John 18:28-19:16 – A Kingdom Like No Other

Let's Pray: Lord Jesus Christ, there are times when we like Pilate might ask, "what is truth?" Let this be answered to us, as we have our hearts and minds opened to your Word by your Spirit. Your Word is truth. Let us be transformed in our encounter with you in your Word, truth himself, to whom all things must conform. Amen.

On this Palm Sunday, we won't be looking at Jesus' triumphal entry, or at least how we normally think about it, but we will be talking about Jesus' kingdom. Many of you know that the Triumphal Entry is all about Jesus coming into Jerusalem as the true king of Israel, that is what we celebrate on Palm Sunday.

In this text, we see Jesus interacting with Pilate, a Roman official. Throughout Jesus life he has a few different interactions with the Romans. He seems to have a kind of indifference to them, or he uses their faith to prove a point to the Jewish leaders about their lack of faith. This comes to a pinnacle here in Jesus' trial before Pilate.

A primary temptation we have, as we pass through our lives, is to think that this world is all there is. We might profess that we believe there is an age to come—heaven, the new creation—but in our lives, we can often live as if there were not, like what we have here is all that matters. We need to constantly remind ourselves that we are on a pilgrimage in this life. That our true home is with the Lord, in his kingdom, a kingdom that is not of this world, as Jesus says in his trail before Pilate.

John 18:28-19:16

Then the Jewish leaders took Jesus from Caiaphas to the palace of the Roman governor. By now it was early morning, and to avoid ceremonial uncleanness they did not enter the palace, because they wanted to be able to eat the Passover. [29] So Pilate came out to them and asked, "What charges are you bringing against this man?"

[30] "If he were not a criminal," they replied, "we would not have handed him over to you."

[31] Pilate said, "Take him yourselves and judge him by your own law."

"But we have no right to execute anyone," they objected. [32] This took place to fulfill what Jesus had said about the kind of death he was going to die.

[33] Pilate then went back inside the palace, summoned Jesus and asked him, "Are you the king of the Jews?"

[34] "Is that your own idea," Jesus asked, "or did others talk to you about me?"

35 “Am I a Jew?” Pilate replied. “Your own people and chief priests handed you over to me.
What is it you have done?”

36 Jesus said, “My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent
my arrest by the Jewish leaders. But now my kingdom is from another place.”

37 “You are a king, then!” said Pilate.

Jesus answered, “You say that I am a king. In fact, the reason I was born and came into the
world is to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me.”

38 “What is truth?” retorted Pilate. With this he went out again to the Jews gathered there
and said, “I find no basis for a charge against him. 39 But it is your custom for me to release
to you one prisoner at the time of the Passover. Do you want me to release ‘the king of the
Jews’?”

40 They shouted back, “No, not him! Give us Barabbas!” Now Barabbas had taken part in an
uprising.

Then Pilate took Jesus and had him flogged. 2 The soldiers twisted together a crown of
thorns and put it on his head. They clothed him in a purple robe 3 and went up to him again
and again, saying, “Hail, king of the Jews!” And they slapped him in the face.

4 Once more Pilate came out and said to the Jews gathered there, “Look, I am bringing him
out to you to let you know that I find no basis for a charge against him.” 5 When Jesus came
out wearing the crown of thorns and the purple robe, Pilate said to them, “Here is the man!”

6 As soon as the chief priests and their officials saw him, they shouted, “Crucify! Crucify!”

But Pilate answered, “You take him and crucify him. As for me, I find no basis for a charge
against him.”

7 The Jewish leaders insisted, “We have a law, and according to that law he must die,
because he claimed to be the Son of God.”

8 When Pilate heard this, he was even more afraid, 9 and he went back inside the palace.
“Where do you come from?” he asked Jesus, but Jesus gave him no answer. 10 “Do you
refuse to speak to me?” Pilate said. “Don’t you realize I have power either to free you or to
crucify you?”

11 Jesus answered, “You would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above.
Therefore the one who handed me over to you is guilty of a greater sin.”

[12] From then on, Pilate tried to set Jesus free, but the Jewish leaders kept shouting, “If you let this man go, you are no friend of Caesar. Anyone who claims to be a king opposes Caesar.”

[13] When Pilate heard this, he brought Jesus out and sat down on the judge’s seat at a place known as the Stone Pavement (which in Aramaic is Gabbatha). [14] It was the day of Preparation of the Passover; it was about noon.

