

Here we are, just two weeks before Easter Sunday, reading the second half of the account of Jesus’ trial before Pilate.

Last Week, Pastor Jan Reynolds brought us the sermon, based on the first half of Jesus’ trial before Pilate.

Today’s scripture continues where that one left off.

It is still the day of preparation for the Passover, a day that began at sundown the night before, and will end at sundown of this current day. It was a day when the shopping, the cooking, the cleaning and more are happening as the people get ready for the festival. It is a busy day for the Jewish people and their leaders.

Since this day began, Jesus has been betrayed by Judas, taken to the former high priest Annas for examination. We learned of Peter’s denial, then Jesus was sent to Pilate for judgment. Last week we learned that the Jewish leaders were making the case that Jesus was calling himself the king of the Jews, and therefore he was an insurrectionist that Rome should put to death.

Before we read the scripture together, it is important to note that the Jewish leaders should not be confused with the whole Jewish people or Jewish faith. Leaders can make poor decisions – and that is what we read here. Please do not use these passages as a reason for antisemitism.

We pick up the trial at its midpoint. The action alternates between the Jewish leaders outside and Jesus inside Pilate’s palace.

Pilate has questioned Jesus inside about the claims that he is a King. When Jesus responds with “You say that I am a king. I was born and came into the world for this reason: to testify to the truth. Whoever accepts the truth listens to my voice.” Pilate asks, <sup>38</sup> “What is truth?”

Then Pilate moves outside and asks if, in celebration of the Passover, the Jewish authorities would like Jesus released? They, and the crowd that has gathered, call instead for the release of Barabbas, an “outlaw” according to our text.

That brings us to our Gospel reading for today. As I read the passage, look for Pilate’s gradual understanding of the charge being levied against Jesus and how Pilate responds.

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### John 19:1-16a

**19** Then Pilate had Jesus taken and whipped. <sup>2</sup>The soldiers twisted together a crown of thorns and put it on his head, and dressed him in a purple robe. <sup>3</sup>Over and over they went up to him and said, “Greetings, king of the Jews!” And they slapped him in the face.

<sup>4</sup>Pilate came out of the palace again and said to the Jewish leaders, “Look! I’m bringing him out to you to let you know that I find no grounds for a charge against him.” <sup>5</sup>When Jesus came out, wearing the crown of thorns and the purple robe, Pilate said to them, “Here’s the man.”

<sup>6</sup>When the chief priests and their deputies saw him, they shouted out, “Crucify, crucify!”

Pilate told them, “You take him and crucify him. I don’t find any grounds for a charge against him.”

<sup>7</sup>The Jewish leaders replied, “We have a Law, and according to this Law he ought to die because he made himself out to be God’s Son.”

### **Pilate questions Jesus again**

<sup>8</sup>When Pilate heard this word, he was even more afraid. <sup>9</sup>He went back into the residence and spoke to Jesus, “Where are you from?” Jesus didn’t answer. <sup>10</sup>So Pilate said, “You won’t speak to me? Don’t you know that I have authority to release you and also to crucify you?”

<sup>11</sup>Jesus replied, “You would have no authority over me if it had not been given to you from above. That’s why the one who handed me over to you has the greater sin.” <sup>12</sup>From that moment on, Pilate wanted to release Jesus.

However, the Jewish leaders cried out, saying, “If you release this man, you aren’t a friend of the emperor! Anyone who makes himself out to be a king opposes the emperor!”

<sup>13</sup>When Pilate heard these words, he led Jesus out and seated him on the judge’s bench at the place called Stone Pavement (in Aramaic, *Gabbatha*). <sup>14</sup>It was about noon on the Preparation Day for the Passover. Pilate said to the Jewish leaders, “Here’s your king.”

<sup>15</sup>The Jewish leaders cried out, “Take him away! Take him away! Crucify him!”

Pilate responded, “What? Do you want me to crucify your king?”

**“We have no king except the emperor,”** the chief priests answered. <sup>16</sup>Then Pilate handed Jesus over to be crucified.

