

## Politics on Trial

John 18:28-19:16

John 18:28 Then they led Jesus from the house of Caiaphas to the governor's headquarters. It was early morning. They themselves did not enter the governor's headquarters, so that they would not be defiled, but could eat the Passover. 29 So Pilate went outside to them and said, "What accusation do you bring against this man?" 30 They answered him, "If this man were not doing evil, we would not have delivered him over to you." 31 Pilate said to them, "Take him yourselves and judge him by your own law." The Jews said to him, "It is not lawful for us to put anyone to death." 32 This was to fulfill the word that Jesus had spoken to show by what kind of death he was going to die.

33 So Pilate entered his headquarters again and called Jesus and said to him, "Are you the King of the Jews?" 34 Jesus answered, "Do you say this of your own accord, or did others say it to you about me?" 35 Pilate answered, "Am I a Jew? Your own nation and the chief priests have delivered you over to me. What have you done?" 36 Jesus answered, "My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would have been fighting, that I might not be delivered over to the Jews. But my kingdom is not from the world." 37 Then Pilate said to him, "So you are a king?" Jesus answered, "You say that I am a king. For this purpose I was born and for this purpose I have come into the world—to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice." 38 Pilate said to him, "What is truth?"

After he had said this, he went back outside to the Jews and told them, "I find no guilt in him. 39 But you have a custom that I should release one man for you at the Passover. So do you want me to release to you the King of the Jews?" 40 They cried out again, "Not this man, but Barabbas!" Now Barabbas was a robber.

19:1 Then Pilate took Jesus and flogged him. 2 And the soldiers twisted together a crown of thorns and put it on his head and arrayed him in a purple robe. 3 They came up to him, saying, "Hail, King of the Jews!" and struck him with their hands. 4 Pilate went out again and said to them, "See, I am bringing him out to you that you may know that I find no guilt in him." 5 So Jesus came out, wearing the crown of thorns and the purple robe. Pilate said to them, "Behold the man!" 6 When the chief priests and the officers saw him, they cried out, "Crucify him, crucify him!" Pilate said to them, "Take him yourselves and crucify him, for I find no guilt in him." 7 The Jews answered him, "We have a law, and according to that law he ought to die because he has made himself the Son of God." 8 When Pilate heard this statement, he was even more afraid. 9 He entered his headquarters again and said to Jesus, "Where are you from?" But Jesus gave him no answer. 10 So Pilate said to him, "You will not speak to me? Do you not know that I have authority to release you and authority to crucify you?" 11 Jesus answered him, "You would have no authority over me at all unless it had been given you from above. Therefore he who delivered me over to you has the greater sin."

12 From then on Pilate sought to release him, but the Jews cried out, "If you release this man, you are not Caesar's friend. Everyone who makes himself a king opposes Caesar." 13 So when

*Pilate heard these words, he brought Jesus out and sat down on the judgment seat at a place called The Stone Pavement, and in Aramaic Gabbatha. 14 Now it was the day of Preparation of the Passover. It was about the sixth hour. He said to the Jews, "Behold your King!" 15 They cried out, "Away with him, away with him, crucify him!" Pilate said to them, "Shall I crucify your King?" The chief priests answered, "We have no king but Caesar." 16 So he delivered him over to them to be crucified. ESV*

## **I. Introduction**

Good morning. Well, our text today certainly is a super-charged text with lots of tension, isn't it? What stuck out to you as it was read?

Yes, we are exploring Good Friday in October. It may seem odd, but it's a good thing according to Richard Neuhaus. He says this:

"Good Friday is not just one day of the year. It's a day re-lived in everyday of the world, and of our lives in the world. In the Christian view of things, all reality turns around the death and resurrection of Christ. So, Good Friday cannot be confined to just Holy Week." Neuhaus goes on, "It is not simply the dismal but necessary prelude to the joy of Easter [either]. Every day of the year is a good day to think more deeply about Good Friday, for Good Friday is the drama of the love by which our every day is sustained... For there is nothing more central to Christianity than what happened on Good Friday" (Neuhaus, X).