“Here is your king,” Pilate said to the Jews.

[15] But they shouted, “Take him away! Take him away! Crucify him!”

“Shall I crucify your king?” Pilate asked.

“We have no king but Caesar,” the chief priests answered.

[16] Finally Pilate handed him over to them to be crucified.

This is the Word of the Lord.

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Pontius Pilate has to be one of the most fascinating characters in the story of Jesus’ life. Other than Mary and Jesus, he is the only human mentioned in the Apostle’s Creed, and yet, he is a pagan idolater who sentenced Jesus’ death. One theologian says he enters the creed “like a dog into a nice room.”

The question of what Pontus Pilate truly thought about Jesus has been questioned over and over in the history of Christianity. In some places he is venerated as a saint, one of the first Christians, who ended his life in Switzerland, a sign of a future Holy Roman Empire. In other places he is seen as nothing more than an evil rubber stamp of an evil Empire sending Jesus on his way to the cross.

On the one hand, he ties a crown of thorns around Jesus’ head and has him flogged. He seems to mock Jesus with his words, presenting him to the crowd as their king, when he knows they want him dead. Finally, he hands Jesus over to be crucified, with a kind of ambiguous sentencing. On the other hand, Pilate seems to not want to have any part of the trial from the beginning and is simply pacifying a rowdy crowd. He seems to know that he doesn’t really have anything against Jesus, repeating three times that he finds “no basis for charge against him.” He seems to let the crowd decide, playing along to avoid a riot, or have them tell the Emperor he is letting revolutionaries go free.

Pilate doesn’t come off as either totally responsible for Jesus’ death, or not responsible for it either. He is ambiguous, like his sentencing. Pilate’s ambiguity seems to match how

Jesus relates to the Roman Empire in general. As I said at the beginning, Jesus does not seem too interested in the power of the Empire.

Pilate also comes across as cynical. His famous line— "what is truth?"—shows this cynicism well. Cynical atheist philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche said this line is the only thing in the whole New Testament worth anything. Maybe this is the cynicism that comes from being a politician, as one constantly tries to build coalitions with those you don't agree with or make policies that constantly compromise your ideals. This is no less true of politics in the Roman Empire than it is today.

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John's telling of the story meets the cynicism of Pilate with his own irony. First, John's irony is clear in the Jewish leaders. They are worried about becoming unclean, and so do not enter Pilate's Praetorium, all the while they are committing the worst sin in human history. They do not want to become unclean so they can partake in the Passover, all the while they miss what the Passover has been foreshadowing for millennia. They also reject Jesus because he is not the kind of messiah they want, a king that will free them from Roman rule, the one that will bring *them* power, but in the process of killing Jesus say, "we have no king but Caesar." They damn themselves with their words as much as their actions.

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Second, Pilate himself speaks quite a lot of truth without knowing in an ironic way. He announces Jesus to the crowd, "Behold the man!" Paul will later call Jesus, "the second Adam," the true man who fulfills what humanity was created to be. He also, dresses Jesus up as a king, intending to mock him, probably to show the crowd Jesus is utterly humiliated and so not a threat. Pilate declares the truth again in a horrible way as he says, "Hail, the king of the Jews!" This is John's irony, that those who appear to have all the power, are merely actors on God's great stage. This is key to understanding what John is telling us with Pilate's trial of Jesus. The forms of power are not as they seem.

The truth of the matter lay underneath the whole story, as Pilate's power, which seems so much stronger than Jesus', that he can parade him and flog him and mock him, is but a shadow. It is a power given to Pilate by the one he is flogging, for a purpose so much greater than he could ever imagine. The one Pilate sentences is the one who gave him his ability to do so. This irony is a part of all Christian life, the world we see around us is simply a preparation for what is to come, even though it seems more real, it is less, it is fading, and the world to come is what is eternal.

This scene has been one of the most important pieces of scripture as the church has attempted to understand what it means to be in the world, but not of the world. Asking,

what are we supposed to do with the political power around us? Historian David Lloyd Deusenbury claims that if this scene was not in the four gospels, "the political history of Europe and the Americas would be unrecognizable."[1] This is not the place for me to give you a lecture on political philosophy, but as Christians, we must see what Jesus is telling us about the political powers of this world here in his interaction with Pilate.

