

John 19.1-19

“Jesus, The One Who Is King in His Crucifixion”

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Palm Sunday

For a number of years now, I have made it a practice each Palm Sunday to preach in a detailed way on the cross - that is, to focus our sermon on this day on the crucifixion and death of Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of God.

And my prayer for us every Palm Sunday and every Good Friday is that the Holy Spirit would move among us in such a way that we would experience the glory and wonder of the death of Jesus in a new way - for the cross is truly inexhaustible in its meaning.

To speak of the crucifixion of Jesus Christ is to speak both of the horror of human sin and wickedness, and, at the same time, of the glory of God’s love and faithfulness.

Our sermon text this morning is the Apostle John’s account of the flogging, the trial, the presentation, the condemnation, and finally, the crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of God, and, as Pilate so aptly names him, The King of the Jews.

Listen now to God’s holy and inerrant word.

It is more to be desired than gold; even much fine gold. It is sweeter also than honey; sweeter than the drippings of the honeycomb.

*Then Pilate took Jesus and flogged him. 2 And the soldiers twisted together a crown of thorns and put it on his head and arrayed him in a purple robe. 3 They came up to him, saying, “Hail, King of the Jews!” and struck him with their hands. 4 Pilate went out again and said to them, “See, I am bringing him out to you that you may know that I find no guilt in him.”*

5 So Jesus came out, wearing the crown of thorns and the purple robe. Pilate said to them, "Behold the man!"

6 When the chief priests and the officers saw him, they cried out, "Crucify him, crucify him!" Pilate said to them, "Take him yourselves and crucify him, for I find no guilt in him." 7 The Jews answered him, "We have a law, and according to that law he ought to die because he has made himself the Son of God." 8 When Pilate heard this statement, he was even more afraid. 9 He entered his headquarters again and said to Jesus, "Where are you from?" But Jesus gave him no answer. 10 So Pilate said to him, "You will not speak to me? Do you not know that I have authority to release you and authority to crucify you?" 11 Jesus answered him, "You would have no authority over me at all unless it had been given you from above. Therefore he who delivered me over to you has the greater sin."

12 From then on Pilate sought to release him, but the Jews cried out, "If you release this man, you are not Caesar's friend. Everyone who makes himself a king opposes Caesar." 13 So when Pilate heard these words, he brought Jesus out and sat down on the judgment seat at a place called The Stone Pavement, and in Aramaic Gabbatha. 14 Now it was the day of Preparation of the Passover. It was about the sixth hour. He said to the Jews, "Behold your King!" 15 They cried out, "Away with him, away with him, crucify him!" Pilate said to them, "Shall I crucify your King?" The chief priests answered, "We have no king but Caesar." 16 So he delivered him over to them to be crucified.

So they took Jesus, 17 and he went out, bearing his own cross, to the place called The Place of a Skull, which in Aramaic is called Golgotha. 18 There they crucified him, and with him two others, one on either side, and Jesus between them. 19 Pilate also wrote an inscription and put it on the cross. It read, "Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews."

Thus far the reading of God's word. It is absolutely true, and it is given to you because your Father in heaven loves you. Let's pray...

In order to understand our sermon text this morning, we must begin first with an older story, a story we heard already this morning, a story from the Old Testament that also takes place in the land of Palestine and has to do with a small nation that found themselves living there.

Now there was something interesting about this nation, about this group of men and women and children, something which set them apart from the nations around them, and that was this: they had no king.

There was no one man who ruled, no one man who led them in battle, no one man who rendered judgments in their disputes, no one man who watched after the needs in war-time and peace-time.

All the nations around them had their chieftains, their pharaohs, their kings. But this nation had no king.

And the reason for this lack of a king was very simple -- their God was their king. Their God ruled them. Their God fought their enemies. Their God settled their problems and made their laws. Their God provided for them and watched after their needs.

And in fact their God had a pretty good track record for doing these things.

He had, after all, delivered his people not so long ago from their slavery to Egypt, the most powerful kingdom in the world, he had fed them for forty years as they wandered in the wilderness, he had fought for them in land of Canaan and conquered their enemies, giving them a land of milk and honey, a land where they might prosper and flourish.

And even more, this nation's God had given them a great story, a story of how he had made the entire world in love, and despite the rebellion of humanity, he intended, because of his love for the whole human race, to use this nation to actually bless the entire world.

