

Message for Good Friday, March 25, 2016, Invocation, Jeremiah 1:10 and Romans 13:1-7

The main focus for Good Friday is the cross: how Jesus got there, what Jesus accomplished there, and how what He accomplished affects us. It is upon the cross that Jesus accomplished the substitutionary atonement: he died for our sins. When we place our faith in what Jesus accomplished on the cross, God accepts Jesus' death as the sufficient substitute for our own sins. As regards satisfying the justice of God which demands a price for all sin, such satisfaction constitutes the affirmation of the moral character of God, His righteousness and trustworthiness. The ultimate absoluteness of the moral law is no less than the laws which by scientific research we gradually discover both define and control physical reality. This is why miracles are such a serious matter. Miracles are generally understood as events in which the laws of the physical order of creation are suspended. We have to consider what such a suspension means as well as how it is accomplished. It is true to say that God is all powerful, so presumably He can do whatever He wants or considers it necessary to do. At the same time, know that God cannot deny Himself. For instance, scripture says that God cannot lie. Along the same lines, we know that God cannot say that something is what it isn't, for that is a denial of the reality which God Himself has established through the exercise of His will according to His own attributes, and those attributes include truthfulness. The Spirit of God is the Spirit of truth. God will not lightly alter or set aside the laws which He has established for the ordering of all creation. What we do not know are the laws established by God for the interaction or interfacing between the spiritual realm and the physical. I suspect this is in part a consequence of the fall. We are blinded to much that is true.

Jesus died for our sins. In saying this, we need to be clear most particularly as to what is meant by saying Jesus died. Dying by crucifixion is amongst the most cruel and painful forms of death. Crucifixion is by no means unique to Jesus. Hundreds of thousands of people have been crucified. In the Gospels we are told that two men were crucified at the same time as Jesus and were on location with him. Despite the extreme pain, both were initially joining with the crowd in reviling Jesus. A little later one of the two had a change of heart and came to faith in Jesus as his Savior. Are we to think Jesus had less fortitude in the face of physical pain than these two thieves? When Jesus was in the Garden of Gethsemane, we are told He sweat what appeared to be drops of blood in the agony of anticipation of His crucifixion. Beloved, it was not His anticipation of physical pains which drove Jesus to such emotional distress. He had already endured a flesh shredding flogging with such equanimity that He could stand before Pilate with perfect poise and choose when and how He would answer him. Jesus' agony of soul was not in regard to physical suffering or death; it was in regard to enduring the wrath of His Father. I do not want to go far in this consideration, only far enough for each of us to begin to sense the two enormous realities manifest in Jesus' crucifixion which tend to become lost from view when we leave the matter at, "Jesus died for my sins." It is more accurate by far is to say "Jesus endured the wrath of God which was the

just response of God for my sins.” Obviously this goes beyond even the more exact definition of “death” which is “separation from God.” Anyone who has lost a loved one to death knows the reality of grief. It can be devastating even for those whose faith tells them the separation is only for a few years, until the glad day of heavenly reunion. Separation is painful, but we are right to expect that it falls short of what is implied or included in God’s wrath.

We have a hard time understanding God’s wrath. In large part this is because we are finite creatures, not infinite, and because we are basically pragmatists, not idealists or purists. As pragmatists our predominant concern is to make things work. We want to resolve difference and difficulties and move on, not getting caught in details. Amongst those details is an exact accounting of and making amends for grievances suffered. Creatures lack the necessary resources for perfect justice. On the one hand we simply don’t have sufficient knowledge of the facts. At the same time we have no satisfactory way of calculating degrees of grievance and whether these are in fact proportionate. It is wisest not to “waste” our time on such matters. Forgive and forget is the path both to peace and healing. Scripture itself commends to us. But as Christians we know it is not commended to us simply so that we don’t get mired down in impossible details. It is commended to us because perfect justice is taken care of by God. Perfect justice is what is at issue when we say that the death of Jesus, what Jesus endured under the wrath of God, satisfied God. What we mean is that the true and exact measure of justice was satisfied by what Jesus received of the wrath of God. It is hard for us to believe this is necessary. It is hard for us because we do not see that the moral order, the order of good versus evil, like true versus false and right versus wrong and actual or real versus illusory and pretention, is as necessary and absolute as the laws of matter, the laws of gravitational pull, of the entropy of structure and energy, of the conversion of matter into energy knows as $E=MC$ squared. We rely with unswerving and implicit faith on the laws of matter, but the God Who created the heavens and the earth is also the God of the Ten Commandments, and that God has said we are to have no other gods, we are to make no idols, we are not to take His name in vain, we are remember the Sabbath day for rest and worship, we are honor our parents, we are not to murder, we are not to commit adultery, we are not to steal, we are not to bear false witness against our neighbor and we are not covet other people’s goods. But if we do these things, there is necessarily a price to pay, a price that satisfies the Creator by preserving the moral order, the balance of truth and justice in the heart of God. In order that He could be both just and the justifier of sinners, God paid the price of having His own Son endure wrath to the full measure.

