

I.N.I.

Fourth Sunday in Lent
John 19:12-16a
March 11, 2018

In Christ Jesus, whose kingdom is not of this world, Dear Fellow Redeemed,

We began this Sunday series of "irony in the Passion" with a definition of irony as "a combination of circumstances or a result that is the opposite of what . . . might be expected," or "a figure of speech in which the literal meaning is the opposite of the intended meaning." What could be more ironic than an Old Testament Jew crying out "**We have no king but Caesar.**"

That kind of ironic statement is even more surprising than a Democrat declaring he is for smaller government and less regulations or a Republican saying he is for raising taxes and loves the unions. In politics we would call that a flip-flop.

I am sure that Pontius Pilate must have done a double-take. Inside he must have thought, "I can't believe my ears!" The Jewish leaders who hated the Roman government, who despised paying taxes to Rome, who distrusted Caesar are the source of this morning's irony of Jesus' passion: **We have no king but Caesar.**

These were their final words in their dispute with the Roman Governor. They demanded that Pilate put Jesus to death and when he faltered because he said he found no fault in him, they played their trump card. With these words, the priests won, or so they thought.

WE HAVE NO KING BUT CAESAR.

I. THESE WORDS ENDED PILATE'S HOPE OF SETTING JESUS FREE.

This dispute began early Friday morning when the Jewish leaders showed up at Pilate's palace to try to persuade him to carry out the death sentence they had passed on Jesus only a few hours earlier in their trial. But Pilate 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 very long to figure out that Jesus was guilty of nothing except making these leaders jealous. Pilate held the real power in Jerusalem. He was supported by Roman troops and Roman law. The Jewish leaders had to argue with and manipulate Pilate because they did not have the legal authority to execute Jesus.

So these two powerful forces squared off, almost as if Jesus had no say in the matter. Pontius Pilate was a Roman, a Gentile. He probably had some knowledge of the Jewish religion. He probably knew little or nothing about Jesus and His followers. 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 Caesar had to say from Rome.

At heart, Pilate was a cynic. He didn't believe in real, absolute truth. The chief priests were different in almost every way. As we said they hated the Romans. They considered all Gentiles to be unclean and looked down on them. They couldn't have cared less about the survival of the Roman Empire. Given a

chance, they would've set themselves up as an independent country in a heartbeat. Their lives revolved around the controversies of the Jewish sects—Pharisees and Sadducees. However, they all believed that the God of Israel was the one true God.

Jesus, of course, was a Jew, but the Jewish religious leaders wanted Him dead. They didn't believe Him to be the long awaited, promised Messiah, the Christ. They didn't care whether He was guilty or not. They were even willing to make up charges just to get rid of Him. But the Gentile governor—the man who said to Jesus, "What is truth?"—that was the man who wanted justice for Jesus. So, again and again, Pilate tried to find a way to set Him free. He remembered the custom of releasing a prisoner for the Passover and offered the choice between Jesus and Barabbas, a convicted murderer and robber. That didn't work.

He had Jesus whipped and beaten and then brought back out for the people to see this bloodied man in hopes that the crowd would feel sorry for Him. That didn't work.

As we heard last week he sent Him to Herod to pass the buck. That didn't work.

He argued with the priests and the Jewish mob in front of the palace. But in the end, he could not escape from the logic of their ironic argument: Jesus claimed to be a king. That meant He was in rebellion against Caesar. If Pilate freed him, Pilate would be taking the enemy's side. Jesus had to be crucified. It was the Roman way. That forced Pilate to put Him on trial publicly. When Pilate asked, "**Shall I crucify your king?**" the chief priests answered, "**We have no king but Caesar.**" With that stunning answer, Pilate felt he had to send Jesus to die.

The only way Pilate could've resisted this desire by the Jewish leaders to murder Jesus would've been if he himself was willing to risk everything for Christ. His career, his family, his very life, was on the line once the chief priests invoked Caesar. Bit in the end, Pilate would not risk anything even to save an innocent man. And isn't that human nature? You take care of yourself first. In fact, that is the difference between Jesus and everyone else in this story. Jesus was the only One who was willing to lay down His life for the good of others.

So are we any different from Pilate? If we imagine ourselves in his place, we would like to think I wouldn't do what Pilate did. I would have stood up to the Jewish leaders, even if it meant my job, my career, my life. But would we? The truth is, most of us probably won't ever find ourselves in a situation quite this dramatic, life or death! Rather, it is much simpler. Every day we have the opportunity to sacrifice our lives for God in the love we show to one another. When we look at our real lives, are we any more willing to sacrifice ourselves for the good of others than Pilate was? Sacrificing ourselves for others is the core of real Christian love. Are we willing to sacrifice everything for God? For the truth? For the wellbeing of people we don't even know, or who we think don't deserve it or who would never make such a sacrifice for us? To be faithful to God we have to stand on God's principles, instead of standing on convenience. Do we do that?

