

John 19:1-16a

We continue with Jesus' trial before Pilate. The first three of seven scenes were covered last week, moving from the handing over of Jesus to the release of a bandit. Now we go to the central scene of seven, in which Jesus is scourged and mocked as king.

In Matthew and Mark, the scourging takes place after Pilate has condemned Jesus; in Luke it is Herod who does it. In John's Gospel it is embedded in the trial narrative and plays a part in John's larger trial motif in which it is ultimately those who believe that they are judging Jesus who are themselves judged. Although we are told that Pilate scourges Jesus, it is obvious that the soldiers do this. But the wording underscores the place of the scourging in Pilate's own danse macabre with the religious authorities, which continues as Pilate parades Jesus before them – a mocked king.

The excruciating nature of the flogging of Jesus is often misunderstood. First, he did not receive thirty-nine stripes. That was the prescription for Jewish synagogue discipline. Paul boasted of having received the flogging five times. Jesus received a Roman flogging administered with a flagellum, a collection of heavy leather straps into which bone, glass and lead balls were embedded. There was no stipulation for how many lashes a person would receive, only that the person would be flogged until the flesh hung from his back. Prisoners were frequently disembowelled by flogging.

The historian Josephus tells us that he once witnessed a Roman flogging and reported that the internal organs of the victim became visible. Usually a convicted criminal was flogged before crucifixion to hasten his death due to blood loss and shock. But Jesus' flogging is different. Pilate orders it before any sentence has been passed in order to appease the Jews. Jesus is abused by the Roman soldiers, wrapped in a purple robe and crowned with thorns. If you look closely at the Gospels, it appears Pilate has done this in hopes that the Jews will see the blood-soaked Jesus and be satisfied.

As noted at the start of this trial, it was preparation day, when Judean Jews were preparing to slaughter their Passover lambs, just as they are now preparing to sacrifice Jesus. It is now noon, the sixth hour. Jesus' "hour" has finally arrived.

Pilate brings the blood-soaked Jesus back out to the crowd and repeats that he finds Jesus innocent. The "here is the man" was spoken with a token of pity. He is not a king after all, but a frail, bleeding man. That Pilate would have a person he considered innocent flogged is a sign of how insane the whole proceedings were.

When the chief priests see Jesus bloodied, they are not satisfied. In fact, they become frenzied. They shout that they want him crucified. To hand an innocent man over to mob violence was the extreme opposite of the idea of the peace of Rome, the Pax Romana. The scene intensifies as the Jews bring a new charge, one that Pilate has not yet heard. Jesus claimed to be the Son of God. This involves the charge of blasphemy in Jewish law.

Pilate's response is fear. This is a serious charge in his Roman world. Only Caesar could lay claim to be the Son of God. Any claim against the sovereignty of Caesar by Jesus must be investigated. If word got back to Rome that Pilate had ignored this crime, he could lose his already precarious position.

Previously, Pilate had pitifully exclaimed "Here is the man." Now he makes a pronouncement calculated to inflame the crowd who has used him and who he so despises. "Here is your king," he shouts. It has the desired effect. The chief priests and police respond to Pilate's presentation of Jesus, scourged and in mock kingly garb, with predictable ire and again demand his execution. The crowd is whipped into a frenzy. Their hysteria is revealed with the repetitive demand "Take him away! Take him away!" Then Pilate adds fuel to the flame. Is he supposed to crucify their king? he asks. Their response is another indication of the madness of any mob. Of all people, the chief priests cry out that Caesar is their only king. They, too, want to be counted among the "friends of Caesar."

Pilate offers his third assertion of Jesus' innocence and insists that they themselves crucify him, which everyone knows they cannot do. So they raise the

stakes. He is not only claiming to be king, they say, but also claiming to be Son of God. Pilate's intentions are unclear. Does he mean to mock them by presenting Jesus again as king (having already referred to him as their king when he offered them Barabbas)? Or does he mean to demonstrate that such a pathetic creature could not possibly be a threat? What is not unclear is the narrative irony in Pilate's presentation of Jesus as precisely the sort of king he is.

Like the suffering servant of Isaiah (to which the scourging and slapping here may allude), Jesus is the vulnerable embodiment of God's love for a dark, broken world, of which Pilate and the religious authorities and their soldiers and police are the representatives.

The Jews now play their most powerful card. They capitalize on Pilate's insecurity. They know exactly where Pilate's Achilles' heel is. "If you release this man, you are not Caesar's friend." If one simple moment in the trial of Jesus can be seen as pivotal, it is this moment. The "friends of Caesar" (*amici Caesaris*) were a well-defined group of senators, knights and powerful men of Rome who for one reason or another had merited the emperor's favour. Pilate, as a Roman governor, would have been a member of this elite club as well.

If he were to release someone who had claimed kingship, who considered himself a Son of God, Pilate would undoubtedly forfeit his membership in the "friends of Caesar" club. He might even lose his prestigious posting if he were denounced to the emperor by the Jewish authorities. He wants at all costs to avoid trouble and an open conflict. He acts against all justice and against his own conscience.

So now the religious authorities frame the choice in terms they know he will understand: Is he a friend of Caesar or of this powerless prisoner? If his ultimate goal is power, it cannot also be justice and love, so Pilate will execute an innocent man. Pilate would not hand Jesus over to the mob. He would pronounce the formal sentence of crucifixion himself, "you shall mount the cross." He would take the credit. He became their perfect pawn.

