

Pilate, melancholy bureaucrat representing Rome in Jerusalem, charged with collecting taxes and keeping the peace, encounters the Ancient of Days who comes to him as one unknown. Frederick Buechner provides color commentary.

After dinner the evening before he meets Jesus, the talk turned to politics, and Pilate was up for hours, talking and imbibing one too many drafts of the latest craft beer. His usual pre-breakfast litany included a resolution to moderate his consumption of alcohol. The resolution, however futile, always buoyed Pilate’s spirit.

Not even the morning paper upset him, leafing through it in the back seat of the limousine as he is driven into the city. It contains the usual grim recital—poverty, crime, disease, corruption in high places, ignorance and superstition and indifference in low places and everywhere else—but he feels for the moment wonderfully isolated from it all as the car rolls along and he glances out at the world from time to time through the tinted windows.

Children play in the street, heavily armed police patrol seedier neighborhoods, sightseers feed pigeons outside the temple gates. Pilate is essentially a law-and-order man, and he is maintaining both as best he can. If the malcontents, the ivy tower, tweed wearing set, the bleeding hearts, want to carry on about rottenness at the heart of things, that is their business.

His concern is with rottenness in the streets. Any hint of insurrection, any threat of violence, must be quelled. All in all he is doing a decent job. His approval rating in Rome is high enough to guarantee reappointment.

When he was a young man, he dreamed of greater things, but he could have done worse. He is a friend of Caesar’s. His sons have the best education money can buy. His wife is subject to troubling dreams, but she has a good analyst.

Their marriage is not what it once was. Passion has waned with the waxing of the daily demands of work and family life. They now take comfort in their dream of retirement in the villa outside Ostia, something their financial advisor assures them is within reach. They will enjoy visits from the children and grandchildren, the evening martini, the walk along the beach.

For now, Pilate has appointments to keep and he keeps them. The chief of the occupational forces is in a sweat because the high holidays are upon them and he expects trouble from the fanatics. There has been some kind of demonstration at one of the city gates with some up-country messiah at the center of it. The question is how to handle it without making it worse.

Pilate agrees to see the man himself, if that is what is needed to keep order. A phone call comes from his wife. She is apologizing for bothering him, but she has had a bad night, the same dark dreams.

As she talks, he swivels around in his chair to look out the window behind him. Down in the courtyard a ragged child is talking to one of the soldiers, and he wonders if it could be one of the

epidemic children, the disease clinging to its clothes like lice. A pigeon perched on the windowsill fans one wing out, then tucks it in again.

When his wife hangs up, as she does whenever she knows he is not paying attention, Pilate finds he is no longer alone. They have brought the up-country messiah in for questioning. The man stands in front of the desk with his hands tied behind his back. You can see that he has been roughed up a bit. His upper lip is absurdly puffed out and one eye is swollen shut. He looks unwashed and smells unwashed.

There is something comic about the way he stands there, bent slightly forward because of the way his hands are tied and looking down at the floor through his one good eye. If there were just the two of them, Pilate thinks, he would give him carfare and send him back to the sticks where he came from.

As it is, however, guards are watching, and on the wall the official portrait of Tiberius Caesar is watching, the fat, powdered face, the toothy imperial smile, so he goes through the formalities.

“So you’re the king of the Jews,” he says. “The head Jew,” because there hasn’t been one of them yet who hasn’t made that his claim—David come back to give Judea back to the Jews. The man says, “*You* say that I am a king. I was born for this, and for this I have come into the cosmos: to bear witness to the truth.”

Pilate asks his question half because he would give most anything to know the answer and half because he believes there is no answer and would give a good deal to hear that too. It would mean one thing less to have to worry about. “What is truth?” The man with the split lip, with Tiberius grinning down from the wall like a pumpkin, doesn’t say a blessed thing.

Some silences are criminal; some silences are pregnant. Court is convened, but Pilate is no longer judge. The books are opened, but no longer books of Roman law. The Ancient of Days, in the pregnant silence of eternity, has opened the Book of Life.

Pilate asks Jesus what is truth and what Jesus hits Pilate over the head with is Pilate himself. Jesus just stands in silence in a way that throws Pilate back on his own silence, the truth of himself. His compromises have purchased a measure of security, a modicum of influence, modest comforts, but at what cost?

Particular truths can be stated in words: love is better than hate, light travels faster than sound, cancer can sometimes be cured if you discover it in time.

But TRUTH itself cannot be so stated. For truth, THE truth of one’s life can only be revealed in an encounter with the One who is TRUTH!