

John 19:1-16

We are continuing this morning in our study of the Gospel of John picking up at verse 1 of chapter 19 and working through to verse 16 of this same chapter. As those of you who have been with us will know, in the course of our study we have divided this Gospel into three parts. Chapters 1-12 have dealt with Jesus' public life and ministry, chapters 13-17 have focused on his more private ministry to his immediate followers and chapters 18-21 are focused on the central events of Jesus' life - his death, resurrection, and ascension.

In chapter 18 we looked at Jesus' arrest and his trial before the Jewish authorities, as well as taking an initial look at his trial before the *Roman* authorities, represented by Pontius Pilate. This morning we are continuing with the account of Jesus before Pilate and will see that through to the end, right up to the point just before Jesus' crucifixion.

Now, if you are sort of new to South Baton Rouge, you might find it a little strange that we would be looking at *these* accounts of Jesus' death and resurrection at *this* time of year, rather than at Easter when passages like this are typically looked at. But the reason that we *are* where we *are* is simply because this is how the timing of things has worked out. Since our practice here is to work our way systematically through books of the Bible, then we tend to deal with passages according to when they arise in the series and not so much according to the season of the year - although we do make some allowances for that sort of thing and, when possible, try to match up seasons and texts.

Nevertheless, while it might seem a little 'out of sync' to be where we are this morning, the reality is that studying these passages in this way lets us take our time looking at some of the *details* of these very important events in the life of Jesus - details that often get left out or skimmed over in the Easter season because there simply isn't enough time to focus on all that is there.

So, let's turn our attention to the passage before us and look at it in a little bit greater detail, knowing that even as we do, even as we ARE able to take our time this morning to look more closely, there is *still* so much more in these passages than we could ever possibly discuss in one sitting. And that's because the Scriptures reflect the character of their author. Before we go any further, let's pray together.

Father in heaven, please guide us now as we take an admittedly brief and insufficient look at this portion of your word. Father, the nature of these particular passages is especially meaningful for us as they deal with the ultimate purposes for which you sent our Savior, Jesus. Help us, then, to reverently and expectantly attend to the reading of these words. Change us by means of these truths, as we pray in Jesus' name....Amen.

(Read John 19:1-16)

When I was growing up, my father and I used to play chess. I don't think either one of us were all that brilliant at the game, but we enjoyed challenging each other and I in particular liked the very back and forth nature of the game - the moves and the counter-moves, the guessing and second-guessing that went on, and how your fortunes could change very rapidly one way or the other.

Now, in case there is someone here who has never played chess, or doesn't know anything about the game, basically what you are trying to do is manipulate your pieces on the board so that you can "capture" your opponents pieces - with the ultimate goal being to capture the piece called the "King". On a chess board there are a variety of different pieces - knights, rooks, bishops, pawns, a queen and a king - all of which have particular ways in which they can move, and attack, etc. As a result, there is a lot of mental calculation going on throughout the game trying to get pieces in certain positions, or force people to move certain ways, or setting traps, etc.

At any rate, the pieces are all moved around and some pieces are lost along the way until you get to the point where one, or sometimes both of you, are in a position to take the other person's King. When you get to this stage your opponent is said to be in "check", which is a dangerous place to be. At this point the person in 'check' has an opportunity to try and get 'out of check' - if they can. This stage of the game can sometimes go on for quite a while as you move back and forth between being "in check" and not being in check - until eventually, one of you has a King that is under threat and has nowhere to run and nowhere to hide. Once that happens, you announce "checkmate" - and the game is over.

The developing scene in John 18 and 19 is, in many ways, very much like a chess game between the Jewish authorities on the one hand, and Pilate, on the other. Various moves and counter-moves are made as these two parties try to gain the upper hand with regard to what will ultimately be done with Jesus with the result that in the end one of them is backed into a corner, with nowhere to go, and nowhere to hide.