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If Jesus' kingdom is "not of this world," then how are we supposed to interact with the kingdom that *is* of this world? It is great that we yearn for heaven, that our greatest desire is to be with God forever and worship him eternally, but what does that tell us about right now? These questions are somewhat on our mind now, with a coming election. We might be drawn to think that the coming election, or the events down south, demand all our attention and energy, but that is to not hear what Jesus is telling us here.

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In this trial Jesus stands before a representative of the Roman Empire at the height of its power. Pilate, in a way, represents the earthly political powers of the world and all they represent—order, violence, security, well-being. If Jesus' kingdom is *not* of this world, Pilate's kingdom represents what *is* of this world. Jesus then shows us how we should relate to the kingdoms of this world in his relation to Pilate.

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Jesus fully submits to Pilate's this-world authority. Jesus' trial before Pilate shows Jesus submitting to the earthly powers that God has put in place. Jesus willingly does this, giving us an example. Jesus does not think that Pilate's power is ultimate. He accepts that God has given Pilate the authority he has and does not seek to overthrow him. However, more importantly, Not only does he do teach about the nature of the kingdom with his actions, but in Jesus' responses to Pilate, we also hear something of the nature of his Kingdom.

Martin Luther summarizes this well in his *Freedom of a Christian*, he says, "A Christian man is the most free Lord of all, and subject to none; a Christian man is the most dutiful servant of all, and subject to everyone." Luther means that in Christ's spiritual kingdom, there are no earthly kings or popes that can bind our consciences, but in the kingdom of this world, Christians are called to love, serve, and submit to all. Jesus gives us a picture of this perfectly.

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[1] David Lloyd Deusenbury, *The Innocence of Pontius Pilate*.

If Jesus' kingdom were of this world, then he would be trying to usurp Pilate's earthly authority, and Pilate would be just in executing him. Treason is a crime worthy of death in almost any society through history. Jesus recognizes this when he says that if his kingdom were of this world that his servants would have fought against his arrest.

Pilate, better than anybody, realizes that the kingdoms of this world must establish themselves according to the political realties this world faces. We remember to last week, when Peter draws his sword to protect Jesus (again, showing that even Peter did not understand the nature of Jesus' kingdom at this time), Jesus tells him to sheath his sword. Unlike every other kingdom to have ever existed, this kingdom does not come through warfare.

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Jesus' kingdom right now is here to testify to the truth, that Jesus is the true Lord despite appearances. Jesus' kingdom is Spiritual, built by the Holy Spirit, first seen in the faith of all believers, and finally made full in the new creation. Jesus says that his disciples cannot use violence to build Jesus' kingdom. How could they? It is something that can be built by God alone. Just as our faith is something that can only be given by God alone.

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When Jesus says, "my kingdom is not of this world," there is a common misconception that this means he is not in control of what is going on in this world. Or that the physical creation is run by another power like Satan, and the spiritual ethereal world is thus to be preferred. Sometimes, especially in John's gospel, things get misunderstood in this way because John will sometimes use the word 'world' to mean God's creation, and sometimes to mean the part of his creation that is in rebellion to him.

We must remember that God is the king of this world, rebellious or not. Ps.47:7 says, "God is the King of all the earth…" Ps.135:6 says, "The Lord does whatever pleases him, in the heavens and on the earth, in the seas and all their depths." God is the creator and redeemer of his creation; nothing has power over him. Jesus is the true Lord over this creation, and all powers receive their authority from him, just in a different kind of way than in his eternal kingdom.

Jesus confirms this when he says to Pilate, "You would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above" (Jn.19:11). God rules over all things, ordering all things. Paul says the same thing when he says, "there is no authority except that which God has established" (Ro.13:1b). Paul even goes so far as to say, "rulers do not bear the sword for no reason. They are God's servants…" This might seem a contradiction to what Jesus says about the

nature of his kingdom, but this is misunderstanding the eternal kingdom with God's providential rule over the world.

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When Jesus says that his kingdom is not of this world, he means his eternal kingdom is something that is still yet to come, when he comes again in glory. Jesus' kingdom is from outside this world, but it will restore this world. Right now, Jesus' spiritual kingdom is seen wherever he is proclaimed as Lord, wherever the gospel is preached. Jesus does have a physical kingdom, the physical nature of the kingdom is not the problem, but it is coming.