Some here may find that first paragraph a bit mystifying or at least perplexing. We rarely think about God in such terms, and certainly not on Good Friday. Good Friday is all about the grace of God securing redemption for humanity otherwise condemned to eternal death on account of their sin. True. It has the character of a rescue operation. But the essence of Good Friday is the meeting between the perfect holiness of the Everlasting God with the fallen condition of sinful humanity. It

is perfect law encountering lawlessness. Happily, for us, it is motivated by perfect love. Perhaps to our amazement if we examine scripture closely we realize it is first of all the love of the Son for the Father and of the Father for the Son.

This deeper reality of the drama of Good Friday comes out especially in Jesus' encounter with Pilate, the Roman Governor of Palestine. As we take up the Gospel accounts it is important that we remember the truth about the power to govern and those who exercise it. Pilate is not simply a random man who by a series of fortuitous choices and chance developments in the world of his day happened to end up as Governor any more than it was a random series of events which resulted in Rome being the empire of the day and ruling over the Jews as part of the empire. As God said to Pharaoh through Moses, I raised you up to demonstrate my power through you. So Pilate was made the Governor of Palestine in the days of Jesus, the Son of God. Before we look at Romans 13:1-7, recall with me the stunning prophecies written down by Daniel during the days of the Babylonian empire, long before Rome was on the scene. In interpreting the emperor Nebuchadnezzar's dream of the great statue, Daniel hundreds of years before the event, said it forecast four successive empires, the fourth of which would be Rome. How did Daniel know this? Through Isaiah the prophet God declares (Isaiah 46:9-10), *"I am God, and there is none like me, declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times things not yet done, saying, 'My counsel shall stand, and I will accomplish all my purpose.'"*

It is part of God's ordering of the world that He establishes governments and raises up people to run those governments. When the Lord called Jeremiah to be a prophet, He told him he would be used to cast down and raise up kings and kingdoms (Jeremiah 1:9-10, *"Behold, I have put my words in your mouth. See, I have set you this day over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to break down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant."*) The nations would not be limited to Israel and Judah alone. If you read the prophecies of Jeremiah and Isaiah in particular you realize they speak with God's authority to the nations and peoples of the world. This is simply an application of what Paul spells out much later in redemptive history in Romans 13:1-7.

"Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval, for he is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer. Therefore one must be in subjection, not only to avoid God's wrath but also for the sake of conscience. For because of this you also pay taxes, for the authorities are ministers of God, attending to this very thing. Pay to all what is owed to them: taxes to

whom taxes are owed, revenue to whom revenue is owed, respect to whom respect is owed, honor to whom honor is owed.”

It is with this understanding that we need to take up the narrative of Jesus' Good Friday conversation with Pilate, the Governor from Rome.

(18:28) *“Then they led Jesus from the house of Caiaphas to the governor’s headquarters. It was early morning. They themselves did not enter the governor’s headquarters, so that they would not be defiled, but could eat the Passover. (18:29) So Pilate went outside to them and said, ‘What accusation do you bring against this man?’ (18:30) They answered him, ‘If this man were not doing evil, we would not have delivered him over to you.’ (18:31) Pilate said to them, ‘Take him yourselves and judge him by your own law.’ The Jews said to him, ‘It is not lawful for us to put anyone to death.’ (18:32) This was to fulfill the word that Jesus had spoken to show by what kind of death he was going to die. (18:33) So Pilate entered his headquarters again and called Jesus and said to him, ‘Are you the King of the Jews?’ (18:34) Jesus answered, ‘Do you say this of your own accord, or did others say it to you about me?’ (18:35) Pilate answered, ‘Am I a Jew? Your own nation and the chief priests have delivered you over to me. What have you done?’ (18:36) Jesus answered, ‘My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would have been fighting. that I might not be delivered over to the Jews. But my kingdom is not from the world.’ (18:37) Then Pilate said to him, ‘So you are a king?’ Jesus answered, ‘You say that I am a king. For this purpose I was born and for this purpose I have come into the world—to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice.’ (18:38) Pilate said to him, ‘What is truth?’*