I want you to keep that analogy in mind, as we take about the passage before us and try to open it up in a little more detail. As we saw last week, the Jewish authorities have determined that Jesus must die, but under their current circumstances, they are not able to carry out the death penalty without the permission and cooperation of the Roman government. And so, they bring Jesus to Pilate, fully expecting that Pilate is simply going to accept their judgment on the matter and "rubber stamp" what they have done - and Jesus will be crucified - and that will be the end of it. So, their coming to Pilate is the first in a series of "moves", the first of a number of attempts to put Pilate in "check", so to speak, to get him to do what they want him to do.

The first *counter-move* - as we saw last week - came as Pilate took them by surprise and, rather than simply signing off on Jesus' death, he proceeded to conduct his own investigation of the matter, with the result that he actually comes to a different conclusion about Jesus - that he really *doesn't* deserve to die. And then, as a further counter-move, Pilate decides to "poll the audience" as it were by giving them an opportunity - to call for Jesus' release - if that is really what they want. But they, in fact, *don't* want that, and choose Barabbas instead. In response to this development, Pilate then takes a different tack:

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 again 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!'

Now, at first glance, it might look like the contest between Pilate and the Jewish authorities is over. Pilate has assented to their commands and is giving them what they want. However, judging from the rest of what takes place in this passage, many scholars agree that what is *really* going on here is that Pilate is attempting to “buy them off” so to speak. He takes Jesus, gives him a good beating and mocks and humiliates him - and then brings him back out to the authorities, presenting him to them with the sarcastic announcement - “Behold the man!”

Two quick side notes here. Firstly, you might wonder what Pilate means when he says, “I am bringing him out to you *that* you may know that I find no guilt in him.” What I think he means is simply this: He has just beaten the tar out of Jesus. And then he takes Jesus out and shows him to the people - who would be able to see for themselves that Jesus had been flogged. And, in the light of this, Pilate seems to be saying, “Look, you can see for yourselves that I’ve beaten this guy black and blue, trying to get some confession out of him, and yet he hasn’t admitted to anything or said anything that would implicate him of a capital crime.”

The other side note has to do with the floggings or beatings themselves. You need to know that back in the day there were three different kinds of beatings or *scourgings* that took place. The first level was certainly painful - but it amounted to a very stern warning, in the end. The second level was considerably more severe and the third level was the worst of all and was reserved for those who had been sentenced to death. The reason I’m telling you this is because, when you compare the Gospel accounts, it seems that there was more than one flogging that Jesus took. There was this early one, and then there was a further flogging that was given to him just before he was sent off to carry his cross toward Golgotha.

That being the case, it is likely that what Jesus receives here in the opening of chapter 19 is the *first level* of flogging – painful enough to make a lasting impression, but not permanently damaging. The second flogging would most likely have been the third level - which is so horrible that I’m not even going to describe it to you except to say that it was so bad that very often people did not even *survive* this flogging to *make it* to their execution. But the likelihood that Jesus received two floggings in a short space of time would help explain both his extreme weakness in carrying his cross, as well as explaining why he so quickly succumbed to death once he *was* finally nailed to the cross.

And so, returning to the story, it seems that Pilate’s hope here is that the authorities will be satisfied with Jesus’ being flogged and publicly humiliated and perhaps even take pity on him and abandon their calls for his execution.

But, of course, they don’t and instead cry out, “Crucify him, Crucify him!”

Once again, Pilate rejects and counters their calls for Jesus' death, saying to them, "Take him yourselves and crucify him, for I find no guilt in him." This response on Pilate's part seems to be further evidence of his reluctance to give them what they want or to take a part in this whole thing - even though he knows, of course, that *they* cannot crucify anybody on their own. And so his remarks here can be seen simply as an outburst of frustration on Pilate's part.

And once again the authorities, without missing a beat, make their counter-move and, in doing so, change their approach to Pilate. They see Pilate's reluctance. They see that he is wavering in his resolve. So what do they do? They switch strategies. They had initially come to him addressing the *political* aspects of their charges against Jesus - asserting that Jesus was a danger because he claimed to be a rival king to Caesar. As we saw last week - while the matter of Jesus being a Messiah was not of huge interest to Pilate, the matter of his being a king WAS.