I agree with Mr. Neuhaus. Anytime we explore the passion of Jesus is time well spent. Today, we move through the trial scenes before Pilate. As we said three weeks ago when Jesus was before the religious authorities, he wasn't the one on trial, they were. And, at the very same time, Peter, representing the disciples, was on trial as he stood around a charcoal fire. Today, even though Jesus is in the dock, Pilate is the one on trial.

But, I also think John writes his narrative so that we, the readers, are also on trial. I think John has written his entire Gospel with the reader in mind. How would you, the reader, respond to Jesus here... and here... and then here on Good Friday? And especially in these passion texts, we see the primary actors sharing what they believe in very difficult circumstances. In the same way, we are invited to put ourselves in their shoes to share what we believe about Jesus as well.

### **Preview**

This morning, as I walk through our long text, I invite you to keep the worship guide in front of you. As Dave and Barb said, our text is structured according to place, either *inside* or *outside* Pilate's headquarters. This slide will help us stay on track. And, as you can see, there is a center to this text, when Jesus is crowned.

Our last study ended with the rooster crowing after Peter's denials. Jesus is then led to Pilate's headquarters where Pilate meets the mob *outside*, 18:28-32.

## II. **Outside Pilate's Headquarters (18:28-32)**

### A. Introduction

As John says, it is early in the morning on Good Friday. Even this comment has several layers of meaning, as is John's custom. It was very early in the morning temporally, but also cosmologically, it is early in the day of the victory of Jesus over sin, evil and death. The light of the world was beginning to overtake all the darkness. A new day for the world was dawning.

So Jesus is led from Caiaphas' house to Pilate's headquarters where Pilate will go *outside* to meet the mob. What is unbelievably ironic is that these religious leaders are worried about defilement for the Passover, all while doing everything in their power to kill an innocent man. This is the ugliness of religion for all the world to see.

### B. Pilate Background

So, who is this man Pilate?

I heard a Sunday School story once about Pilate where the class was talking about the Holy Family's flight to Egypt when Jesus was a baby. And, this young child had drawn a picture of the family fleeing. And, he drew a large airplane flying to Egypt. And, when the teacher pointed to each person in the airplane, the boy said, "Oh yeah, that's Joseph, and that's Mary, and that's baby Jesus." "Oh, and who's that sitting up front?" "Oh, that's Pontius the Pilate."

Even though not much is known about Pilate, we know for sure he wasn't a pilot.

What do we know? To begin with, archaeologists found a stone in 1961, now called the Pilate Stone, that mentions Pontius Pilate as a prefect of the Roman province of Judea from AD 26 to AD 36. A prefect was essentially the commander of auxiliary troops, who were known to be simply peacekeepers. So, Pilate, in the big scheme of things, is not a big cheese. He's more of a little cheese, which is why he is in Palestine. Palestine is not a coveted place to work.

And, for various reasons, Pilate was no friend of the Jews. In fact, he treats everything Jewish with contempt, and almost immediately in AD 26, he makes some decisions which infuriate the Jews. The Jews, in turn, begin complaining to Caesar Tiberius about Pilate. Tiberius happens to be favorable toward Judaism, so Tiberius gets upset with Pilate.

So, by the time we meet Pilate in the Gospels in the early 30s, he's in a real fix. He's under immense pressure. He can't stand anything Jewish, but he's also in hot water with the emperor. So, he has to find a way to keep peace with the Jews in order to keep his job, and maybe even, to keep his life! The Caesars were famously known to take out those who rubbed them the wrong way. So, the bottom-line is Pilate cannot afford to get this decision about Jesus wrong! He's in a very tense and complicated situation.