(18:39) *“After he had said this, he went back outside to the Jews and told them, ‘I find no guilt in him. But you have a custom that I should release one man for you at the Passover. So do you want me to release to you the King of the Jews?’ (18:40) They cried out again, ‘Not this man, but Barabbas!’ Now Barabbas was a robber.*

(19:1) *“Then Pilate took Jesus and flogged him. (19:2) And the soldiers twisted together a crown of thorns and put it on his head and arrayed him in a purple robe. (19:3) They came up to him, saying, ‘Hail, King of the Jews!’ and struck him with their hands. (19:4) 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.’ (19:5) So Jesus came out, wearing the crown of thorns and the purple robe. Pilate said to them, ‘Behold the man!’ (19:6) When the chief priests and the 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.’ (19:7) 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.’ (19:8) When Pilate heard this statement, he was even more afraid. (19:9) He*

entered his headquarters again and said to Jesus, 'Where are you from?' But Jesus gave him no answer. (19:10) 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?' (19:11) Jesus answered him, 'You would have no authority over me at all unless it had been given you from above. Therefore he who delivered me over to you has the greater sin.'

(19:12) 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.'
(19:13) 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. (19:14) Now it was the day of Preparation of the Passover. It was about the sixth hour. He said to the Jews, 'Behold your King!' (19:15) 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.' (19:16) So he delivered him over to them to be crucified."

There is an easy simplicity to this narrative, indicating it is well written. All seems clear and obvious, but beneath the surface there are revealing perplexities. To begin we might consider what sort of thinking it is that is scrupulous regarding ritual defilement at the very moment they are setting up the death of a man they know is innocent? (18:28) But our primary focus is on Pilate. He is the governor, appointed by the Emperor, the ruling power of Judah and Jerusalem. He is, therefore, the man of power. He alone in fact has the power of life and death. We see that he is initially gracious to the Jews, accommodating their scruples by going out to them rather than having them enter the Governor's palace a place of Gentile power. Further he is discerning. He realizes almost at once that the Jews are not interested in his judgment: they have already decided Jesus is guilty. So he resolves to let them do as they wish and seeks to send them on their way. It is then that the Jews let him know what they want is something only the Governor can give: the death sentence.

We need to get inside of Pilate's head. Here are these Jews, men of wealth and power at least in the small setting of Jerusalem and Palestine: in the setting of the Empire they are scarcely worth the time of day; but Pilate is not in Rome, he is in Jerusalem. He has the power. They want him to use that power to accomplish their will. The question he has to resolve is, "Am I willing to be used, to be maneuvered by them?" Pilate is not naïve; he knows the way things work in such situations. What has he got to gain and what has he got to lose? In the games of power everything is a matter of calculation.

Pilate speaks to Jesus, asking him if he is the King of the Jews. Jesus wants to know if this is Pilate's own thought. Perhaps Pilate had been keeping an eye on Jesus, especially on the stir which

He had made just a few days before when entering the city. After all, Pilate is the Governor; it is both his responsibility and potentially to his benefit to keep on top of things. But it appears Pilate is not on top of things. *“Am I a Jew?”* he asks. Apparently as far as Pilate is concerned, this is a Jewish problem, not a Governor sent from Rome problem. *“Your own nation and the chief priests have delivered you over to me.”* Roman law and practice presumed a man innocent until proven guilty. Pilate is not quite so impartial, he does not ask, *“Of what are you accused,”* or even, *“Have you done anything?”* Rather, he asks, *“What have you done?”* Apparently Pilate is either ignorant of Jesus’ triumphal entry into the city or is ignorant of its implicit claim to being the king. Jesus’ answer affirms that he is a king. *“My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would have been fighting, that I might not be delivered over to the Jews. But my kingdom is not from the world.”* Pilate gets it: *“So you are a king?”* Jesus’ answer is curious. *“You say that I am a king.”* But possibly Pilate not say so; the ESV interprets the sentence as a question, not as an affirmation, but perhaps a kind of rhetorical question.