But the men and women and children of this nation had begun to grow impatient, they had begun to grow restless under the reign of their God and so one day they went to their holy man and demanded that he give them a king.

And not just a king, they said — we want a king like the nations around us. We want to be like those nations.

Despite his love, despite his faithfulness, they rejected their God as king over them -- and their God gave them what they wanted. He gave them a man named Saul.

This story in 1 Samuel 8 is a small story. It is often passed over with barely a comment. And yet it represents one of the great turning points in the Scriptures.

For it represents the moment when God's people rejected him as their king and took for themselves a king like the nations around them.

Fast-forward one thousand years and we find ourselves in our sermon text this morning, a story that takes place in a similar place and has a similar theme.

Now, by any measure, the last ten centuries for the nation of Israel since they rejected God as king over them, have been a more or less unmitigated disaster.

There have been good moments, of course, but mostly they have suffered for centuries under the tyranny and violence of wicked men, under men like Saul and Ahab and Manasseh, men who slaughtered and preyed on the the innocent, men who offered children in worship to idols, men who abused the weak and needy.

They have suffered under the imperial rule of the Assyrians, the Babylonians, the Persians, the Greeks, and now the Romans.

They have been exiled from their land and watched their homes and cities and even their temple burn.

But now, in our passage this morning, their God has come to them.

Their God — the same one they rejected one thousand years ago — has come in the flesh, in the person of his Son, and he has taken up again his role as their faithful king.

For three years, Jesus, the incarnate Son of God, has healed their sick, raised their dead, fed their hungry and loved them well.

And now, Jesus comes to reign, to be enthroned fully and finally as the king of Israel.

He stands before Pilate, the Roman governor, but he talks with him not as you would expect a man under the threat of execution, but as a man who is himself the true king, the true source of authority.

When Pilate questions him, Jesus the King is silent and refuses to answer.

When Pilate threatens him with crucifixion, Jesus the King says simply: *"You would have no authority over me at all unless it had been given you from above,"* And Pilate shudders in fear.

Ironically, Jesus' kingship in this passage is shown not only by his words but also the words and actions of those who think they are ridiculing him.

His enemies think they are mocking this would-be Messiah, but actually they are establishing his kingdom.

*"Hail, King of the Jews!"* the soldiers say as they strike him, as they flog him, as they crown him with crown made of thorns, as they place on his shoulders the purples robe of royal authority.

*"Behold the man!"* Pilate cries to the crowd as Jesus stands before them as their faithful king with his crown and robe, his love proved by the blood that covers his body, his faithfulness proved by the silence with which he endures his suffering of behalf of his people.

And then, finally, at the end of the passage, Pilate, at the seat of judgement, at the Stone Pavement, brings Jesus out and like a unwitting prophet cries to the people of Israel, *"Behold your King!"*

And they behold him.

This man who has healed their sick. This man who has forgiven their sins, raised their dead, fed their hungry, made the lame walk and the blind see.

Jesus is their faithful king and he stands before them with a bloody crown and a bloody robe and a ironic proclamation that are meant to mock but only serve to confirm in dramatic terms his royal vocation, the manner in which he is not, in any sense, a king like the kings of the nations, but a king utterly different than any king before him -- how he is, in fact, none other than the Son of God.

But our sermon text this morning is the not only the story of how Jesus is revealed as the Son of God who is the faithful king of his people, it is also the story of how he is the faithful king that is utterly rejected by the human race in their sin.

Consider the various ways the sin of humanity is on flagrant display in this passage, how the rebellion of man paraded without shame.

Consider the almost absurd hypocrisy of the Jewish leaders, how though they have fomented rebellion and hatred of Rome, now pretend to be the model loyal Roman sympathizers, challenging Pilate when he is seeking to release Jesus by saying: "If you release this man you are not Caesar's friend. Everyone who makes himself a king opposes Caesar."

The Jewish leaders are no friends of Caesar, of course. But they will say or do literally anything to carry out in their conspiracy to murder an innocent man in cold blood.

It is difficult to imagine a more stark picture of the blind pride of the human race, the false religious piety men and women are so often capable of.