Yes, Pilate is a real person living a real life and under incredible pressure. Just like many of us in different times in our lives, not with our lives on the line (hopefully), but with our jobs on the line.

### **C. Observations from this Text**

In our text today, Pilate asks eight questions, and they are all the right questions to ask. For many of them, I wish we could hear the tone of the question. It would help us understand more about him. And, he makes several great declarations which contain Gospel truth. Like Caiaphas, God uses Pilate, an unbeliever, to declare the Gospel.

### **D. Transition**

We now move *inside* Pilate's headquarters for a private conversation between Jesus and Pilate, verses 33-38a.

## **III. *Inside Pilate's Headquarters (18:33-38a)***

### **A. Pilate Opens**

In these verses, Pilate asks a total of five questions, centered around kingdom and truth.

Whereas "high priest" was a theme during the interrogation in the high priest court, now kingdom becomes a theme in the politician's court. In our text, king or kingdom occurs twelve times.

Pilate simply must find out the facts of the case. So, he begins the inquiry by asking whether Jesus is the "King of the Jews." It's a politically loaded question, because Rome had authorized no king since the coming of the governors.

### **B. Jesus Responds**

Jesus, in turn, responds with a question, verse 34, essentially asking "Pilate, how do you even know to ask that question?" I think Jesus, here, is encouraging Pilate to make up his own mind and not be influenced by the Religious Leaders.

### **C. Pilate's Next Question**

To which Pilate asks what sounds like a legitimate question, "*So, what have you done?*"

### **D. Jesus Responds**

Jesus famously responds by disassociating himself from the world, verse 36. His kingdom is *in* the world, but not *of* the world, meaning his kingdom is of an entirely different kind than the kingdoms of the world.

### **E. A Radical Distinction**

Earlier, when Jesus and his disciples were on their way to Jerusalem, Jesus had spoken in more detail of this difference between kingdoms. After He had foretold his death a third time, James and John go to Jesus asking him if they could be great ones in his kingdom, sitting on thrones with him. Of course the other ten get upset about the arrogance of James and John. Jesus responds with these words: "*You know that rulers of this world want to rule over others, and the great ones want to exercise authority over others. Not so with you! Whoever would be*

great among you must be your servant. For even I did not come to be served, but to serve and give my life away” (Mark 10:35-45).

See, the kingdoms of the world organize themselves without God. Therefore, the impulse of the kingdoms of this world is to stand over others with weapons. The impulse of the kingdoms of this world is to climb over others. The impulse of the kingdoms of this world is to rule over others.

*“NOT SO WITH YOU,”* Jesus says. If you follow me, you stand under. The impulse of people in His kingdom is to stand under others by being a servant, as Jesus was. The kingdom of God is a radically different kind of kingdom. Under one another; in submission to one another. The model is Jesus who says, *“I did not come to be served, but to serve and give my life away.”* This is why he serves the hungry and poor. This is why he washes his disciples feet. This is why he will suffer and die. In his kingdom, there is no need for weapons and no need for fighting. Jesus is inaugurating a radically different kind of kingdom. It’s a kingdom of under-ness not over-ness.

#### **F. King?**

But Pilate still needs to press further to make sure that Jesus is no threat to Rome. In verse 37, he says, *“So, you’re a king?”* (37a). Jesus’ replies, *“You say that I’m a king”* (37b). That’s an interesting response isn’t it? It’s almost as if Jesus is saying “Pilate, your idea of kingship is too small a category for what I’m doing.”

#### **G. Truth**

Jesus then gives more details about his kingdom. Not only is it a kingdom of service, but “it’s a kingdom of truth” (Burge, 724). Serving one another is to live in and by the truth.

Of course we know that truth has been a key theme throughout this Gospel:

- In chapter 1, Jesus brings with him *“grace and truth”* (1:14).
- In chapter 8, Jesus says that when we abide in him as a genuine disciple, we *“will know the truth and the truth will set us free”* (8:32).
- And in chapter 14, Jesus famously reveals that He is in fact the truth. He says, *“I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me”* (14:6). Jesus himself, the great I AM, embodies ultimate truth.