Jesus answers, *“For this purpose I was born and for this purpose I have come into the world—to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice.”* This was not the response Pilate expected. Pilate knew what any Roman administrator knew: kingship, being the ruler, exercising power is only peripherally about truth; it is centrally about power. His response could easily and justly be phrased as, *“What has truth got to do with being a king?”* I suspect that now Pilate figures he knows what he is dealing with. He returns to the Jews and says, *“I find no guilt in him.”* He does not mean he finds Jesus innocent. On the contrary if the accusation of the Jews was that Jesus claimed to be king, Jesus has affirmed the accusation. No, what Pilate means is that he has found Jesus to be innocuous; Jesus is no threat. There is nothing here to worry about. Everybody just needs to relax. And so Pilate offers the Jews a way out of what has become a rather embarrassing moment, embarrassing for the Jews who have so mistaken the realities of the situation: *“But you have a custom that I should release one man for you at the Passover. So do you want me to release to you the King of the Jews?”* Pilate is being magnanimous; he is also poking fun at these difficult Jewish priests. Matthew tells us Pilate knew part of the motivation of the Jews was envy. Now he is laughing at them for being envious of a man who is obviously out of touch with the realities of power. Because the Jewish rulers were practical men, men who knew how to manipulate the crowd and how to survive in the empire of Rome, Pilate was sure they would wake up and appreciate the way out. They had over-reacted.

Again the response is unexpected: *“They cried out again, ‘Not this man, but Barabbas!’ Now Barabbas was a robber.”* It is likely Pilate begins to sense there is something more going on here than meets the eye. Why would the Jewish leaders ask that a common thief – one of the Gospels says Barabbas was actually a murderer in a recent insurrection, which was very likely aimed at the power of the Jewish elite as well as the Roman occupation – be released instead of Jesus, whom

Pilate has just indicated is a kind of empty headed idealist? Luke's Gospel says the Jewish leaders told Pilate *"He stirs up the people, teaching throughout all Judea from Galilee even to this place."* But this was nothing new amongst in the Jewish population. According to Luke, when Pilate learned Jesus was from Galilee he happily sent him to be judged by Herod, presumably to get Jesus off his hands. But Herod had sent Him back and now He is here again, and the Jews are still in a fuss. It is surely irrational. The leaders have developed some sort of fixation on this man. Something more needs to be done to get them to see the way things really are: *"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."* Whipped, beaten, abused, mocked, bloody from the flogging and the piercing thorns of the twisted crown, Pilate the man of power, the Governor appointed by the Emperor and sent from Rome, brings Jesus out to the leaders again: *"See, I am bringing him out to you that you may know that I find no guilt in him."* And again we need to realize that what Pilate means is not that Jesus is innocent – innocence is a matter of truth and justice and Pilate is concerned for neither – what he means is that Jesus is harmless, of no danger. The mockery by Pilate the man of power is perfect: he drags Jesus out dressed in a royal robe of purple, but Jesus is a bloody, ugly, even disgusting mess. What can there be to fear?

Again the response is unexpected: *"When the chief priests and officers saw him, they cried out, 'Crucify him, crucify him!'"* This was not the crowd, the street rabble so easily used by the leaders; this was the leaders themselves crying out in anger or fear. Perhaps they should be pacified: *"Take him yourselves and crucify him, for I find no guilt in him."* But the Jews do find guilt in Jesus, and now they tell Pilate: *"We have a law, and according to that law he ought to die because he has made himself the Son of God."* Pilate is not a Jew; he does not share the Jew's belief in the One God. But Pilate is a man of the empire, and the empire had many gods. One of the major challenges for being Governor of the Jews was putting up with their often fanatical insistence on this One God. The Empire had given the Jews special permission to practice their strange faith and not worship any of the many gods of the Empire. Now here was a man who apparently was claiming to be what for the Jews absolutely could not be: a son of the One God. For Pilate the Governor, the man of power, the man appointed by the Emperor and sent from Rome things are getting more and more difficult. As John says, *"When Pilate heard this statement, he was even more afraid."* This is telling: apparently fear has been growing in Pilate, creeping up on him, laying hold of his heart. He was the man of power, the Governor, the man appointed by the Emperor and sent from Rome, but somehow matters are getting out of hand. This was not your standard game with the opposition amongst the contending power sectors in society. Further, Matthew tells us in his Gospel that about now Pilate's wife has sent him a warning: *"Have nothing to do with that righteous man, for I have suffered much because of him today in a dream."* Pilate was a man of power, the Governor sent from Rome, appointed by the Emperor. For Pilate truth was a peripheral

concern and justice the same, for justice is a matter of truth in governance. But Pilate knew there were gods aplenty, gods who could do you good or do you harm, gods who needed to be placated, gods who could not always be ignored. If fear was getting hold of Pilate it was because he was sensing power at work, a power outside his reach, a power he was not controlling, a power driving events on without regard to Pilate, the man of power, the Governor, the man appointed by the Emperor and sent from Rome.

