

+ John 19:12-16a + Ironies of the Passion: We Have No King But Caesar¹ +
+ Lenten Midweek #3 + 24 February 2016 +

"I can't believe my ears!" Have you ever caught yourself saying that? Maybe your daughter, who's told you a thousand times how much she hates wearing dresses, suddenly tells you that she doesn't have a nice dress for church. Or your friends, who've always been very frugal, suddenly splurge on a trip to Hawaii. Those kinds of unexpected reverses can seem unbelievable.

But that's nothing compared to someone who contradicts everything he's ever stood for because it's advantageous. A politician, who has opposed raising taxes for decades, suddenly comes out with a plan to raise taxes. You can't believe your ears, but this tax-cutting politician thinks that the only way he can win an election is to support what he was once against. Of course, his opponent will quickly point out the irony of his flip-flop.

Tonight we have before us that kind of flip-flop. We find the Roman governor Pontius Pilate in a position where he very well could've said, "I can't believe my ears!" Once again Jesus' enemies—the Jewish leaders provide the irony as they proclaim, **WE HAVE NO KING BUT CAESAR.**

It started with an argument and ended with the dashing of Pilate's hopes to set Jesus free. Early Good Friday morning, the Jewish leaders showed up outside Pilate's palace. They wanted to persuade him to carry out the death sentence they had passed on Jesus hours earlier.

Pilate, however, wasn't going to let them dictate whom he executed in the name of the Roman Empire. So he questioned Jesus personally. It didn't take him long to figure out that Jesus was guilty of nothing except making his enemies jealous. Supported by Roman troops and Roman law, Pilate held the real authority in Jerusalem, while the Jewish leaders had none.

So the two forces squared off giving Jesus no real say in the matter. Pontius Pilate was a Roman. At best, he had only a surface knowledge of Jewish religion, and he probably didn't care to know any more than that. Pilate was loyal to Rome. He was there to enforce Roman law, to collect Roman taxes, and to protect Roman borders. The only opinion that mattered to him was what people were saying on the other side of the Mediterranean Sea. At heart, Pilate was a cynic. He didn't believe in truth.

The chief priests were different in almost every way. They hated the Romans. They considered all Gentiles (non-Jews) to be unclean. They couldn't care less about the survival of the Roman Empire. Given the chance, they would've set up an independent country in a heartbeat. Their lives revolved around the hair-splitting controversies of the Jewish sects, but they were all convinced that the God of Israel was the only true God.

Jesus, of course, was a Jew, but the religious leaders wanted him dead. They didn't care whether he was guilty or not. They even invented charges just to get rid of him. Ironically, the Gentile governor—who represented the occupying army and said, "**What is truth?**" (John 18:38)—wanted justice for Jesus.

Again and again, Pilate tried to set him free. He tried using the custom of releasing a prisoner for the Passover and offered Jesus to the crowd. He had him flogged and brought back out in hopes that the crowd would feel sorry for him. He tried sending Jesus to Herod to pass the buck. He even argued with the priests and the Jewish mob in front of the palace.

In the end, however, Pilate could not escape the logic of their argument: Jesus claimed to be a king. That meant he was in rebellion against Caesar. If Pilate freed him, the governor would side against Rome. Jesus had to be crucified according to Roman law. Pilate had to put Jesus on trial publicly. When Pilate asked, "**Shall I crucify your king?**" the chief priests answered, "**We have no king but Caesar.**" So Pilate sent Jesus to die.

The only way Pilate could've resisted all this would've been if he himself was willing to risk everything for Christ. His career, his life was on the line once the chief priests invoked Caesar. Yet Pilate wasn't going to risk anything for Jesus. Isn't that human nature? You take care of yourself first. In fact, that's the difference between Jesus and everyone else in this account. Jesus alone was willing to lay down his life for the good of others.

Are you and I any different from Pilate? In spite of what we might imagine, you and I probably would've caved

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just like Pontius Pilate. The truth is, most of us probably won't ever find ourselves in a situation this dramatic. Instead every day presents opportunities to sacrifice your life for God in the love you show to one another. Yet are we any more willing to sacrifice ourselves for the good of others than Pilate was?