However, their strategy of emphasizing the political aspects of Jesus' alleged crimes seems to have fallen a little flat. Pilate is having a hard time believing that this now beaten, pathetic figure before him is any serious threat to Roman rule. The authorities see this and so, in an instant, switch directions and go to the heart of the matter - to the issue that is *really* troubling them about Jesus - the fact that Jesus considered himself to be *the Son of God*.

And, you see, it is *this* description, *this* phrase, *this* particular way of putting thing that seems to have struck Pilate in a way that, so far, nothing else has. There is an urgency and a deep concern and even great *fear* that seems to attach itself to Pilate at this point. As Carson writes,

"When Pilate heard [this] slight revision of the charge....he [as the text says] was even more afraid."

Now, this rendering "even MORE afraid" Carson argues, is *one* possible legitimate translation. But an alternative, equally legitimate and, as it seems to me, *better* translation might be, "He became *exceedingly* afraid", which, given the context and the progress of this scene, seems to fit better with the flow of the passage. As Carson notes, up to this point in the account of Pilate and Jesus, Pilate comes across as cynical and blunt - but not really as one who is afraid. However, now something seems to be different in that regard. He continues,

".....to a Jewish ear, the charge that Jesus claimed to be the Son of God would be taken as messianic pretension.....but to a Graeco-Roman ear [i.e., to Pilate's ear], the charge sounded quite different. It had nothing to do with blasphemy and presented no threat to the Roman Empire; rather, it placed Jesus in an ill-defined category of 'divine men', [which were] gifted individuals who were believed to enjoy certain 'divine' powers. If Jesus was a 'son of God' in this sense, Pilate might well feel a twinge of fear; [after all] he had just had Jesus whipped....."

Carson goes on to note that Roman society in that day had many stories of “gods” who had come to earth in human form and who exercised their various powers in different ways. And so, it would not have been at all unusual for Pilate - who cared nothing about the Jewish religion - to nevertheless possess a healthy amount of *superstitious* belief that perhaps Jesus was one who fell in this *other* category of person/being.

And so, this seems likely to be one factor in Pilate’s rapidly changing assessment of both Jesus and the undesirability of this situation that he would *desperately* love to just go away.

The other factor that would contribute to Pilate’s shifting assessment of this situation has to do with an event that John has not seen fit to record - for some reason - but which IS found in Matthew’s Gospel. When you read Matthew’s account you discover that at some point in the midst of these proceedings, and likely near the end, Pilate was approached by his wife - who warned him to have nothing to do with Jesus. Why? Because, apparently, she had suffered much in her dreams on account of him. We hear nothing else about this event in the Gospels so it’s hard to speculate on just what was going on - but clearly Pilate’s wife felt that these dreams were significant - some sort of warning - and so she passed this information on to Pilate - even as he was in the midst of examining Jesus.

And so, at the description of Jesus as one who called himself the “Son of God”, and also as a result of circumstances involving his wife, Pilate is suddenly and increasingly afraid. He had already come to the conclusion that Jesus was an *innocent* man. But now he is gravely concerned that he might be even more than that.

So Pilate takes Jesus in for further interrogation - and his question now has gone from, “Are you a king?” and “What have you done?” to a very basic, “Where are you from?” And, again, given what we’ve just seen, you can be certain that Pilate is not really interested in the name of Jesus’ *home town*. What he wants to know is whether or not Jesus is from *here*, this world, this *planet*, or whether, in fact, he *does* have some sort of divine origin.

Well, on this point at least, Jesus decides to remain silent. *Why* he chooses not to respond to this *particular* question is not clear. But the fact that he chooses to remain silent for at least *some* of his questioning is something that we see in all of the Gospel accounts. And, as some of you will likely know, this reality actually fulfills one of the prophecies about the Messiah - found in Isaiah 53:7.

Without going into a lot of detail, what the Isaiah passage is saying, among other things, is that, in response to his oppression and affliction, the Messiah, when he comes and appears before his accusers will not open his mouth but will be silent - like a sheep before his shearers. And the point of the Isaiah passage is not to say that the Messiah will not say *any words* in the presence of his accusers. That would be a fairly wooden reading of the passage and, at any rate, as the gospels clearly show, it isn’t what Jesus did.

