

King of the Jews

Deuteronomy 21:22-23, Mark 15:1-15 (ESV)

June 8, 2003

Pilate asked Jesus, “Are you the King of the Jews?” And Jesus answered him, “You have said so.” After this, he said nothing else. Having affirmed to the priests that he was the Christ, Jesus left it to others to affirm that he was king. But Pilate, wishing to satisfy the crowd, delivered him to be crucified. Thus Pilate found his way into history and into the Apostles’ Creed: We believe in Jesus Christ, who “suffered under Pontius Pilate.”

Can you see the beauty of God hidden here in the horror of humanity? Three times Jesus was identified as the King of the Jews, a title not at all true politically but true theologically more than they could imagine, since he is Lord of the universe. Three times it says that Jesus was “delivered,” handed over to be tried, convicted, and crucified. Three times we have the opportunity to see and to realize the extent and the depth of God’s suffering love for us in the silence, the innocence, and the defenselessness of Jesus on trial—humiliated, falsely accused, wrongly convicted, unanimously rejected.

What is going on here? Jesus was not a criminal, Jesus was not an insurrectionist, Jesus was not a pretender to the throne, Jesus was not a threat to Pilate, and Jesus did not deserve to die. Pilate knew it. We know it. But it happened anyway. Pilate caved in to the crowd, had Jesus scourged, and delivered him to be crucified. And through it all, in the face of this travesty, Jesus exhibits absolute trust in God.

Of course, it was all very legal. Or so we are led to believe. Pilate had the authority to make judgments in such cases. Never mind that the religious authorities had held an illegal trial under cover of darkness. Never mind that their false witnesses told so many lies that they had trouble finding two who agreed. Never mind that Pilate himself was convinced that Jesus had not done anything wrong or evil. Never mind that it is hardly conceivable that a Roman governor, with the full power of the army of the Roman Empire behind him, would cave in to a screaming crowd. Those are just details. The main point is that Jesus was convicted.

So not only was he condemned for blasphemy by the Jewish religious authorities, who could not tolerate the suggestion that he was the Son of God; but also he was convicted of sedition by the full legal authority of the Roman Empire, which could not tolerate the suggestion that there was any other king, any other authority, any other power than its own. So Jesus was both religiously condemned

and legally convicted. All the irregularities do is to show both that the condemnation was a sham and that the conviction was a sham. Jesus had no fault, but he was convicted for us, for our fault. Jesus had no sin, but he died for us, for our sin. So he not only died a horrible death, but he did so taking on the curse of being condemned as a sinner and taking on the guilt of being convicted as a criminal.

This is accentuated by the Old Testament reading for today. Anyone who is hung on a tree is under God's curse. The religious significance of Christ being killed by impaling him on a wooden cross, means that he was under the curse of God Almighty, creator of heaven and earth, his very Father. Jesus was innocent, but crucified. He took a guilty verdict in our place. He died that we might live. And in dying as he did, he took on the divine curse that we deserve, in order that we might live under the divine blessing that rightly belonged to him.

Throughout this terrible excuse for a trial, Jesus was the silent, obedient servant of the Lord, even to the point of suffering and death. He maintained his innocence by not defending it. He fulfilled his calling by not insisting on the prerogatives of the office. He revealed himself as Lord of the universe by taking the worst that the world could throw at him and not dodging it or retaliating for it. The religious leaders despised him on the presumption of blasphemy, and they accused him before the court of criminal activity against the throne and against the state. Jesus never denied it, never tried to defend himself, never tried to side-step or evade the crushing weight of the lies and everything being amassed against him. He could have defended himself very well against such fallacious and outrageous charges, but he quietly and simply declined and refused to do so. He was not interested in getting off. He was not interested in escaping punishment. Instead, he offered no defense, he sought no escape, and he did not plead for mercy. He stood and took what was coming to him.

More to the point, he stood and took what was coming to us! He had nothing coming to him, in terms of conviction and punishment. He was innocent. We are the ones who are not innocent. We are the ones who try every trick we can to get off. We are the ones who deserve conviction and punishment. And yet, the only one who deserved no punishment has taken it all off of us and upon himself, without complaint, being crucified, dead, and buried. All our guilt was placed on his head.

Consider the alternatives. Jesus could have argued for his innocence. He could have gotten off and not been crucified, but then how would he be our savior? Jesus could have called in an army of angels to rescue him, so he could have avoided the lies and the suffering, but if he had been unwilling to suffer, where would that have left us? Jesus could have resisted or fought back, but then evil would have won by replicating itself in him.

It is important for us to see that Jesus did what he did not only because Judas betrayed him, not only because the disciples deserted him, not only because the religious authorities condemned him, and not only because the government officials convicted him—Jesus could have overcome any of these forces—but instead, Jesus did what he did, accepting his condemnation and conviction in silence, because he was acting in obedience to the will of God. It was not only the authorities who handed him over to each other for conviction and crucifixion; it was God who handed him over to die for our sake. It was God who sent him here. Jesus was committed to fulfilling God's plan, and no one else even knew what was going on. The righteous man stood trial on behalf of unrighteous humanity. The innocent man suffered death for the sake of a guilty humanity. Jesus died to show us the extent of God's love, so that we have no reason to hold back on our faith. And he died without a single word of self-defense, to show us the strength of his obedience.

