

Then Pilate took Jesus and flogged him. And the soldiers twisted together a crown of thorns and put it on his head and arrayed him in a purple robe. They came up to him saying, "Hail, King of the Jews!" and struck him with their hands. Pilate went out and said to them, "See, I am bringing him out to you that you may know that I find no guilt in him." So Jesus came out, wearing the crown of thorns and the purple robe. Pilate said to them, "Behold the man!" When the chief priests and 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." 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." When Pilate heard this statement, he was even more afraid. He entered his headquarters again and said to Jesus, "Where are you from?" But Jesus gave him no answer. 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? Jesus said to him, "You would have no authority over me at all unless it had been given to you from above. Therefore he who delivered me over to you has the greater sin." 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." 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. Now it was the day of Preparation of the Passover. It was about the sixth hour. He said to the Jews, "Behold your King!" 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." So he delivered Jesus over to them to be crucified.

John 19:1-16

"Behold the Man!"

Pastor Stephen Ridge

Last time in John's gospel, we saw Pilate, the Roman governor, and Jesus, face to face in an interview room where Pilate struggled to make some sense of the charge that the bruised and tired carpenter in front of him was some sort of threat to the powers that be. And the answers Jesus gave to Pilate's questions were strangely unrelated to anything that might concern a Roman governor.

A kingdom *"not of this world"* with no troops on the ground, no one to defend Jesus against a kind of hatred from the Jews that seemed all out of proportion to anything an unarmed carpenter could do to anyone. So Pilate went again out to the sidewalk where the priests stood trying to stay kosher and the governor tried to wriggle out of whatever feud had brought Jesus to his courtroom.

"It's the Passover," Pilate said to the scowling priests, *"and you've already worked this guy over half the night. Couldn't we release him and send him back to whatever village he's from? We do that for someone every year!"* But the priests saw this coming, and they knew the governor had a real insurrectionist in his basement who could be released to the delight of his zealot partisans.

Part of the fun of asking for Barabbas to be released is that everyone on that sidewalk knew that Barabbas, back on the street with a knife in his hand, was the last thing Pilate wanted that day. So Pilate spun around on the sidewalk and headed back inside, looking for a way to frustrate the priests. And his eyes fell on Jesus and Pilate's first thought was that a Roman cat a nine tails would stir Jesus to give him something more useful than a lot of dreamy talk about faraway, otherworldly kingdoms.

The cat o'nine tails was a Roman instrument of torture designed to inspire prisoners to confess what they'd done, right then, right there, before the pain became unbearable. It was a broom shaped, one handed whip that spread out into leather straps with small bones and shells and glass and stone woven into the strands. So every blow would leave a patch about a hand's breadth wide right across a prisoners back where the skin was entirely torn and perforated. It follows that a flogging of any duration would leave a prisoner in indescribable pain and on the edge of going into shock because of the bleeding it caused.

But Jesus didn't implicate himself or any of his disciples in any plots against the Romans or the Jews. In the absence of a confession, the Romans would have flogged him just short of death. So the soldiers untied him from the post and dragged him into the courtyard where they crowned him with thorns and dressed him in a purple robe, probably left at the fortress after one of the governor's parties. And then the fun began, soldiers lining up to salute and praise and pummel Jesus, each in their turn.

After some time at this, Pilate brought Jesus out on the kosher sidewalk and showed the priests what happens to Jewish pretenders who come into Roman custody. Luke informs us in his gospel that Pilate had wanted the punishment to stop there, that the governor had hoped to satisfy the bloodlust of the priests by showing them the pathetic pulp of the man they had so feared. The truth was that Jesus' courage in the face of the flogging had begun to undermine Pilate's hard hearted cynicism. *"Behold the man!"* he shouted to the priests. But the sight of Jesus, unmanned and undone, only excited the hatred of the priests all the more. They began to howl for him to be crucified. *"Take him yourselves and crucify him!"* Pilate answered.

It was more of a taunt than a serious answer. The Jews on the sidewalk had no authority to crucify anyone and everyone standing there knew it. *"I find no guilt in him!"* Pilate went on, reminding the priests that he was the judge, no matter what they thought about Jesus. So some priestly lawyer pressed home the case against Jesus. *"We have a law, and according to that law he ought to die because he has made himself the Son of God."* At this point some of the things Jesus had said about a faraway, otherworldly kingdom clicked in Pilate's mind and he began to realize that he may be into something deeper than a Jewish factional feud.

So Pilate spins around again on the sidewalk and storms back into the Praetorium a second time looking for Jesus. He finds him wherever the soldiers had heaped him and he sticks his face where Jesus has to see and hear him and the governor demands an answer, *"Where are you from?"* He could have learned that before the flogging if only he had shown a little more patience when Jesus was talking about the kingdom and the truth. But Jesus now is all done trying to teach Pilate and says nothing.

Here's an application we can all take home this morning. That none of us is given an infinite number of chances to listen to Jesus and take his word to heart. That there is a point past which, if we won't listen and won't care, we run out of chances to hear and believe and be saved. Pilate is dangerously close to that point right now. He storms at Jesus, *"You won't speak to me? Don't you know I have authority to release you and authority to crucify you?"* Now Jesus answers, *"You would have no authority over me at all unless it had been given to you from above."* Jesus is actually teaching Pilate, one last time, that governors and carpenters and priests are all subject to an authority *"from above"* whether we know it or not, whether we like it or not.

"Therefore," Jesus goes on, *"he who delivered me over to you has the greater sin."* It's an intriguing statement. Who is the *"he"* who has the *"greater sin"*? Is it Caiaphas? Annas? I think it's Satan. And I think the point here is that people are redeemable even when what we've done incurs great guilt and causes great damage. But Satan's hatred for God and for all that is good is such that it has rendered him existentially unable to repent and be saved. It is that *"greater sin"* that we must fear and avoid if we want to save our souls.

Pilate may or may not understand what Jesus was getting at, but he immediately begins to backpedal out of the corner where the priests want to trap him that day. John tells us: *"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.'"* At that moment Pilate runs out of any easy options. If he releases Jesus, the priests will see to it that word reaches Rome that he has gone soft on the locals.

If he crucifies Barabbas, he will incite zealot riots in a city that is already a tinderbox. If he crucifies Jesus, nobody will complain to Rome and nobody will riot. So Pilate ascends into the ceremonial judgment seat facing a patio called Gabbatha, the Stone Pavement. The priest and the crowd circled the Praetorium and met him there to hear his verdict. Matthew's gospel tells us that, at that moment, God gave Pilate one last chance. A servant handed him a note from the governor's wife.

She had had a dream about Jesus and she begged him not to render a verdict. Pilate put the note aside and announced to the crowd on the pavement: *"Behold your King!"* Staying on script, they howled for his crucifixion. *"Shall I crucify your King?"* he pleaded. *"We have no king but Caesar!"* the priests answered. Again, the veiled threat that the priests will send a bad report to Rome. And at that moment, Pilate simply folded and gave Jesus over to a team of executioners to do what the priests wanted.

Right and wrong can be so hard to find, when people swirl and everyone's overblown certainties collide. We are prone to fold when the wind and tide are up, and we can't see the horizon in the swirl. It is the point of the last line in the Lord's Prayer: *"Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil."* And the promise is that, when we lack the wisdom to know what's right or the courage to do what's right, the Father is still there to lead us through the shadows and home. Our souls don't depend on what nobility and wisdom we can cobble together in a swirl, but rather on whether we will trust and look to God before, during, and after the storm.