Or consider the cold self-interest of Pilate, the way that he is at first intrigued and fascinated with Jesus, but then how quickly Pilate's interest in Jesus turns to fear -- fear of the Jewish leaders and their troubling questions about the strength of his loyalty to Caesar, fear of the crowds, and most of all, fear of Jesus with his unwillingness to play the game of the false trial by defending himself, fear of Jesus' claims of an authority that transcends his own.

And consider how that fear so quickly drives Pilate to step aside, to refuse to take responsibility, to release the robber instead of the faithful king, to sentence the king to death because it seemed like, at that particular moment, the only way to save his own precious skin.

Or consider the visceral anger of the crowds, their sudden disenchantment with this ruined messiah that stands before them in his pathetic crown and robe, their lust for spilling innocent blood, the way in which the violent and savage words, "*Crucify him, crucify him, away with him, away with him, crucify him*" feel so strangely comfortable on their tongues.

But most of all, consider the end of this passage.

Consider the way that Pilate pauses before issuing his final judgment, before raising his hands in imperial blessing of this sadistic mob and poses this final question to the crowds assembled there before him, "*Shall I crucify your king?*"

Consider how, just for a moment, Pilate assumes the role of the prophet Samuel so many years ago, and how the people of God assemble before him and utter the chilling words of their final apostasy and betrayal: "*We have no king but Caesar.*"

And so the ancient sin is increased. So the sins of the fathers are visited on their children. It is no longer enough that they reject God and have a king like the nations.

This is the heir, they think. Let us kill him, and we will have the inheritance.

Their faithful king stands before them in his bloody crown and robe. He has healed their sick. He has raised their dead. And they cry in response, "*We have no king but Caesar.*" He has washed their feet and taught them to love. And they say, "*Crucify, Crucify.*"

For this is the story of how Jesus, the Son of God, reveals himself to be faithful king that is rejected by the human race, and is rejected in the most dramatic and brutal terms possible.

And it is not only the story of the people alive there did this terrible thing. It is the story of how all of us, if we had been there, would have done the same thing.

In fact, one of the primary realities that this passage reveals is the convenient lie we like to believe that our problems with sin are primarily due to the unfortunate fact that we like sex and drink and money and shiny objects more than is really good for us and we'll give it all up one of these days sometime soon.

No, this passage shows us that human sin is, and has always been, and will always be, at its dark core, about power. About authority. About who is, in the end, in charge of our lives - us, or God.

This passage shows us that human sin has always been, ever since the Garden, a direct response to God's claim on our lives as king, his claim that he is our creator and therefore he has the final authority, the final word, the final say.

And it also shows us that human sin has always been about the reality that we will do anything to free ourselves from what we perceive to be God's oppressive reign, that human beings would have killed God long before that dark day in Israel 2000 years ago, and the only difference about that day is that God finally let them do it.

This passage shows us that human sin is not, in the end, a failure to keep a list of moral rules.

No, human sin is always, and has always been, an act of personal rebellion against the God who would presume to be our king.

But that's not all this passage shows us.

It does not only tell us the true story of human sin, the truth about who we as human beings, stripped of all our illusions of decency, actually are.

It also tells us the story of what it actually means for God, in his love and kindness, to be our king.

In our Gospel reading this morning, just five days before his death, Jesus describes how he understands what is about to happen to him in his arrest and trial and flogging and humiliation and finally, his crucifixion.

He says, *"The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified."*

You see, for Jesus, as God's Son, the way of the cross was actually the way of glory.

This, beloved, is the wonder of our God.

His glory, he says, is not most clearly displayed in anything that we most associate with kingship — wealth, power, dignity.

No, our God's glory, is most clearly displayed in this: when his Son is rejected by the people whom he has loved, and when he gives himself in death for their sins, even the sin they are committing by killing him, when his body is nailed to a cross and lifted up into the air to die — it is in this moment that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is most glorified as the true King of Israel.

And it is for this reason that God willed for his Son to die with these words fixed on his cross for all to see: "Jesus of Nazareth, the King of Jews."

For it is in his crucifixion that Jesus embraces the worst of your sin and my sin, the worst of our rejection, the worst of our hatred, the worst of our pride, the worst of our violence, and he stretches out his arms on the cross and he fulfills his own prophecy, made five days before: *"The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified."*

For this is how Jesus, the Son of God, is made our King.

*Though he was in the form of God, he did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.*

*Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.*

Beloved, this is the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.

This is the beauty and wonder and glory of our Crucified King.

Praise to you, O Christ!

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.