

Good Friday 2014

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We think soberly tonight of the sacrifice that he has made, the Lamb of God slain before the foundation of the world and given as our substitute, sacrificed on a great altar in order that our sins might be cleansed and that we might be accepted in your presence. As we ponder this evening, as we sing these songs, as we listen to the interchange between our Lord and Pilate, we ask that the weight of the gravity of that moment might in some small measure work its way deep into our own hearts so that feeling the weight of our sin, we might at the same time feel the joy of having it expunged, of removal from us and placed on him in order that you might look upon us with favor and mercy, and you might give to us what we otherwise would not deserve, and that you might share with us all of the blessings of salvation that are found in Christ. Most importantly, Lord, as we hear him cry out from that cross, "It is finished," may we hear in those words the only hope that we have, that the work which he has accomplished is done. It needs to be complemented by nothing. We offer nothing to go along with it. We come to you yet again with empty hands and we ask you to fill them with his works. For this we ask in his name and for his sake. Amen.

The day had come that all eternity had waited for. It was a day that most people viewed as ordinary but it would become the fulcrum of time and eternity. Since the fall of our first parents, Adam and Eve, in the garden of Eden, all history had led up to this moment and after this day, the future would never be the same. This would be the day that would astonish angels, the Lord of Glory made subject to the hands of his own creation. This would be the day when the eternal bliss of the holy Trinity would be shattered. Father would turn in anger against Son, and his Son would hang forsaken by the Father. It would be the day when God would bridge the chasm that was created by our sin. He would lay on the shoulders of Christ the stripes we deserved, the bruising our guilt demanded, and the hell reserved for us. In those moments on the cross, Jesus would accomplish what no mere mortal could ever hope to, he would reconcile us to God. The seed of the woman would be bruised and the head of the serpent would be crushed.

Reflecting on his work, the Apostle John would write in his prologue these words,

9 The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.

10 He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him. 11 He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him.

Christ Accused

Judas had done his job. Jesus had been arrested and his disciples have scattered. Only a few hours earlier, he was questioned by the high priest, his face shows the bruising and swelling from a beating that he received from the temple guard. Peter has already fulfilled the prophecy of Jesus and denied him three times. It is now early in the morning, the night is almost gone. It is the time that Pilate will hear cases in his court.

Jesus arrives at Pilate's house and is taken inside. The Jews who have taken him there remain outside. It is the time of Passover and the Jews must remain ceremonially clean. If they enter the house of a Gentile, they will be unclean for the feast. They have murder in their hearts but they want to keep their hands clean to celebrate the deliverance of the Lord.

Pilate speaks: "Another case of fighting and disagreement among these people that I am supposed to rule. My job is to keep the peace. Sometimes I have to get brutal with them. Sometimes I find myself in the middle of their religious squabbles and I simply don't have the interest or the knowledge to make an informed decision. Most often, I just wish that they would leave me alone. Look, here they come with another prisoner, another case to consider. Obviously, they have worked this one over already. What has this man done?"

A priest speaks: "This man is a criminal. He is a threat. Why would we bring him to you if these things were not true?"

Pilate: "If you're not going to answer me, then take him into your own courts and you judge him."

The priest: "We want him dead. We don't have the power to do it, you know that. You know that only Roman governors have the power of life and death. If we had this power, make no mistake about it, we would have passed judgment ourselves."

Christ Is Questioned

Now the story is played out on two stages with Pilate acting as the mediator between the two. Leaving the Jews who remained outside the palace to avoid being made unclean, Pilate went inside to speak to Jesus. "So, I've heard rumors that you think you are the King of the Jews. You know I have dealt with your kind before, right? I've often had to put down rebellions and kill their leaders, but you don't seem like the leader of a rebellion. Tell me this: are you the King?"

Jesus answers: "Pilate, is that your own idea or has someone planted it in your head? Have others talk to you about me?"