The *point* of the Isaiah passage is to show that God's Messiah - the Suffering Servant described in the passage - will certainly be oppressed and afflicted and wrongly treated - and YET, in spite of this difficulty, in spite of the fact that what is happening to him is terribly unjust, he will NOT resist this, he will NOT fight against it, he will NOT run away from it but - instead - will *capitulate* to it. He will run *toward* it. He will embrace it. He won't be trying to argue his way out of it, he won't become defensive, he won't be making any bargains or deals, he won't be railing at his accusers, or crying and wailing and moaning. He will accept what comes from their hand. Why? Because he is God's designated sin-bearer.

That is the role he was meant to play and the purpose he came to fulfill. And this is precisely what you see as you watch Jesus being interrogated - a man who responds to some things and refuses to respond to others - but a man who clearly is not trying to escape or walk away from or get out of the terrible predicament in which he finds himself - a fact which, as the Gospels testify, Pilate finds simply amazing, even incomprehensible.

And you see his bewilderment here in his response to Jesus' silence: "*You will not speak to me?*" he says, "*Do you not know I have authority to release you and authority to crucify you?*" Jesus' almost scandalous dis-interest in getting some sort of release or pardon is clearly puzzling to Pilate. The fact that Jesus is not defending himself, not begging for mercy, not crying out to be let go - all of this, once again, has left Pilate deeply confused. He has seen a lot of dangerous and treacherous men in his day. But dangerous and desperate men don't *act* like this. Wicked men don't *speak* like this. Un-principled men don't *respond* like this.

And then, as if he hasn't already done enough to show his poise and command of this situation, Jesus at this point *even takes the time to mildly correct Pilate* with regard to his misconceptions about the power that he possesses. And, once again, the irony here is rich, isn't it? Here's Pilate telling Jesus about the power *he* has to release him - and Jesus' response is to take Pilate to school and explain to him the ultimate source of his power - which is not Caesar but God. To put it another way: Jesus tells Pilate that the only power he has to exercise is that which God has allowed him to have.

And this, of course, is where the great irony of this situation enters in. Because Pilate asserts here that he has the power to release Jesus. And that may be correct in a formal, technical sense. But the *truth* is that in this situation Pilate could no more have released Jesus than he could have re-arranged the stars in the sky. Because, as we have seen repeatedly in John's Gospel, *Jesus isn't here by accident*. Jesus isn't just a victim of a "series of unfortunate events". *Jesus is standing before Pilate right now because that is where God the Father wants him to be*, and because that is where he - Jesus - is *willing* to be and because the plan, all along, has been that he would come to this very thing, that he would die, on a cross, in the place of his people, bearing their sin and shame, and reconciling them to God in the process. And so, Pilate's assertions notwithstanding, the truth is that *no power in the universe could have prevented this moment from happening*, much less the paltry "power" of Pilate.

And even so, on top of everything else we have seen, and as if this short passage isn't *already* overflowing with meaning and significance, Jesus goes on to utter this *pastorally brilliant* statement that has more meaning than we can really unpack this morning. But notice what Jesus says: "*Therefore he who delivered me over to you has the greater sin.*"

What? Where did that come from? Were we talking about Pilate or Pilate's sin here? Was that discussion even on the table? I mean, one moment, Pilate is dumbfounded over Jesus' non-attempt to get out of this situation and reminding him of the power he has to help him do just that - and the next moment, Jesus is telling Pilate that there is someone that has committed an even greater sin than him. What is that all about? Where is this coming from?