Sacrificing yourself for others is the core of real Christian love. Are you willing to sacrifice everything for God? For the truth? For the good of people who don't deserve it and who would never make such a sacrifice for you? If so, you have to accept the smirks and the dislike of people who don't want to be too fanatical about their faith. You have to stand on God's principles, instead of standing on convenience, but do you do that?

Don't we usually save our own skins like Pilate? You make up an excuse to keep yourself out of trouble. You avoid making eye contact with people who need your help until you're out of range. You wait for the right moment to talk about Jesus, but strangely, the right moment never seems to come. You act friendly, but don't really put yourself out there for your neighbor. So you never really risk anything for Christ. Does that sound like you?

All those sins and failures, all that lack of love deserves God's punishment in hell. What an irony that Jesus endured this endless debate for people like us. In love, Jesus did endure it. This was just one more step to the cross, one more step to dying and rising and setting you free. He could've put a stop to it at any moment, but he didn't. He played along while these mortal men argued and debated, knowing how it was going to end. Then he submitted when Pilate lost, and Jesus died on the cross.

The miracle in all this is that God counts that perfect, self-sacrificing love of Christ as yours. He looks at Jesus and says that you have loved God and one another because Jesus did. Amazingly, God counts that death as your payment for sin. When Jesus died on that cross, his blood washed away all your selfishness, all the lies you tell yourself to make yourself feel better, all your guilt for all the times you put yourself first. Because Jesus suffered your death and your hell, God has forgiven those sins so you and I are free.

In a way, Pilate and the Jewish leaders were like children playing at being adults. They were playing at judging Christ as if it were really up to them to decide whether he went to the cross. Only they didn't know it was a game. That adds some sadness to tonight's irony of the Passion.

It was no secret that the Jews hated Caesar. Jerusalem had a reputation for being one of the hardest places in the Roman Empire to rule, because the Jews were convinced that they were the people of God and God would help them if they revolted. So they tried over and over again. **"We have no king but Caesar"** was a lie they never thought would pass their lips. So why say it? They cynically hoped to trap Pilate into doing what they wanted.

Yet there was a deeper meaning to it. Jesus was the true King of Israel. A thousand years earlier God had promised to send a son of old King David to rule his people. Jesus was that Son of David. All Jewish hopes focused on him. Abraham had looked forward in faith to the day of Christ, and every true child of Abraham trusted in him even in the Old Testament. So when these men rejected Jesus and said they had no king but Caesar, they were actually denying the faith of their fathers and were removing themselves from God's people.

In every person's heart there is a king. There is a Caesar who rules our hopes and dreams, who steers our goals and work. That king is supposed to be Jesus. His Word and love are supposed to be the be all and end all of our existence. Yet for most, the king is someone else. In fact, when you were born, the king was someone else. It was you and your pleasure and convenience. Even to this day, that old selfish king still wants his job back.

You might be shocked to find out how easy it would be for you and me to join Jesus' enemies in denying all that we have confessed and in claiming a false god as our king. No sinner has the strength to remain faithful to Christ on his or her own. The devil is constantly probing for that moment of weakness when he can pull you away from Christ and back into his kingdom. It doesn't take much for a lifelong habit of attending worship and studying God's Word to become a habit of staying away from God's house and God's Word.

Have no fear though. The same Jesus who could've stopped that silly argument 2,000 years ago is in control of your life too. He gave you faith, and he promises to keep that faith alive through his Word. You can trust him. When you fear for your faith, that's when Jesus says, "I'm here. I love you. I've forgiven you. I've given you my Word and Sacraments to strengthen you and keep your faith alive. I've given you a pastor to hear your confession and comfort you with my love and forgiveness. I've given you fellow members to encourage you. I will never leave you or forsake you. If you ever doubt my love, look back on that ridiculous day when my enemies thought they were doing what they wanted. They were actually doing what I wanted by bringing me to

the cross so I could die for you. My blood has washed all your sin and weakness away. So now I live in you.”

In every person’s life, there is a king. The king in the heart of an unbeliever leads that person to hell, but God has given you the one thing Pilate and the chief priests lacked—faith in Christ. He has put a new King in your heart, who will remain your King. He reigns through the message of his love. Trust in him, and with his help, have no other king in your life. Amen.