Don't we usually save our own skins, just as Pilate did? We tell little white lies that keep us out of trouble. We sometimes avoid making eye contact with people who need our help until we're out of range. We feel we need to wait for just the right moment to talk about Jesus, and, oftentimes, the right moment never seems to come. We act friendly to our neighbors, but we don't really put ourselves out there for them, and we very rarely ever really risk anything for the cause of Christ. Does that sound like you? It often sounds like me!

All those sins and failures, all that lack of selfless love deserves God's punishment in hell. What an irony that Jesus endured this dispute for people like us. For Him, this was one more step to the cross, one more step to dying and rising and setting us free. He could've put a stop to it at any moment. He really had all the power, not the Jewish leaders or Governor Pilate. But He didn't. He played along while these men argued and debated, knowing how it was going to end. Then He submitted when Pilate lost, and He was crucified.

The miracle in all this is that God counts that perfect, self-sacrificing love of Christ as our own. He looks at Jesus and says that you and I have loved God and one another because Jesus did. And just as miraculous, God counts Jesus' death as our payment for sin. When Jesus died on that cross, His blood washed away all our selfishness, all our guilt for all the times we put ourselves first. Because Jesus suffered our death and our hell, God has forgiven those sins. Through faith in Jesus, we are now free.

That leads us to our second point.

WE HAVE NO KING BUT CAESAR.

II. THESE WORDS ARE A SAD COMMENTARY ON LIFE WITHOUT FAITH.

As we said the chief priests 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 that God would help them if they revolted—and they tried over and over again. "We have no king but Caesar" was a lie they never thought would pass their lips. So why did they say it? It was their cynical ploy to trap Pilate into doing what they wanted.

However, there is a deeper meaning to it. Jesus was the true King of Israel. God had been promising for a thousand years to send a son of King David to rule His people. Jesus was that Son of David, that Messiah, that King. All Jewish hopes focused on Him. Abraham had looked forward in faith to the day of Christ, and every true son of Abraham trusted in Him even in the Old Testament. When these Jewish leaders rejected Jesus and said they had no king but Caesar, they denied the faith of their fathers and removed themselves from the people of God.

In every person's heart there is a king. There is a Caesar that rules our hopes and our dreams. There is something that we live by and work for. For us believers that king is Jesus. His Word and His love are to be the end all and be all of our existence. But for most people, the king is something else. Even for us Christians, when we were born, the king was something else. It was Satan and self, pleasure and convenience. And even

to this day, the old king of our hearts still wants his job back.

It really takes surprisingly little for you and me to join these leaders in denying all that we have confessed and in claiming a false god as our king. Every time we sin and put ourselves first before God we do that. No sinner has the strength to remain faithful to Christ on his or her own. The devil is constantly probing, constantly looking for that moment of weakness when he can pull us away from Christ and back into his kingdom. If you don't believe how easy it could be, look at former members of just about any congregation and see how easy it was for them to get out of the good habit of coming to church to hear God's Word. How easy it was to drift away.

But we need not fear. The same Jesus who could've stopped this dispute at any time is in control of our lives too. He sent the Holy Spirit who has worked faith in us, and He promises He will keep that faith alive through His Word. He said in John 10:27-29: **MY SHEEP HEAR MY VOICE, AND I KNOW THEM, AND THEY FOLLOW ME. AND I GIVE THEM ETERNAL LIFE, AND THEY SHALL NEVER PERISH; NEITHER SHALL ANYONE SNATCH THEM OUT OF MY HAND.**

When you see how easy it is to let something else become the driving force in your life, how easy it is to drift away, that's when we need to remember that Jesus' Word strengthens us. His Word tells us that He loves us, has forgiven us, given us pastors to teach us and to encourage us with His Word. He promises that He will never leave us or forsake us. If we ever doubt His love, we only need to look back on that day when Jesus willingly went to the cross so that He could die for us. His blood has washed away all our sins and someday He will bring us home.

In every person's life, there is a king. The king, the ruler in the heart of unbelievers, Satan, leads them to hell. But God has given us the one thing Pilate and the chief priests lacked—faith in Christ, the King who rules in our hearts. Yes, our King has rivals. All the sin and all the cares, worries, treasures and pleasures of this life tempt us, but Jesus is still the King. He reigns in our hearts through the message of His sacrificial love.

Amen.