

Sermon Draft

Sermon: Whom Do We Follow?

Text: John 19:1–16a

Pilate has determined that Jesus is not guilty, but now he must convince the crowd. His first attempt was to bargain. We heard that in our reading last week. Pilate tried to exchange Barabbas for Jesus. It didn't work. Now he appeals to sympathy. Jesus is whipped, dressed in mock robes and a crown of thorns. He is beaten, humiliated, and then presented before the crowd:

“Behold the man!” (v 5).

Pilate was hoping for compassion, for sympathy. He was hoping the wretched sight of this beleaguered Man would stir the crowds to cry for his release. Instead, the chief priests and elders of the Jews stir up the crowd even more: ***“Crucify him, crucify him!”*** (v 6).

Pilate then tries to hand Jesus off: ***“Take him yourselves and crucify him, for I find no guilt in him”*** (v 6). It's at this point that the Jewish officials bring up Jesus' claim to be the Son of God, which frightens Pilate even more. He brings Jesus back into the chamber and tries to determine more, but Jesus responds to nothing except Pilate's boast about his authority.

Pilate desperately wants to release Jesus. He now tries everything he can think of, every political maneuver he's learned as he's worked his way up the bureaucratic ladder to become governor of Judea. Nothing works. The crowds are insistent.

Finally, the Jews cry out, ***“If you release this man, you are not Caesar’s friend. Everyone who makes himself a king opposes Caesar”*** (v 12). And that’s it. The game is over. There’s nothing Pilate wants more than friendship with Caesar. His position, his wealth, his power, all depend on Caesar. Jesus is handed over to be crucified.

The contrast of Pilate’s idolatry with Jesus’ faithfulness is profound, and it’s a parable for us. Let’s consider it this way:

Imagine you are a stranger traveling to Jerusalem on this day. You hear the crowds, so you wander through the narrow streets of the city into this courtyard, bathed in the morning light and filled with excited people. On the platform are two men.

One is a Roman with the strong body of a retired soldier. He has fine clothes and gold rings and chains; he sits on a throne. He is a friend of Caesar. He has a palace, an army, a beautiful wife, and all the crowd is looking to hear what he'll say. He is, by every worldly measure, a success.

Before him is another Man. He's Jewish. He's bleeding. He is weak, barely has the strength to stand, his face bruised, spit dripping off his half-plucked beard. He's wrapped in a filthy robe with a crown of thorns pressed into his head. He is abandoned by his followers, hated by the crowd. He has nothing no home, no money, no friends left.

And as you consider these two men, someone comes up next to you and asks, "Which would you like to follow?" Wow. We this evening are Christian people listening to a Christian sermon, so we know the answer. We are supposed to follow Jesus. But let's pretend we are still that stranger in Jerusalem, that we don't know who these men are, that we are judging by outward appearance.

It looks as if Pilate has it all together. It looks as if he's the picture of success. He has everything we're supposed to go after in life. A good education. A good job. A good family. And more than that. He has wealth, power, and political success. If Pilate wrote a self-help book, you would read it.

Jesus looks like the opposite. He's got nothing. He's being condemned as a criminal. He's being mocked by the crowd. Even the clothes he's wearing are not his but are part of his humiliation and shame. He is weak, rejected, shamed, mocked, poor, wretched, and miserable. He's bruised and bleeding, beaten and about to be crucified. It looks as if everything has gone wrong in his life. It surely looks as if he's failed.

If you and I were strangers in Jerusalem that day, I don't think the decision would be difficult. "Put me on Team Pilate. I'm with this guy, the one who's not being crucified."

See, dear friends, how God works in hidden ways. His majesty is hidden in humility. His glory is hidden with blood. His kingdom comes in suffering, and his rule is only under the cross.

Jesus is the King of glory, but that glory cannot be seen with the eyes of man; it can only be known through the Word and Spirit.

Pilate made himself a friend of Caesar, and he had his reward. Jesus warns us about this: ***“What will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul?”*** (Matthew 16:26). Pilate had everything but Jesus.

The Savior of the world was standing there in front of him, the life-giving blood dripping onto the polished tiles of his palace floor, and he missed him. Pilate’s king was Caesar; his kingdom was of this world; his god was his own success. He was successful at many things, but he failed at the one thing that mattered. He tried to be his own savior.

Now, the point of this little thought experiment is not to make us despise nice clothes or a good education, or even political positions, but rather to help us to see that salvation is not obvious and that the kingdom of God does not come by observation. That the glory of God does not look like normal glory.

Remember the promise of Isaiah 53: ***“He had no form or majesty that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him”*** (Isaiah 53:2).

We are called to follow a King crowned with thorns and exalted on a cross. We are called into a kingdom that is not of this world. We belong to the Suffering Servant, whose death is our life and whose shed blood is our hope and peace.

If we look at Jesus with the eyes of this world, we see a poor man abandoned and condemned as a criminal suffering and dying a wretched death. But the eyes of faith see God in our flesh, bearing our sin, carrying our sorrow, and winning for us an eternal kingdom of joy and peace. Yes, only the eyes of faith can see the glorious kingdom of salvation hidden under the humility of Jesus' suffering. His humiliation, his suffering, his agony—all of this was for you, so that he would be yours, your Savior, your friend, the King who brings you righteousness and peace.

Amen