



Lent 5
Take Up Your Cross
April 2, 2006

John 19:1-16
The Sentence
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This morning I am concluding a series of sermons from the Passion narratives in the Gospel of John. We have followed the events from the night Jesus was arrested until the time that Pilate sentenced him to be crucified. My prayer has been that we hear this not simply as history but as God's drama with our lives as well.

Pilate was not that different from us. He had a tough job, he worked hard at it, and he wanted to succeed. As we noted a couple of weeks ago, for seven years he had been serving as the Roman administrator of Judea. Certainly, Pilate had higher ambitions than being stuck in the dusty crossroads of Judea, but he would never make it to a better job back in beautiful Rome unless he succeeded here. Pilate's king was Emperor Tiberius. But as far as we know, Tiberius wasn't even aware of Pilate since he was too far down the ranks of civil servants. So Pilate had to do well here in order to get noticed.

It did not take long for Pilate to discover that Judea was a tough place to succeed. That's because the crowds were tough. According to the ancient historian Josephus, shortly after Pilate arrived, he made the blunder of setting up banners in Jerusalem that had the Emperor's image on them. He was sure this would please the crowd back in Rome, but the crowd in Jerusalem revolted by baring their necks and exclaiming that they would rather be dead than have such idols in their holy city. When the riots continued, Pilate received a memo from Rome telling him to get rid of the banners. His second fiasco came when he tried to respond to the crowd's need for clean water. There was no money in the imperial treasury to build an aqueduct in Judea so Pilate took the funds from the only the place he could find — the Temple. Again the crowd revolted, again a memo came from Rome, and Pilate had to abandon the water project.

Like any one of us, Pilate has a dream. He has a vague idea of where he wants to be in life, and a crystal clear idea of where he doesn't want to be. But the hardest part of his dream is that he has to please the crowd to succeed. He knows it, and so do they.

So who is really Pilate's king? He really isn't serving Emperor Tiberius. That's just who he thinks he's serving as he tries to rule over Judea. But the ruler of this crowd is actually being ruled by them. It is they who will determine if he looks like a success in Rome, and they who hold the key to his future dreams. Pilate has learned the hard way that he needs the crowd.

So do you. You also have some dreams, and you also have a crowd who will determine if those dreams come true. Maybe it is the people at work, or the crowd at the club, or at school. Maybe it is the family who raised you, or the friends you've gathered around you, who determine the value of your achievements. Or your crowd can be comprised of customers, clients, students, patients, supervisors. You may have several crowds in your crowded life. You would be horrified to think that you have made those people your king, but that is exactly what the crowd is if it has the power to make your dreams come true. You don't have to like these people. In fact, since they have so much power over your dreams, you probably don't like the crowd any more than Pilate did. But you know that you need their approval. That's why they have power, and why they are your real king.

One night a crowd from the Sanhedrin, the assembly of religious leaders, dragged a rabbi from Galilee to Pilate's front door. It was clear that the rabbi had already been slapped around. The crowd claimed that this man was a criminal, but Pilate knew he had committed no crime. He was interested in Jesus for a different reason. Pilate must have also heard that when Jesus arrived into Jerusalem, his followers hailed him as their king. News like that would surely be carried to the Roman administrator. This is what intrigued Pilate. So he asked the man with a split lip, "Are you the king of the Jews?" And Jesus responded by saying, "You say that I am a king."

In other words, the question implies the answer. Even when the question is asked in doubt, it implies that we are looking for what we can't believe is before us. The religious leaders were looking for the Messiah, but couldn't believe it was really Jesus. Pilate, who had spent years trying to further his career by serving a king in Rome, and who had only succeeded in making the public opinion his king, just couldn't believe that this beat up rabbi was king. But I believe that Pilate would have loved to find a king that is worthy of his service—a king who cares about him and who doesn't try to use or manipulate him like the bureaucrats in Rome and the complaining crowd in Judea. How could this man be that king? Still, Pilate could not dismiss him.

Pilate tried to tell the crowd that this man was innocent, but they wouldn't hear of it. He even tried to set a prisoner free, but the crowd chose Barabbas instead. Our text portrays Pilate making five trips between Jesus who is inside and the crowd outside. Inside he is drawn closer and closer to the quiet truth of Jesus. Outside he is repeatedly confronted with the frenzied crowd demanding that Jesus be crucified. Back and forth he travels, time after time, as if to express the struggle that is unfolding in his own soul.

Desperate to get out of this dilemma, Pilate has Jesus flogged by his soldiers. He allows them to ridicule him with a crown of thorns and a purple robe. At first he says, "Look, he is just a man." Then he says, "Look, he is your king," but to no avail. Pilate knows what the crowd wants.

Success in our world has always been the reward given to those who maintain the delicate balance of giving the crowd what it wants without having to sacrifice too much of their own soul. We know that the world's dreams will cost at least a piece of our souls. "Some values have to be compromised," we tell ourselves, "some expectations lowered." For instance, you really despise

your job, but the security is good. Or you admit to yourself that you're in a relationship that isn't exactly love, but you tell yourself that it beats loneliness.

We think we can just keep giving more and more pieces of the soul, but eventually the soul is almost gone, leaving us with only emptiness inside. Then one day, maybe in worship on Sunday, you are staring right at Jesus, who has already been rejected by the same crowd who is just using you. And something in your soul says, this is the one you should have been serving all along. But how do you do that?

How do you now free yourself from the tyranny of the crowd? I can answer that. You will never find the courage to be free until you no longer care about the rewards the crowd dangles in front of you. If you think that by making the crowd happy they will make your dreams come true, then you've got the wrong dreams. And they were never going to give them to you anyway.

If you want to use your life for something that matters in this world and the next — something like peace and justice, healing and restoration, forgiveness and reconciliation — then you have to stop trying to make the crowd happy. Jesus loved the crowd, but he never reduced his ministry to pleasing them. Why do you think you have your crowd at work or at home? Why are you in leadership there? It is not to please the crowd. No, your mission is to lead them toward the kingdom of Christ the King.

Sooner or later a moment comes, when every one of us has to face the same moment of decision that Pilate is now encountering in our text. This is the moment when you have to decide for the crowd or for Jesus. Who is your king? Who is the source of your hope? Who is the one that informs your choices and measures your life? As Pilate discovered, you cannot compromise your way out of this choice, and you just cannot avoid it. So who is king — your crowd or Jesus Christ?

We have been looking at the trial of Jesus, but in this particular story it isn't actually Jesus, it is Pilate, you and I who are on trial. In the end, Pilate was found guilty of selling his soul to the crowd. He sentenced Jesus to be crucified, but far worse, he sentenced himself to be the slave of a crowd that would never be satisfied and would never make him a success. The great tragedy is that Emperor Tiberius probably died without even knowing the name of his servant in Judea.

The story does not have to end that way. It all depends on the choices you make.

Benediction: *Not only do you get to choose your king, you have to. And whether you realize it or not, every other choice you make this week will depend on that one. Amen*