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Truly, there is nothing that anyone can do to bring about the coming kingdom, and there is nothing that someone can do to stop it. We see it partly in our faith today, in the church that faith creates, and in the good works that faith produces, but these are but a glimpse. It is a work of God. He will not be coerced. Our main job is to proclaim this kingdom in word and sacrament, and make disciples fit for it. As Hebrews 11:10 says, we look "forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God." God is using the kingdom of this world to prepare for the everlasting kingdom that is yet to be revealed.

This is why Luther said we are both the freest of all and those who serve all. We are free because God's kingdom is something he does, guaranteed by his saving power. We are subject to all, because in the meantime he has set up all kinds of authorities that we are called to submit to in love. Even if part of this submission is to call these authorities to what God created them to do.

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It is common problem today for Christians, especially down south, to want to build a 'Christian Nation'. This is not a new desire for Christians. In the Roman Empire, after Christianity was adopted by Constantine in 312, this became the desire of many Christians, to see the whole Empire transformed for Christ. And there was much good that the Christians brought to the Empire, helping it to function closer to what God desires for the kingdoms of this world. This does not mean that there was not also much compromise as Christians blended old pagan ideas with new Christian ones.

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It was less than a hundred years after this, when there had been a chain of Christian emperors of one quality or another, when the great city of Rome fell, being sacked and burned in 410. Many pagans in the city, who descended from the old pagan Roman aristocracy, blamed the now-ruling Christians for the fall of Rome. To them, the new

Christian God has failed to keep them safe, his primary duty in their eyes. And they were somewhat justified in this blame, as many Christians thought that was the main job of God, to keep them healthy and safe in this life.

To this situation, Augustine wrote his monumental 'City of God'. In this book, he retells world history through the lens of two cities, the city of man, as seen in the rise and fall of empires, created by the desires of human nature, and the city of God, a direct work of God to bring out his covenant of grace, most fully seen in Christ. God is providentially ordering both, but one will one day perish, and the other is eternal. God uses the city of man to bring out his eternal city, it can be good for promoting justice and peace, but it is not eternal. When we see the fall of great empires, we should not despair as Christians, as we will one day be able to look back and see God's hand in this.

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This does not mean that we cannot participate in what is necessary for our age to function as God created it to. In fact, we have a duty to do so. Christian politicians are a blessing. We have a foot in both ages as it were. On the one hand, we are called to live lives that are looking forward to the coming Kingdom, where Christ's rule will be complete, the curse of creation is overturned and all is made well, we are 'subject to none' as Luther said. But on the other hand, we live in the age of the curse, we live with sin all around us and within us, and God gives us political means to bring out the best in this life, in love we are "subject to all." We are not going to be able to see the perfection of our society, and ordering our society to that perfection is very imprudent. Look at the history of communism, while that kind of equity would be wonderful, it is an attempt to create heaven on earth and is always doomed to fail.

So, when we now look at whatever craziness is happening down south, or how the stock market is flailing around, we should not be like those who put their faith in such things. We should recognize the authority that God had given them, submit appropriately, challenge appropriately, but recognize that these things are not ultimate. We can look at the empire as Jesus does, with a kind of apathy, at least as some take it to be ultimate. Even when governments act unjustly, we are called to submit. If you need proof of this, look at Jesus, it was a sham trial if there ever was one. He was able to submit in this way because he knew that Pilate's authority was not ultimate.

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This becomes especially evident when we consider how the Jewish leaders, and a whole crowd of their supporters in Jerusalem, turned on Jesus because of his rejection of their earthly claims to authority. This should give us pause to consider just how tied to the goods

of this world *we* can become. If God takes our earthly goods or power from us, will we turn from Christ? Will we then, in our actions, shout “crucify” with them?

Sadly, in the history of Christianity, we have often looked at the Jewish leaders depicted in this story in a racist way, seeing there something particularly wrong with them. But that is to totally misunderstand the story of the Bible. God set apart a people that would be able to bring forth his saviour, and these, the best of us, the ones trained by God to see what has done, are the ones who rejected the son. We are the gentile branch grafted on to the main, they are God’s chosen. It is not that we would have done differently, we would have done the same, and we all continually do the same as we go on sinning.

We must not simply look at what appears to be the case, we are called to a life of faith. We must see through what happens now, whatever might look like what is happening, and know that Christ is in control of all things, he is directing them towards his eternal purposes for us.