries]* I didn't know! I thought I knew! I did what I thought I had to do...for the nation!

**Claudia**    *[breaking into wild laughter]* A betrayer! Praise the gods! Next to you, my husband will only be *half* a monster!

**Servant**    *[to himself]* Great gods, they're both mad! *[calling over another servant]* You! Send a message to the master at the palace that her ladyship is not feeling well, and that he should come home as soon as possible. And have a detachment of guards position themselves outside this door. They are not to come in unless I call for them, understand? Now go. Quickly!

**Judas**      *[pleadingly]* But I didn't know! I did my best, knowing what I did! How can I be blamed for not knowing everything? Why would the Messiah not make himself clear???

**Claudia**    *[laughing again]* Do you think that's how the gods work? Poor little boy! The gods toy with us; they torture us. They play their games, with us as the pieces! Forever and ever you will stand with my husband: the betrayer and the executioner. *[breaking down in despair]* Forever and ever, world without end!

- Servant** Ma'am? You seem...over tired. Why don't you go to bed, and I'll see the stranger out? The master will be home soon. Everything will look better in the morning.
- Claudia** *[contemptuously]* Morning! *[in a climax of oracular power]* There will be no morning! Darkness will cover the earth tomorrow! Darkness and lamentation! And in that darkness, my husband's doom and yours: to be remembered forever and ever as the ones who brought it to pass!
- {She exits.}*
- Judas** *[weakly]* I'm too late. What more is there to do? One more thing at least. Maybe I can still beat him to death's door.
- Servant** *[indignantly]* Now see here! I don't know who you are or what you've been babbling about, but you come crashing in here like a common thug, riling up her ladyship and disturbing the whole household, and now when your mischief's been done, you start whining about doing away with yourself? For shame!
- Judas** *[wearily and a little crazily]* You don't understand. I was the smartest of the bunch, the one who planned out everything, and here at the moment of my triumph, I got it all wrong. *[a sudden outburst]* Why wouldn't he just tell me! Did he *want* to die? *[in a spent voice to the servant]* You have no idea the damage I've done. *I* have no idea.
- Servant** *[in a grudgingly encouraging tone]* Well, maybe not, but I do know this: all you can do is your best, day by day, and if you mess up, there's always tomorrow.
- Judas** *[in sudden petulance]* You think I'm some village boy who broke a pot and can pay for his sin by doing housework for the owner for a month? You can't conceive of the scale of wrong I've done! *[in a low, haunted voice]* My own death won't be near payment enough.
- Servant** *[compassionately and gently, as if to a child]* Listen, I don't care how big a wrong is. The power of right must be bigger, mustn't it? The devils can't be stronger than the God who created them, can they? Why don't you do as the lady and go to bed? Everything naturally looks darker at night. You'll feel much better in the morning.
- Judas** *[in a dead voice]* "There will be no morning." "Darkness will cover the earth." Darkness and doom.

*{Judas exits.}*

---

*You can read my thoughts about this play and respond with your own at  
**[www.WineskinProject.net/blog/pilate](http://www.WineskinProject.net/blog/pilate)***

Copyright © 2014 by Freeman Ng and the Wineskin Project

Freeman Ng is a writer, poet, and Google software engineer living in Oakland, California. He's also the author of:

- *Joan* - a novelization of the life of Joan of Arc
- *Who Am I?* - a personalizable picture book
- **Haiku Diem** - a daily haiku feed that's been going since July, 2010

**[www.AuthorFreeman.com](http://www.AuthorFreeman.com)**