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“We have not king but the emperor,” “we have no king but Caesar.” That answer from the chief priests, or as Dale Bruner<sup>1</sup> translates, the “head pastors”, has been staying with me this week. Another translation calls these leaders the “religious professionals” – and that also hits home.

First of all, these words, “We have no king but the emperor” are odd words to be found on the lips of those preparing to celebrate the Passover. In the liturgy of the Passover Seder, there is a hymn in the Hallel Nirtzah section that says in part, “From the beginning to the end of the world you are Almighty G-d and other than you we have no King, redeemer, and savior who delivers, rescues, sustains, answers and is merciful in every time of trouble and distress; we have no King but you.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Frederick Dale Bruner, “The Gospel of John: A Commentary” Eerdmans 2012

<sup>2</sup> From a Passover Haggadah, excerpted from Chabad.org by Nick Carter in “Feasting on the Gospels: John Volume 2”

We should note that this Seder is from a much later time than that of Jesus, but the same sentiment is found in the Covenant with God and King David, as found in 2 Samuel 7, and also in the Psalm that Amy read for us earlier.

Psalm 146:3-5

<sup>3</sup> Don’t trust leaders;  
don’t trust any human beings—  
there’s no saving help with them!

<sup>4</sup> Their breath leaves them,  
then they go back to the ground.  
On that very same day, their plans die too

The Psalmist continues, stating that the one who is truly happy is the one whose trust is in the Lord God alone. Leaders may promise many things, but it is [Psalm 146:6b ff]

God: who is faithful forever,  
<sup>7</sup> who gives justice to people who are oppressed,  
who gives bread to people who are starving!

The LORD: who frees prisoners.

<sup>8</sup> The LORD: who makes the blind see.  
The LORD: who straightens up those who are bent low.  
The LORD: who loves the righteous.

<sup>9</sup> The LORD: who protects immigrants,  
who helps orphans and widows,  
but who makes the way of the wicked twist and turn!

<sup>10</sup> The LORD will rule forever!

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In the history of Israel and Judah the countries have been ruled by good kings and not-so-good kings. The prophets speak boldly about the duties of Kings to rule wisely and fairly, to not take advantage of their people, to shepherd the flock – not abuse it. <sup>3</sup>

Human history has shown that power often corrupts those who wield it.

Our own country was founded on the principle that it was better to be governed by elected representatives, with power held in check across three branches of government, than to have all the power wielded by a single King.

I have never lived in a country with a king, and I hope never to do so.

But I have thought about what it would be like to follow a king – more precisely to follow Jesus as my King. Jesus spends a lot of time, especially in Matthew’s gospel, talking about the kingdom of God and explaining what that is like to his disciples using parables. The parable of

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<sup>3</sup> See Ezekiel 34 for one example.

the good Samaritan, the mustard seed, the Sower of seeds, the leaven for the bread ... illustrations that made sense to his listeners and presented the kingdom as something that was already germinating, already at work – can you perceive it? The kingdom may come from somewhere unexpected (Samaria). It may not look like an earthly kingdom. Jesus even entered Jerusalem riding on a donkey, welcomed with the waving of palm branches – an entry prophesied by the prophets for God’s messiah.

Having read the gospels, we know a lot about what Jesus’ kingdom, the Kingdom of God, is like,

One of the joys of my last 20 years has been participating in a 9-month ecumenical retreat focused on the life of Jesus, using the Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius of Loyola<sup>4</sup>. Because we make this retreat in the midst of our everyday life instead of traveling to a retreat center for an 8 day or even 30 day retreat, it is named the Spiritual Exercises in Everyday Life.

In the Spiritual exercises, a series of 30 mostly scriptural meditations on the life of Jesus, there is an exercise that clearly reflects its 16<sup>th</sup> century origins. We are invited to imagine two standards, two battle flags. One is the banner of the enemy of the good, the devil, who masquerades as someone who is attractive to us – perhaps we might first see him as wealthy, proud, clearly powerful. He may even offer us honor, riches, or fame. The other banner is the flag of Jesus.

