

From then on, Pilate tried to set Jesus free, but the Jews 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 Passover Week, about the sixth hour.*

"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. (John 19:12-16)*

We Have No King but Caesar!

"I can't believe that you're saying that!" Have you ever said that? Maybe your teenage daughter who's told you a thousand times that she hates wearing dresses suddenly tells you that she doesn't have a nice dress for church. Or your parents who have always been very frugal suddenly splurge on a trip to Europe. Those kinds of unexpected reverses can throw us for a loop. But they're nothing compared to someone contradicting everything they've ever stood for because it's advantageous to do so. A politician who has opposed raising taxes for decades suddenly coming out with a plan to raise taxes because that's the way the political wind is blowing. You can't believe your ears, because this guy has made his reputation as a tax cutter. But now, he figures the only way to win an election is to argue for the things he's always been against. Of course, his opponent won't be shy to point out the irony of his flip-flop. Tonight, we have before us that kind of flip-flop. If Pontius Pilate had said, "I can't believe my ears!" it would've been totally fitting, because once again, the Jewish leadership was the source of tonight's irony of the passion: **we have no king but Caesar!**

I.

These words were the final argument in a dispute between Pilate and the Jewish chief priests. With these words, the priests won, or so they thought. **We have no king but Caesar. These words ended Pilate's hope of setting Jesus free.**

It was about noon when this argument ended. But it began early that morning when the Jewish leadership had shown up at Pilate's palace to get him to carry out the death sentence they had passed on Jesus a few hours before. But Pilate wasn't going to let them dictate who he executed in the name of the Roman Empire. So he had questioned Jesus personally. It didn't take him very long to figure out that Jesus was guilty of nothing except making these guys jealous. Pilate held the real power in Jerusalem. He was backed by Roman troops and Roman law. The Jewish leaders had to argue and manipulate because they did not have the legal authority to execute Jesus.

So these two forces squared off, almost as if Christ had no say in the matter. Pontius Pilate was a Roman, a gentile. At best, he had a surface knowledge of Jewish religion and he probably didn't want to know any more. 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 they were saying on the other side of the Mediterranean Sea. At heart, Pilate was a cynic. He didn't believe in truth. The chief priests were different in almost every way. They hated the Romans. They considered all gentiles to be unclean and almost subhuman. They couldn't have cared less about the survival of the Roman Empire. Given a chance, they would've set up shop as an independent country in a heartbeat. Their lives revolved around the hairsplitting controversies of the Jewish sects. But they were all convinced 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 care whether he was guilty or not. They were even willing to invent charges to get rid of him. But the gentile governor – the representative of the occupying army, the man who said, "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 crowd Jesus. He even had him flogged and brought him out in hopes that the crowd would feel sorry for him. He sent him to Herod to pass the buck. 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 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 sent Jesus to die.

The only way that Pilate could've resisted this drive to murder Jesus would've been if he himself had been willing to risk everything for Christ. His career, indeed his very life was on the line once the chief priests invoked Caesar. In the end, Pilate would not risk anything to save an innocent man. Isn't that human nature? You take care of yourself first. That is, in fact, the difference between Jesus and everybody else in this story. Jesus alone was willing to lay down his life for the good of others.

Are we any different from Pilate? If we imagine ourselves in his place, we almost can't help daydreaming that we would stand up to the Jewish leaders, even if it meant they would run all the way to Rome to tattle. But would we? The truth is, most of us probably won't ever find ourselves in a situation quite this dramatic. Rather, every day, we have the opportunity to sacrifice our lives for God in the love we show to one another. When you look at our real lives, are we any more willing to sacrifice ourselves for the good of others than Pilate was? Sacrificing ourselves is the core of real Christian love. Are we willing to sacrifice everything for God? For the truth? For the good of people who don't deserve it and who would never make such a sacrifice for us? To be faithful to God we have to accept the smirks and the dislike of people who don't want to be too fanatical about their faith. 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 like Pilate did? We tell "little white lies" that keep us out of trouble. We avoid making eye contact with people who need our help until we're out of range. We wait for the right moment to talk about Jesus and strangely, the right moment never comes. We act friendly, but we don't really put ourselves out for our neighbor and we never really risk anything for the cause of Christ. Does that sound like you?

All those sins and failures, all that lack of love deserves God's punishment in hell. What an irony that Jesus endured this endless debate for people like us. But in love, Jesus did endure it. 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. But he didn't. He played along while these little men argued and debated, knowing how it was going to end. And then he submitted when Pilate lost and he died. The miracle in all this is that God counts that perfect, self-sacrificing love of Christ as ours. He looks at Jesus and says that you and I have loved God and each other because Jesus did. And just as miraculous, God counts that death as our payment. When Jesus died on that cross, his blood washed away all our selfishness, all the lies we tell ourselves to make ourselves feel better, all our guilt for all the times we put ourselves first. Because Jesus suffered our death and our hell, God has forgiven those sins. We are now free.

II.

In a way, Pilate and the Jewish leaders were like children playing at being adults. They were playing at judging Christ as of it was up to them to decide whether he went to the cross. Only they didn't know it was a game. That adds to tonight's irony of the passion. **We have no king but Caesar! These words are a sad comment on life without faith.**

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 that they never thought would pass their lips. So why did it? It was a cynical ploy to trap Pilate into doing what they wanted.

But there was 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. 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 men rejected Jesus and said that 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 steer by and work for. That king is supposed to be Jesus. His word and his love are

supposed 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 us and our pleasure and our convenience. And to this day, the old king of our hearts still wants his job back.

It would take surprisingly little for you and me to join these men in denying all that we have confessed and in claiming a false god as our king. 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, go find a member of this church that you know used to come faithfully, but who has now drifted away. Ask how hard it was to get out of the habit of coming to church. You'll be horrified to discover how easy it was.

But have no fear. The same Jesus who could've stopped this farce at any time is in control of our lives, too. He has given us faith and he promises that he will keep that faith alive. Trust in him. When you see how easy it is to let something else become the driving force in your life, when you fear for your faith, that's when Jesus says, "I am here. I love you. I have forgiven you. I have given you my word to strengthen you. I have given you baptism and communion to keep your faith alive. I have given you pastors and teachers to hear your confession and to comfort you with my love and forgiveness. I have given you fellow members to encourage you. I will never leave you or forsake you. If you ever doubt my love, look back on that ridiculous day when these little men thought that they were doing what they wanted. All along, they were bringing me to the cross so that I could die for you. My blood has washed all your sin and weakness away. I live in you and I will bring you home."

In every life, there is a king. The king in the heart of unbelievers leads them to hell. If they go rejoicing and feeling lucky at the lives they've led, or if they go sad and bitter about how hard it's been, either way they go to hell. But God has given us the one thing Pilate and the chief priests lacked: faith in Christ. So he has put a new King in our hearts. Yes, that King has rivals. All the sin and all the pleasures of this life tempt us. But Jesus is still the King. He reigns through the message of his love. Trust in him and have no other king in your life. Amen.