

"Ironies of the Passion: We Have No King But Caesar"

"I can't believe my ears!" Have you ever said that? Maybe your teenage daughter, who's told you a thousand times 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. However, they're nothing compared to someone who contradicts everything he or she has ever stood for just because it's advantageous to do so. A politician, who has opposed raising taxes for decades, suddenly comes 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, as the leaders of the Jews pronounced this irony of Jesus' passion: We have no king but Caesar.

These words were the final argument in a dispute between Pilate and the Jewish chief priests. The argument had begun early that morning when the Jewish leadership showed up at Pilate's palace to persuade him to carry out the death sentence they had passed on Jesus only a few hours before. But Pilate wasn't going to take their word for it. He questioned Jesus personally, and it didn't take him very long to figure out that Jesus was innocent. Pilate held the real power in Jerusalem. He was supported by Roman troops and Roman law. He stood in the way of the Jewish leaders wanting to execute Jesus.

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 just to get rid of him. But in this ironic twist, it was the gentile, Pilate, who tried to find a way to set him free. He had Jesus flogged hoping that would be enough. He tried to free Jesus according to the Passover custom. 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, Pilate's boss, Pilate's king. If Pilate freed Jesus, Pilate would be taking the enemy's side. Jesus had to be crucified. When Pilate asked, "Shall I crucify your king?" the chief priests answered, "We have no king but Caesar." And at that stunning answer, Pilate sent Jesus to die.

The only way Pilate could've resisted this drive to murder Jesus would've been if he himself was 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.

Are we any different from Pilate? What would we have done in his place? 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 for others 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 is to accept the smirks and the dislike of people who don't want to be too fanatical about their faith. It is standing 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 wait for the right moment to talk about Jesus, and, strangely, the right moment never seems to come. We act friendly, but we don't really put ourselves out there for our neighbor, or 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. 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. 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 one another because Jesus did. God counts his death as our payment for sin. 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. Through faith in Jesus, we are now free.

The reality was that 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. It was a cynical ploy to trap Pilate into doing what they wanted.

However, 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 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. 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. When we were born, the king was something else. It was us and our pleasure and convenience. And even 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 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, find a member of this church who 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.

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 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 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 person's life, there is a king. The king in the heart of unbelievers leads them 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 his 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.

The Text: John 19:12-16a

¹² 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.