Jesus did this, at the ultimate cost to himself, so that you and I have no reason to doubt that we are set free from the sin of which we are, in fact, guilty. The innocent man was convicted and punished so that you and I, miserable sinners that we are, could escape punishment. The innocent man stood and fell before a judge on earth, who had no authority over him, so that we might stand and rise before God. This is the purpose and the result of this conviction of the righteous man. He is paying the price for our wrongdoing, not for anything he did.

By way of contrast with Jesus on trial, you and I know, when we are honest with ourselves, that we are not innocent. We may be innocent of flagrant, outer crimes, or we may not be; but surely we know that we are not innocent of the countless wrongs of thought, word, and deed that we have committed against God, against neighbor, and against loved ones. Some of these we cannot even admit; some we cannot bear; some we cannot live with. We do not mention this in church to be hurtful or accusatory and especially not to wallow in undue fascination with wrongdoing. Far from it! We acknowledge here our lack of innocence for this reason alone: in order to seek and receive the healing, forgiveness, cleansing, freedom, and release we so desperately desire.

Jesus Christ provides the one, sure hope we have for life and for the world. If we hope in ourselves, we find that we are weak and failing. If we hope in others, we find that they betray and desert us. If we hope in government or the economy or history, we find that they do not save us. And yet, there is one upon whom we can depend, one in whom we can rely. There is one who has never failed us or deserted us. There is one who calls us by name as his very own. He is our one sure hope, in life and in death. Cling to him, as to no other, for he holds us close to himself. Christ gives us life beyond this life, and therefore hope and life within this life. Disease may ravage us, but God can resurrect us. Society may collapse upon us, but the

Kingdom of God does not fail. Family and friends may desert us, but Jesus Christ never abandons us. We too often hate ourselves, but Jesus never stops loving us. In all the changing world, here is the rock upon which we can base our lives. In all the shouting, lying, mocking confusion of today's reading, Jesus quietly and serenely goes about doing what he was called to do, obeying God, fulfilling all righteousness, effecting the salvation of humanity. Here is our one good hope.

Today we can appreciate who Jesus is and what he is about by believing in him. The crowd in today's reading gives us a counter example by failing to appreciate Jesus and choosing Barabbas instead. They chose a guilty criminal instead of the righteous man who was willing to suffer a criminal's punishment for them. We are trying to go the other direction. The effects of Christ's silent obedience then extend to and beyond today. He was shown at that time to be the servant of the Lord in order that he might still serve us today. The one who never opened his mouth to defend himself is now in heaven defending us. The quiet, righteous man, is worthy of our full attention and complete devotion. We would do well to study him diligently, to meditate upon him frequently, to worship him faithfully, to serve him eagerly, and to pray in his name without ceasing. These are the kinds of things we can do to begin to appreciate who Jesus is and what he is about.

On the basis of this appreciation and faith, we can begin to appropriate the lessons of this reading into our lives. It would not be enough to admire Jesus and yet to keep him at arm's length. Jesus went through this conviction and suffering to forgive and take away our sin. Sometimes it is the hardest thing in the world for us to accept forgiveness. We do not want to admit we need forgiveness. We do not want to be beholden to someone else. We would rather live by our own strengths and weaknesses than rely on the gifts of others. We do not want to move from the comfortable constrictions of the old life into the frightening freedom of the new life of forgiveness in Christ. But let us not allow the innocent suffering of Jesus go to waste! Let us not ignore his expensive obedience and so throw it back in his face! It would be horrible for us to learn what Jesus did to take away our sin and then to walk out of here still clinging to our sin.

On the basis of this appreciation and appropriation, we can share this good news of Jesus Christ with everyone around us. Whose life is in such good shape that he or she does not need some help? Jesus was delivered to Pilate, and then Pilate delivered him to be crucified, in order to set us free, in order for us not to be delivered to the power of sin and not to be bound to the power of death. There is not a person in the world who does not need to know that. There is someone in your family, in your neighborhood, at your school, at your work, who needs to know about Jesus Christ, who needs to know about the incredible and infinite long-

suffering love of God, who needs to know about grace and forgiveness and the opportunity for new life and new relationships. Think for a moment about how hard it was for Jesus to stand there and to take being wrongly condemned and falsely convicted without even defending himself. Let us learn from his courage how to be brave. Let us learn from his example how to be obedient. Let us learn from his life how to be faithful. Let us bring people here to meet and to get to know him, Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior. They will want to appreciate, appropriate, and share this good news about him, too.

Today is the day for us to respond to gospel this message. Can you see the beauty of God hidden here in the horror of humanity? Are we ready to worship God as made known to us in Jesus Christ, who was wrongly condemned and falsely convicted for our sake? Are we ready to love the one whom so many despised? Are we ready to serve the one who refused to defend himself? Are we ready to follow and obey the one who has paid the price of obedience himself?

To God be the glory forever and ever! Amen.

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