Jesus’ words here to Pilate are an invitation to Pilate to receive him as the truth. At the very least, Pilate now knows that if he condemns Jesus, he is condemning truth. Which side will he be on – truth or falsehood?

And, then the famous question, verse 38, *“What is truth?”* How are we supposed to read that question? Is it a cynical question or is it a seeking question? Most people read it cynically. But, isn’t it the right question to ask? Would that more politicians ask this question. Besides, guess what happens next, verse 38?

## IV. *Outside Pilate's Headquarters (18:38b-40)*

### A. Introduction

Pilate goes back outside and *speaks truth*. His first great declaration is full of Gospel truth. He finds *"no guilt in [Jesus]"* (19:38b). According to Pilate, Jesus is innocent.

But, instead of releasing him, Pilate appeals to a tradition of releasing a prisoner during the Passover festival. John here places the tradition within the hands of the religious leaders. The outcome will be entirely in their hands.

### B. The King of the Jews

Next, Pilate speaks more truth, verse 39. Jesus is *"the King of the Jews"* (18:39). By using this title, Pilate is probably saying that Jesus is no threat to Rome.

### C. Barabbas

At this point, the crowd enters the scene and under the control of the religious leaders, rejects Jesus' release. It is important again to note that when John says Jews, he is not speaking of all Jews. This mob here has been spun up by the religious leaders. And, these religious leaders convince them to choose a man named Barabbas. John tells us that Barabbas was a "lestes" (ληστής,). The ESV translates it as robber, but that's not strong enough. A lestes was a violent man that typically fought in uprisings. He was a violent terrorist, which means he *is* a genuine threat to Rome.

## V. *Inside: Jesus Is Crowned (19:1-3)*

### A. Introduction

Moving back inside, then, we come to the center of our passage. Jesus is flogged and beaten, with a crown of thorns placed on his head. He is then arrayed in a purple robe as the soldiers mock him as king. "Although these actions are meant as harm, on a deeper level, Jesus is actually being acknowledged as king" (Burge, 708). Most scholars see these actions as a scheme by Pilate to get Jesus set free. The thought is that the punishment will satisfy Caiaphas and company, and they will release Jesus.

### B. The King

But, let's linger here for a moment, for here is our king. Although the world has its way with Jesus, we, the readers, know the truth. We see here the kind of king Jesus is, and the kind of kingdom he's inaugurating. We get a clear picture of the Gospel here, and we get a clear picture of the immensity of God's love for the world. Here is our king. He is the silent suffering servant of Isaiah 53. *"The punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed... He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he opened not his mouth"* (Isa 53:5-7). Here is our king. The true king. A king who brings peace without a sword. A king who brings an eternal kingdom without a physical fight. And a king who, because of his obedience, receives *"the name above every name... [and before whom] every knee will bow and every tongue confess that he is the true king"* (Phil 2:9-11). Here is our king.

## VI. *Outside Pilate's Headquarters (19:4-8)*

### A. Introduction

Next, outside again, Pilate repeats his verdict that Jesus is innocent.

### B. "Behold the Man"

He then makes another great declaration full of Gospel truth. Verse 5, "*Behold the man!*" "Behold" is always a key word in the Gospels. It means "to look and be surprised." Look and see *the man!*

- Peter had said, "I do not know the man" (18:17).
- The high priest and their people had said this "man" was an evil-doer (18:30).
- The crowds say, "*Not this man, but Barabbas!*" (18:40).
- But, Pilate says, "*Behold the man!*"

Is Pilate saying more than he knows? Is he listening to Jesus talk and watching how Jesus responds and wondering if this could somehow be how a true human talks and responds? Is he saying, "Look at how this man reacts in this situation. Here is a person who responds in the right way to hatred. Here is *the man.*"

### C. Pilate Afraid

But, the crowd responds to Pilate's declaration shouting, "*Crucify him!*" Pilate declares him innocent for a third time. At this point, they declare their reason for wanting crucifixion, that he claimed to be the Son of God. Now Pilate becomes "*more*" afraid. Why?