Jesuit Joseph Tetlow describes the difference in the two standards this way, and I quote:

All disciples have to choose where we are going to stand—with Jesus or with the world. No matter what life the Spirit has drawn us to, once we are baptized and confirmed we are called to stand in Jesus’ company under his flag.

We begin to move under Jesus’ standard when we join him in the living conviction that everything we have and are is God’s gift. However much or little we have, we say gratefully, “Look at all God has given me.” Then the way opens through the smoke of self-satisfaction and approval of others. “How can I help?” becomes a daily preoccupation. And through a life of love and service, the Spirit leads us to live as meekly and humbly as the Lord lived—whether we are a famous ballerina or an anonymous computer programmer.

The way of the world differs entirely. The starting point is getting as much wealth as you can. You say, “Look at all this stuff I have.” When the world’s way opens before you, you shift your focus, saying, “Look at me with all this stuff.” As those around you grow more deferential, you start saying, “Look at *me*.” You become convinced that you are the

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<sup>4</sup> A contemporary version of the exercises can be found in *The Ignatian Adventure* by Kevin O’Brien SJ

center of your world. You may not have sinned yet, but it is only a matter of time.<sup>5</sup> [end of quote]

Ignatius invites us to prayerfully consider which standard (which banner) is worthy of our life’s work and attention. The standard of the world – or the standard of Jesus. Which would you choose? And why?

This is church, so the answer must be Jesus, right? But sometimes the alternative looks so good. The rulers of this world offer riches, wealth, fame. Or at least they offer slogans to entice us to believe they have our best interests, our safety, our future prosperity in mind.

But as Jesuit Kevin O’Brien writes about the two standards meditation and the banner of the world:

Fixation on riches and honors devolves into a self-serving pride, leaving little room for God or anyone else.<sup>6</sup>

And we have all known leaders like that, haven’t we? Leaders who put themselves first, who focus on their own profit over others’ well-being, who promise one thing only to deliver nothing.

In reading the lesson about Pilate’s trial of Jesus I was struck again by the violence of the time, the scourging, the mocking, the jeers of the crowd. I was struck by how easy it was for an innocent man to be killed and known criminal to go free. I was struck by how quickly the leaders said “we have no king but the emperor.”

This is not the best of humanity, is it?

Pilate appears in the text to be doing the job he agreed to do – to act as Rome’s representative. It is unclear in the Greek whether Pilate sat on the judgement seat to render his decision, as was his practice, or whether he sat Jesus there in mockery of the idea that he was a king. But we do read that Pilate was even more afraid.

The commentators disagree about what caused Pilate’s fear. Was it that this man appeared to be innocent and he was afraid of putting an innocent man to death? Was it the supernatural claims associated with Jesus that caused Pilate, known to be superstitious, to react with fear? Or was it fear for his own job, for not making the choice that would lead to his further employment as Roman governor of Judea? Any of these are possible. But I would invite you to consider what you might be afraid of if you were Pilate?

I think if I were Pilate, I would be afraid that I was somehow on the wrong side of history, someone that would be proven wrong, misguided, or even guilty. I would wonder if I was following the right king.

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<sup>5</sup> From Joseph Tetlow, SJ as quoted in <<https://www.ignatianspirituality.com/ignatian-prayer/the-spiritual-exercises/the-two-standards/>>

<sup>6</sup> Kevin O’Brien, “The Ignatian Adventure” Loyola Press. P. 168ff

Who is the king you are following today?

This coming Saturday is another "no kings protest," with protests occurring around the nation by citizens concerns with the direction the current administration is taking our country. I am not telling you which side to support in this national debate, but I have chosen my side, and I am engaging with those around me in respectful conversation and protest.

For me, this has looked like:

- having conversations with friends and family to better understand those who disagree with me.
- Volunteering with organizations to encourage voter participation in upcoming elections.
- And, yes, joining my neighbors in protesting at local events.

How you will respond to our present moment is up to you. I encourage you to read again the teachings of Jesus, perhaps starting with Jesus' Sermon on the mount in Matthew chapters 5-7. Or pray with Psalm 146 that Amy read for us today, and ask how your time, talents, and voice can be humbly used to serve in ways that proclaim, "We have no king but Jesus."

Amen.