

# TYRIAN PURPLE

When I act as Pilate in the Easter Experience, I represent power and wealth. The purple sash that I wear would have been originally Tyrian purple. Its colour comes from molluscs that live only in that part of the Mediterranean and the sash that I am wearing may be worth over \$100,000 in today's money<sup>i</sup>. The width of the sash that Pilate could wear was limited by his rank; a full purple dress was reserved for the Roman emperor. In fact, purple became a sign of royalty up to and including Elizabethan times and the wearing of purple was restricted to the ruling class.

And by written accounts, Pilate used his status. While the historical record is fairly sparse, one account of Pilate captures his concern that a group of Jews might go to Rome and “*expose his conduct as governor by stating in full the briberies, the insults, the robberies, the outrages and wanton injuries, the executions without trial constantly repeated, the ceaseless and supremely grievous cruelty.*”<sup>ii</sup>

This quote takes my mind in multiple directions, all at the same time, so I will work through them one by one.

Our government and people in power continue to act like Pilate. Power corrupts (or maybe the corrupt are drawn to power). In our state ICAC has exposed *briberies, robberies, outrages* worth over (I reckon) \$500M. Very few people



have even faced trial and certainly not in proportion of their offence. Secondly, recently, the United Nations have come close to saying our asylum seeker detention policy is “**ceaseless and supremely grievous cruelty**”. Pilate is very much alive in our institutions, government and business leadership and scripture is calling for new Jesi to respond. We even have a large number of leaders who will wash their hands of offence or the modern equivalent – “plausible deniability.”<sup>iii</sup>

Secondly, religion has often taken on the robes and role of Pilate. I awoke to the news that a Muslim group in Indonesia is calling for the death penalty for gay and lesbian activity. It demonstrates religion’s ability for “**ceaseless and supremely grievous cruelty.**” And in Australia, the Commission investigating Sexual abuse in organisations including the Uniting Church has demonstrated our contribution to “**outrages and wanton injuries**” of the population. We are often viewed as people who tell others what to do, sitting in the position of Pilate rather than Jesus. In some ways, when religion takes up the role of Pilate, the population rises up against it and rejects it.

The Biblical record, with its softly-softly approach to Pilate does not line up for me with the historical record. A man who repeated “**wanton injuries, executions without trial, and ceaseless and supremely grievous cruelty**” would seemingly struggle to find anyone “innocent”. Maybe the biblical record picks up a little bit of idle conversation and maybe Pilate even contemplated a different course for a few moments. However, in the end, he executed Jesus, like so many others and then continued on the same path of “**briberies, insults, robberies, outrages and wanton injuries, executions without trial constantly repeated, ceaseless and supremely grievous cruelty**” until he was removed from office.

So, how is this musing useful for us. I might simply be getting us all depressed. I have three points, because all oral traditions use 3 points.

1. We can act out our parts in the Easter Experience with the confidence that even a seeming failure in the face of power can become one of the most

significant stories in our world. We can act with certainty and enthusiasm. There are many others who will follow us, who will act the same story for our audience and the combination can make an impact on the future of our humanity.

2. We can continue to encourage ourselves to take the stand of Jesus in our lives. This takes many forms and many circumstances, but telling this story reignites this story in us and gives it a chance to grow.
3. We can use this story in our lives, within our church institutions and beyond as it provides a template for understanding which side we are on. People become addicted to power and people addicted to love can influence and change the situation even if it often seems hopeless at the time. We have not progressed this far without individuals being dedicated to growing science, ending slavery, educating the masses, and universal health – even when the people in power did not want it.

So act with confidence, take the story into your hearts and work to reduce the abuse of power.

So Be It

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<sup>i</sup> The colour purple has been associated with royalty, power and wealth for centuries. In fact, Queen Elizabeth I forbade anyone except close members of the royal family to wear it. Purple's elite status stems from the rarity and cost of the dye originally used to produce it. (<http://www.livescience.com/33324-purple-royal-color.html>)

<sup>ii</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pontius\\_Pilate](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pontius_Pilate)

<sup>iii</sup> Plausible deniability is the ability for persons (typically senior officials in a formal or informal chain of command) to deny knowledge of and responsibility for any damnable actions committed by others (usually subordinates in an organizational hierarchy) because of a lack of evidence that can confirm their participation, even if they were personally involved in or at least willfully ignorant of the actions. In the case that illegal or otherwise disreputable and unpopular activities become public, high-ranking officials may deny any awareness of such act in order to insulate themselves and shift blame onto the agents who carried out the acts, confident that their doubters will be unable to prove otherwise ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Plausible\\_deniability](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Plausible_deniability)).