To make the proceedings now as official as possible, Pilate goes to the place

where formal sentences are pronounced, the Stone Pavement. Julius Caesar carried a portable pavement with him on his campaigns for holding his tribunals. The Jews referred to the place as Gabbatha or “high place.”

The word used to describe Pilate’s sitting on the judge’s bench can also mean that he seats Jesus on it. Either way, Jesus at his most powerless, but still robed in purple and with a crown of thorns, is now both king and judge. As Pilate has earlier ordered the religious authorities to behold Jesus as a beaten man, he now orders them to behold him as their king and to condemn him themselves, which they do. And in so doing, they, like Pilate, declare their ultimate loyalty to Caesar – not to God.

Before proclaiming the sentence, Pilate says mockingly to the people: “here is your king!” as if this “crazy religious man” is the only one worthy of being king of such a people. Jesus is declared king from the earliest chapters of all the Gospels. That he is crucified is an utter redefinition of what this means, and as Paul wrote it’s “a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles.” Jesus tells Pilate, his is a kingdom not from here. Pilate is now even more frightened. But as bullies are perpetually afraid, it is not difficult to imagine this of Pilate. Maybe Jesus has some divine or mystical power that could cause him some personal harm.

He goes back into the Praetorium. His fear elicits the question. “Where are you from?” Perhaps he expects to hear the answer “heaven.” Jesus comes from God and is going to God but Pilate is unable to understand. By this point Jesus may be going into shock from the flogging. He has already lost a lot of blood. Perhaps he sees the discussion as pointless. Jesus gives no answer, having answered this already. This infuriates Pilate, who tries to remind Jesus of his power over him, of his power over life and death. Jesus replies that this power is irrelevant, this is only an illusion, as all earthly power is illusory. Pilate has no power except the power given to him from heaven, the place where Jesus is from.

Pilate is part of something he does not understand, and in that sense is less guilty than the religious authorities, who should perhaps have known better than to

kill the Word made flesh. Any power Pilate has come from above.

That Jesus is from Galilee is clear. But even beyond the glorious mystery of the prologue, it is clear that Jesus is also from God. Nathaniel knows it. Even Nicodemus, who understands precious little (including “from above”, which he interprets to mean “again”), knows it. The man born blind knows it. Peter and Martha declare it. Perhaps even Pilate finally has an inkling.

The role that the Jewish nation was to play in bringing to earth the kingdom of God has been denied. The right of God to rule the world has been dismissed. The messianic claim has been renounced. God could never again be seen in the power symbols of either religion or politics, in church or state. Something quite different was to be revealed in Jesus of Nazareth. Pilate was the final foil through whom the revelation of Jesus would be received.

Jesus’ revelation would carry him and his disciples beyond the scope of religion and beyond the realm of the world’s most powerful symbol of authority. They would be born to a new dimension of human life. The doorway into that new dimension would be opened in the death of Jesus, accused by entrenched religion, executed at the hands of the state.

Pilate hands him over to them to be crucified. It is the soldiers, not the religious authorities, who do the killing. But in both instances the narrative places the responsibility with the ones in power, not their servants. Still, the servants reflect the one who is their master. Servants of Caesar are known by their violence. Jesus says everyone will know his servants by their love. We might wish to ask if this is so of us. Pilate has played his role on this central stage, and now he disappears. It will be in the revelation of life in the midst of death that the symbolic true believer, the one who understands the meaning of Jesus’ life, will finally be recognized in this gospel. He is called the “beloved disciple.”

Filled with love and kindness for each person, Jesus is arrested and condemned to death. His whole being seems to threaten those in power. The misuse of power continues today. So many innocent lives, weak and without protection:

children, the elderly, refugees, minority groups, women, people with disabilities are pushed aside, treated badly, sometimes physically or sexually misused and abused. They cry out for respect, understanding; their cry for their rights is often ignored by the powerful. But power will not have the last word. History tells us those who live by the sword eventually perish by the sword. Those who live for truth and justice rise up in truth and justice.

Jesus, the Lamb, crushed by insolent power, lays down his life in order to give life and to witness to the truth. The resurrection of Jesus will announce a new era where his disciples will be given a new power, to continue his mission of love and to transform hearts through the gift of the Spirit.

The seeds of Judas, who sought power and hated love; the seeds of Peter, who could not accept the Messiah's weakness; the seeds of the religious authorities, who could not accept the presence of God hidden in the new; the seeds of Pilate, afraid of conflict and being denounced to the Roman authorities – these seeds are in us all. Each one of us is capable of hurting weak and innocent people who threaten and disturb us. But the seeds of the beloved disciple are also in each of us, calling us to trust in the folly of love.

The fundamental questions for each one of us are these: Do I live for truth and justice, or do I live for the glory and self-satisfaction of power? Do I feel I exist because of power or because I believe in love and compassion? Does our testimony in word and deed reflect our citizenship in the alternate kingdom from above, where servants of the Beloved are nonviolent, vulnerable lovers of friend and foe? Or do our words and actions suggest that our first allegiance is to something else – a nation or party or religious institution or whatever-your-modern-day emperor may be?

If the answer is not clear, the good news is that it is precisely this broken world of Pilate and the religious authorities and our own hearts that God loves. The judgment of this world is also its salvation. When truth-telling love is bound and beaten and killed (not only in Jesus but again and again in other times and places)

out of fear or ignorance or greed, that is never the end of the story. The seed that dies does bear much fruit.

Amen.