Pilate: "Am I a Jew? What makes you think I could care less about this whole matter? My job is to make sure things go smoothly so that Rome gets good reports that you people are peacefully paying your taxes. What do I know about you and your claims to be a Jewish Messiah. Your people have handed you over to me. Obviously, I didn't order your arrest. I didn't have you beaten or dragged here, but from the bruises and welts on your face, I can see that you are not very popular with them. What did you do to make them so angry? Why do they want you dead?"

Jesus responds: "My kingdom is not of this world. It's not grounded here. It doesn't originate here. If it did, there would be a fight. My followers would be armed and dangerous. You would have a revolutionary war on your hands. No, my kingdom is from another place altogether."

Pilate: "So if you have a kingdom, then you must be a King, is that what you're telling me? Are you a King?"

Jesus: "You are right in saying that I am a King. That is why I was born. This is my reason for coming into the world. I came to testify to the truth and everyone on the side of truth listens to me."

Pilate: "What is truth?"

Jesus Rejected

After questioning Jesus in the palace, Pilate went out to speak again to those gathered outside his house. "I could find no basis for any charge against him. Normally at this point I would free Jesus and send all of you back to your homes, but I'll make a deal with you. As you know, during the Passover I grant you the release of a prisoner. You can choose this man who claims to be the King of the Jews, or you can have this political prisoner, Barabbas. As you know, Barabbas is a dangerous man. So, Jesus or Barabbas? Which of the two will you choose?"

The crowd: "No! Not him! We choose Barabbas! Free Barabbas! Let Barabbas go! Crucify him!"

Seeing that his strategy to free Jesus would not work, Pilate took a different tact. Pilate had Jesus flogged, which was one of the most cruel tortures imaginable. There are three different methods of flogging: one is fairly mild; the second is more brutal; and the third is often deadly. Jesus received the third kind.

A crown of thorns was fashioned and was put on his head. A purple rug was thrown around him to represent a royal robe. The Roman soldiers came. They took turns punching him, spitting in his face, and mocking him. The desired effect was intended to bring sympathy from the crowd toward Jesus; to stop them from this unjust crucifixion; to set them at bay.

Following this humiliation, Pilate brought Jesus out to face the crowd. He was bleeding. He was staggering as he made his way to meet those who were calling for his death.

Pilate: "Look, I'm bringing him out. I have examined him and I find no basis for charge against him. Now drop the charges. He has received a beating, he has been humiliated. Should I let him go free?"

The crowd responds: "Crucify him! Crucify him! Crucify him!"

Christ Condemned

Knowing that he had no basis to put this man to death, Pilate continued to plead with the crowd. "I find no reason to put him to death. If you want him dead, you take him out and crucify him. I can see no just reason to put him to death."

A priest speaks up: "We have a law and according to that law he must die. He claims to be the Son of God. As you know, Pilate, your job is not just to uphold Roman laws, you must also uphold our laws and customs. He claims to be a King. That's in opposition to Roman law, and he claims to be the Son of God which is against our law. He must be put to death."

Upon hearing this, Pilate, Roman governor, is very afraid. Who was this strange man and why did these people hate him? And why did he say nothing in his own defense? Pilate turns to Jesus yet again. "Where are you from? What is your background?"

Jesus says nothing.

"You refuse to talk to me? Look at you. Your head and your face are bleeding, your back is laid wide open from the whip. Do you not know that I hold the power of your life in my hands? All of the authority in this situation belongs to me. I decide if you die. I decide if you live. Will you not speak in your own defense?"

Jesus responds: "You only have power because it has been given to you from God. No matter what you plan to do to me, it is all under his control. You are merely doing what has been planned all along. Pilate, those who have handed me over to you, they are the guilty ones."

Pilate could not understand this strange answer but he made up his mind to set Jesus free, but those gathered outside his palace continued to shout, "Crucify him! Crucify him! If you let this man go, you are no friend of Caesar's! Anyone who claims to be a King opposes Caesar! You must crucify him!"

Pilate knew that this was a very serious charge. It would not be good for this kind of accusation to find its way back through the rumor mills and the political back channels of Rome.