Well, I wonder if it's the use of "*Son of God*" by these leaders. Remember, Pilate is not a Jew, so he's not steeped in Old Testament imagery. For him, the Caesar is the Son of God, meaning he's a messenger of Zeus. So, could it be that, for Pilate, the mention of "*Son of God*" has caused this entire situation to take on greater implications. In Pilate's mind now, this is much, much bigger than simply a Jewish issue. There's actually a question of deity here. As with the arresting mob back in the garden who shook and fell before Jesus, could Pilate's internal foundation be shaking right now?

Matthew also tells us that around this time Pilate's wife sent him a message telling him to have nothing to do with this good man because of dream she had (Matt 27:19). Maybe that's also playing into Pilate's fear, because dreams at that time were considered to come from the gods.

## VII. *Inside Pilate's Headquarters (19:9-12)*

### A. Introduction

Next, beginning in verse 9, Jesus and Pilate move back inside, where Pilate will ask three more questions.

- "*Where are you from?*"
- "*You will not speak to me?*"
- And "*Do you not know that I have authority to release you and authority to crucify you?*"

All three are valid questions.

### **B. Jesus' Response**

To the last one, Jesus says, *"You would have no authority over me at all unless it had been given you from above."* Again, we are reminded that Pilate is not in control of any of these events. Jesus is.

### **C. Seeking to Release**

In the end, Pilate seeks to release Jesus, literally *"was seeking to release him,"* implying that Pilate had made several attempts to release him. But, he backs off because of fear. The religious leader-incited crowd keeps pushing Pilate's buttons. They know how to get their way with these Romans.

## **VIII. Outside Pilate's Headquarters (19:13-16)**

### **A. Introduction**

Pilate then takes Jesus back outside to the mob, verse 13. And, Pilate makes another great declaration full of Gospel: *"Behold your king!"* (19:14). Look and see your king!

### **B. Pilate Fails**

But, despite Pilate's Gospel declarations, out of fear for his job and fear for his life, Pilate fails his trial. He delivers Jesus over to be crucified.

### **C. Religious Leaders Fail**

But, the scene closes even more shockingly! So far we've seen the disciples, represented by Peter, fail. We've seen the political leaders, represented by Pilate, fail. And, here, we get the conclusion of the religious leader's trial. They fail miserably. Verse 15: *The chief priests answered, "We have no king but Caesar."*

Oh my goodness. Don't you just gasp when you read that statement? This is a horribly tragic moment! They've sold their souls! What about Yahweh? Isn't Yahweh your king? The ones who accused Jesus of blasphemy have just committed blasphemy themselves. It's all over.

A shocking and sad end to John's account of the trials of Jesus.

And, that's our text for today. So, what do we learn from this text?

## **IX. Implications**

### **A. The Normality**

As I have sat back and studied this text, it seems to me that what happens here is not that uncommon. And, we have to think that or we'll never learn anything from it. The people in these scenes are not exceptionally evil people. The motivations they have are not exceptionally evil motivations. It seems to me what happens in this text is fairly normal and ordinary.



- For example, the religious leaders are jealous and feeling threatened. They're leaders after all, and they're convinced they're doing the right thing. But, they're blinded by their jealousy, and their thirst for power. That's routine stuff in our world.
- And the mob? Nothing surprising about them. Mobs happen all the time. They get swept up in their emotion by a charismatic leader, which happens every day all around the world. It's so common.
- And Pilate. He's a fearful politician way in over his head and backed into a corner. He's trying desperately to maintain his job and his grip on power. That happens every day in politics.