Pilate decides to confront Jesus; he needs to get the facts: *"He entered his headquarters again and said to Jesus, 'Where are you from?' But Jesus gave no answer."* Again the response is unexpected. Silence is hardly acceptable; silence can easily be defiance. But perhaps Jesus' silence is just the result of his being sort of overawed. He is after all a relatively simple itinerant preacher from the impoverished town of Nazareth confronted by the Governor of the province, the man of power, the one appointed by the Emperor and sent from Rome. Perhaps he simply doesn't understand the situation: *"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?'"* Even the simplest man should understand so blunt a statement of the reality of the power of life and death.

Again the response is unexpected: *"Jesus answered him, 'You would have no authority over me at all unless it had been given you from above. Therefore he who delivered me over to you has the greater sin.'"* Now this is a troublesome answer indeed. How might Jesus' words have been heard by Pilate, the man of power, the Governor, the one appointed by the Emperor and sent from Rome? Jesus' words cut like a two-edged sword, separating Pilate from the power source by reminding Pilate the power he has is not his own. Implicitly Jesus has said that Pilate is a man without authority, a man without power; his power was only on loan from someone else. He is answerable to a higher authority. But to what authority? Pilate would think first of Rome, the Emperor and perhaps even the Roman Senate. who could at any time call for a review of all that he had done. But it is Jesus' second statement that unsettles: *"Therefore he who delivered me over to you has the greater sin."* Who had delivered Jesus to Pilate? Not the emperor, who was in Rome and knew nothing of Jesus. Surely it was the Jewish leaders, the Sanhedrin who had delivered Jesus. Does Jesus mean to say that it was the same power source who appointed Pilate as the Governor who now delivered Jesus, putting Him under Pilate's authority? But it was not from the Sanhedrin that Pilate had received his authority. Further Jesus had said that whoever it was who had delivered Jesus to Pilate has the greater sin. Greater than what sin? And who is making the judgment as to what is and is not sin and decides what is the greater sin? What or who is it that ties these two statements of Jesus together? What is it that Jesus knows, what is it that gives this beaten, mocked, degraded and completely abandoned man – for it is at least possible that Pilate has learned along the way that all of Jesus' followers have left him, and certainly none of them has stepped forward to support let alone defend him – so what is it that gives this bloodied and whipped and rejected

and abandoned man such poise, such inner strength that he can stand in front of Pilate the man of power, the Governor appointed by the Emperor and sent from Rome and choose not to answer the Governor's question but instead redirect the conversation such that the foundation of the governor's power suddenly seems to be dissolving?

It is not likely Pilate ever understood Jesus' words. That he was unsettled by them we know, for he takes renewed steps to free Jesus: *"From then on Pilate sought to release him..."* We cannot think that Pilate suddenly developed an interest in truth or justice. No, Pilate was afraid. Powers were at work in Jesus and the events surrounding him that were far greater than he could readily grasp and he did not want to run afoul of them. But at every turn he would run into those powers afresh, *"...but the Jews cried out, 'If you release his 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 him over to them to be crucified."* Jesus had said he was a king, but also said he was not a king in or from this world. Pilate knew the king of this world. He was the Caesar in Rome, and he did not dare do anything to threaten or disrupt the relationship he had with that source of power, for without it, as Jesus had reminded him, he was nothing. And so Pilate the Governor, the man of power, appointed by the Emperor and sent from Rome caved to the malicious envy of the Jewish leaders and shouts of the crowd, making an utter travesty of his position as governor and abusing the power with which he had been entrusted, and let Jesus be crucified.

God by the craven acts of fallen men accomplished the greatest of all His acts of grace, having His Only Begotten Son die for the sins of humanity so that all who would believe might be saved from death to eternal life, reconciled to God the Father and united to Jesus, God the Son, adopted as members of the Family of God. The justice of God is perfect, for God's justice is founded upon truth. In the end no source, form or exercise of power can endure which is opposed to the power and justice of God. The cross, that vicious tool of Rome's flawed justice and cruelty, has been taken by God and turned into the symbol of the triumph of God's perfect justice, for upon that cross Jesus satisfied the justice of God by taking the full punishment of death demanded by the law for sin, and transformed the cross into the perfect instrument of His love, for it is by means of the cross that sinners are reconciled to the God Who is perfect in justice, truth and holiness.