Again, he brings Jesus out. It's about noon, the time of the day when two things happened during the Passover feast: first, everyone stopped working; second, the slaughter of the Passover lambs began. The lambs were killed so that the sins of the people might be forgiven so that the angel of judgment might pass over them. Those gathered around Pilate's house needed to hurry along the execution so that they could go home and celebrate the love of God in the Passover feast.

Pilate, exasperated, backed into a corner that he did not like, speaks to the congregation and says, "I find no fault in this man. He claims to be a King but he is harmless. Look at him. He is not a threat to Rome and he is not a threat to you. What do you say?"

And the crowd yet again yelled, "Crucify him! Crucify him!"

Pilate: "Shall I really crucify your King?"

The crowd says: "We have no King but Caesar! Crucify him!"

Pilate: "Then let him be crucified."

Stand with me and we'll sing.

Hallelujah him! What a Savior!

"Man of Sorrows! what a name
For the Son of God, who came
Ruined sinners to reclaim.
Hallelujah! What a Savior!

Bearing shame and scoffing rude,
In my place condemned He stood;
Sealed my pardon with His blood.
Hallelujah! What a Savior!

Guilty, vile, and helpless we;
Spotless Lamb of God was He;
'Full atonement!' can it be?
Hallelujah! What a Savior!

Lifted up was He to die;
'It is finished!' was His cry;

Now in Heav'n exalted high.
Hallelujah! What a Savior!

When He comes, our glorious King,
All His ransomed home to bring,
Then anew His song we'll sing:
Hallelujah! What a Savior!"

Who is this, so weak and helpless?

"Who is this, so weak and helpless,
Child of lowly Hebrew maid,
Rudely in a stable sheltered,
Coldly in a manger laid?
'Tis the Lord of all creation,
Who this wondrous path has trod;
He is Lord from everlasting,
And to everlasting God.

Who is this, a Man of Sorrows,
Walking sadly life's hard way,
Homeless, weary, sighing, weeping
Over sin and Satan's sway?
'Tis our God, our glorious Savior,
Who above the starry sky
Is for us a place preparing,
Where no tear can dim the eye.

Who is this? Behold him shedding
Drops of blood upon the ground!
Who is this, despised, rejected,
Mocked, insulted, beaten, bound?
'Tis our God, Who gifts and graces
On His church is pouring down;
Who shall smite in holy vengeance
All His foes beneath His throne.

Who is this that hangs there dying
While the rude world scoffs and scorns,
Numbered with the malefactors,
Torn with nails, and crowned with thorns?
'Tis our God Who lives forever
'Mid the shining ones on high,
In the glorious golden city,
Reigning everlastingly."

Be seated.

So they took Jesus and he went out bearing his cross to the place called the Place of the Skull, which in Aramaic is called Golgotha. There they crucified him and with him two others, one on either side and Jesus between them.

Pilate also wrote an inscription and put it on the cross. It read, "Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews." Many of the Jews read this inscription for the place where Jesus was crucified was near the city and it was written in Aramaic and Latin and in Greek.

So the chief priest of the Jews said to Pilate: "Do not write 'The King of the Jews,' but rather 'This men said I am King of the Jews.'"

Pilate answered: "What I have written I have written."

When the soldiers had crucified Jesus, they took his garments and divided them into four parts, one part for each shoulder, also his tunic. But the tunic was seamless, woven in one piece from top to bottom so they said to one another, "Let's not tear it, let's cast lots for it to see whose it shall be." This was to fulfill the Scripture which says, "They divided my garments among them and for my clothing they cast lots."

So the soldiers did these things but standing by the cross of Jesus were his mother, his mother's sister, Mary, the wife of Cleopas, and Mary Magdalene. When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing nearby, he said to his mother, "Woman, behold your son." Then he said to the disciple, "Behold, your mother." And from that hour the disciple took her to his own home.

After this, Jesus knowing that all was now finished said to fulfill the Scripture, "I thirst." A jar full of sour wine stood there so they put a sponge full of the sour wine on a hyssop branch and held it to his mouth. When Jesus had received the sour wine, he said, "It is finished," and he bowed his head and on Good Friday, he dismissed his spirit.