So it seems to me, as Jesus stands before all of these people, there's nothing exceptional about any of it. It's all normal stuff that we get up to on a daily basis: fear of losing power, a thirst for control, blinding jealousy, bitterness and suspicion toward others, being swept up into movements and so on and so forth. This is ordinary life in this world. And, of course it is because as one writer says, "The line between good and evil runs through every human heart" (Solzhenitsyn in Neuhaus, 19). Sin has invaded, permeated and infected every single cell of our bodies. Jesus, himself, described our plight throughout his teaching ministry. He told us that we are in the grip of something in which we cannot free ourselves, and that thing is sin. We are all in bondage to sin. So, what do we do?

## **B. The Lamb of God**

Well, we turn to *"the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world"* (1:29). In verse 19:14 of today's text, John gives us a seemingly unimportant detail. Did you catch that when it was read? He tells us that when Jesus is sentenced, it was noon on *"the day of preparation for the Passover"* (19:14). We read right by that, but this is an important detail. Why? Because John wants us to connect the death of Jesus with the slaughter of the Passover lambs. If you're familiar with the story of Israel, you'll know the story of the Passover. Israel was in slavery in Egypt, and God tells Moses that the final act of judgment against Egypt will be the killing of the firstborn in every household. So God instructs Moses to tell the Israelites to kill a lamb and spread the blood on the doorposts of their houses. And God says, *"When I see the blood, I will pass over you. No destructive plague will touch you when I strike Egypt"* (Ex 12:7-13). The blood of the Passover lamb delivered the Israelites from slavery and death.

And, now on this day in John, on that first Good Friday and the last Passover, "the perfect and eternal Passover Lamb was prepared, Jesus Christ, the Son of God" (Klink, 787). On that first Good Friday, Jesus became the great deliverer, not from physical slavery, but from the slavery of sin.

Jesus, the lamb of God, will go to the cross to take away your sin and my sin and the sin of the world, and he will not fight it. *"Like a lamb that is led to the slaughter ... so he opened not his mouth"* (Isa 53:7). The one who is "not guilty," said three times by Pilate, will go to the cross to die for those who are.

- Jesus, the guiltless one, will go to the cross to take away even the sin of Barabbas, the guilty one.

- Jesus, the true high priest, will go to the cross to take away even the sin of Caiaphas, the high priest.
- Jesus, the true king, will go to the cross to take away even the sin of Pilate, the world's king.
- Jesus, the lamb of God, will go to the cross to take away my sin and your sin.

He is the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

### C. Your Response

I'm going to invite the worship team up on stage now as we begin to close.

How do you, the reader, respond today? As Jesus stands before you this morning – he's here you know. Jesus is standing before all of us today, as he stood before Pilate and the religious leaders.

- What do you want to say to him?
  - As Pilate asked all sorts of questions, what question do you want to ask him?
  - As Pilate made powerful declarations, what declaration do you want to say about him?
    - Can you say with Pilate, *"I find no guilt in this man,"* or *"Behold the true human,"* or *"Behold your king"?*
    - Can you say, "Behold my king"?

### D. Moment of Reflection

So, as the team plays, respond quietly to Jesus as he stands before you.

### Benediction

If you would like prayer this morning, there will be a prayer team up here who would love to pray with you.

Now receive this benediction:

How marvelous! How wonderful!

Jesus the King is great and glorious!

Through His death and resurrection,

may His glory shine on you,

and may His glory shine through you

as you leave this place,

so that all may know the true King of Kings!

And, now, to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory for ever and ever.

Amen.

## **Resources**

Bruner, Dale, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*

Burge, Gary, *John (NIV Application Commentary)*

Johnson, Darrell, *Preaching John (Regent College Course)*

Klink, Edward, *John (Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the NT)*

Morgan, G. Campbell, *Gospel According to John*

Neuhaus, Richard, *Death on a Friday Afternoon*