Simply this: Jesus can see that Pilate is struggling. He has seen Pilate's reluctance and uneasiness building throughout this whole episode. He can sense the fear that is growing within Pilate. And he knows that Pilate - despite all his declarations and pretensions - is *not* going to release him. And he knows that Pilate is, nevertheless, terrified that not only is he likely putting to death an innocent man, but also quite possibly some sort of "divine man", some emissary of the gods, maybe even a god himself. And so, in the face of that, Jesus makes this *brilliant* comment that accomplishes at least three things all at once:

- 1) He affirms by this remark the fact that all that is happening is under the sovereign control and purview of God, including the exercise of authority by those who have condemned him.
- 2) He affirms that even though this whole event is orchestrated by God, that does not mean that the actions and decisions of those that have arrested, tried, condemned and beaten him are free from guilt. They are clearly wrong. What has been done is still sinful. It is still without excuse or justification in God's eyes.
- 3) Nevertheless, while what Pilate has done IS sinful, even *greatly* sinful, it is still not as bad in God's eyes as the sin of others in this whole matter. In other words, God *does* recognize the difference between the Jewish authorities who *instigated* this whole thing, and Pilate's involvement which was a *response* to the initiated actions of others. In short, what Jesus is communicating to Pilate here is that, yes, he is sinful, but also that the God whom he has offended/is offending is a *just* and *discerning* God.

And why does Jesus even *bother* to point out that God is just and discerning - especially now, especially in *this* circumstance? Because, as it seems to me, this is yet another example of Jesus, even in this extreme situation, even at this late hour, showing mercy and responding pastorally to those around him - *including* his enemies. His pointing out to Pilate that he is sinful, but God is just - is an implicit invitation to Pilate, to throw himself on the mercy of this firm, but just God.

Well, not surprisingly, upon hearing this response of Jesus, and after seeing it for the pastoral gesture that it truly is, Pilate is now more concerned than ever to bring about Jesus' release, or at the least, to somehow avoid his being crucified.

But, returning to the chess board analogy.... the Jewish authorities are not finished. They have not exhausted all of their moves. There is one more play they have that may well result in “checkmate”. They can see and sense Pilate’s crumbling resolve, as I’ve already said. He clearly doesn’t want to go through with this. But all their previous maneuvers have not yet forced him to give in. So they make their last move - they deliver what amounts to a bit of blackmail - a thinly disguised threat that if Pilate lets Jesus off the hook, they will go directly to Caesar and report Pilate’s lack of loyalty by allowing a claimant to the throne such as Jesus to live. And the very likely result of that would be Pilate’s removal and subsequent execution in the process. And Pilate knew it. As extra-biblical records seem to suggest, he was already on shaky ground with his superiors because of some prior events.

So, with this last comment, Pilate realizes that he has finally been cornered by the Jewish authorities and has no other options - not if he wants to live. And so he, at this point, gives up any further attempts to have Jesus released and resigns himself to the inevitable. Accordingly, he takes his seat on his official “chair” much as a Judge would take his seat in a court of law. And from this position and place of authority, he makes a binding pronouncement and judgment - and reluctantly hands Jesus over to them - but not without a last sarcastic jab at the Jews whom he now surely despises more than ever. “Behold your king” to which the chorus of Jesus’ despisers replies “Away with him, away with him, Crucify him”.

“Shall I crucify your king?” Pilate says, clearly mocking them. The people respond - with words that were truer than they knew, “We have no king but Caesar.”

“We have no king but Caesar”. Six words. Six words that perfectly summarize *exactly* what is going on here. Because in their rejection of Jesus, they have shown their disregard - not *just* for Jesus, not just for this person who had been so troublesome to them - they have shown - and have now *shouted* it out loud - that they have rejected God himself. Truly, they now have NO king, but Caesar. God is no longer their king. People ask, when did we shift from being all about Israel to being all about the Church? *I’d say it was right here.* Here where ethnic Israel finally and loudly makes their intentions clear regarding their Messiah, and regarding God Himself.

John’s Gospel preserves this event for us for many reasons, but one of them, clearly, is because he wants his readers to see the results of rejecting Jesus. He wants them to see where you end up when you refuse to acknowledge and honor Christ. He wants his readers to see the tremendous significance of this decision, the lasting consequences of this decision, the *starkness* of this decision because, at the end of the day, you either have to fall on your knees and acknowledge Jesus as your King, or you need to start looking for a hammer and some nails.