



John 19:6–11

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 realise 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.’

Reflection

In our post-Christian society, many people fail to realize just how much our modern worldview has been shaped by Christianity. Especially when it comes to our values. Most people in the West, even if they claim to be agnostic or even atheist, walk around valuing truth over falsehood, right

over wrong, life over death, mercy, justice and love – in other words a full set of Christian values; even if they don't know where these values come from and even if they deny their source. Before Jesus Christ came into the world we were very different. All ancient cultures were honour and shame cultures. At the top of the value hierarchy in an ancient culture was not truth and falsehood, or life and death, or any notion of right or wrong but rather honour and shame. The chief end in life was not to do good, or to live authentically, or to protect the sanctity of human life. In ancient cultures the chief end in life was to obtain honour and avoid shame. If one needed to lie to achieve that end, so be it. If someone needed to die to achieve that end, so be it.

And so it is hard for us to grasp just how repellent what Pilate has done to Jesus would have been in the eyes of an ancient Jew, especially one weighing the claims and teachings of Jesus Christ. In yesterday's passage Pilate thrust Jesus forward into full public view outside his palace in Jerusalem. Jesus has been savagely beaten and mocked by Pilate's soldiers. He's been flogged and beaten around the head, there's blood streaming down his back and ribs and his face is bruised and swollen. And he's been humiliated, dressed up in a soldier's cloak and made to wear a crown fashioned out of thorns. It's been pressed down savagely onto his head. Blood is streaming down his battered, bruised and swollen face.

‘Here is your king,’ Pilate said to the

Jews.

The shame and humiliation of the moment would be enough for an ancient witness to avert their eyes. At once, these zealous Jewish crowds would have been incensed at Pilate's mockery of Judaism, but also, the claims of Jesus Christ and the power of his teaching would have begun to seep away in the face of such dishonour. In no scenario that begins like this, with its founder so utterly shamed and humiliated, could Christianity have spread wildfire in the ancient world, especially when that same founder goes on to suffer crucifixion, the most shameful of all deaths. Except, that is, if Jesus really did rise from the dead. That would be the only way to come back from this level of public shame, humiliation and dishonour.

Today's passage continues in John 19:6–11,

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Pilate's attempt to stack the decks immediately fails. He detests the Jewish religious authorities and is loathe to do their will and so against their mounting pressure he's turned Jesus over to the caprice of the crowd. Jesus' life is in their hands. It's customary at the festival to release a popular prisoner from death row. The choice is between Barabbas and Jesus and so Pilate has roughed Jesus up and made a mockery of him with the hope of garnering sympathy from the crowd. In the Greek, one can even translate 'Here is the man!'

more with the sense of ‘Behold the poor man’ or ‘Behold the poor creature.’ ‘Look at this poor, bruised, bleeding creature. Haven’t you hounded him enough? Surely this is punishment enough for the offense he has caused you.’ But the crowds, stirred up by the chief priests and their officials are having none of it.

‘Crucify! Crucify!’

Pilate speaks directly to their leaders.

‘You take him and crucify him. As for me, I find no basis for a charge against him.’

But they have him and they know it.

‘We have a law, and according to

that law he must die, because he claimed to be the Son of God.' When Pilate heard this, he was even more afraid, 9 and he went back inside the palace.

Pilate is gripped by fear. His authority already hangs in the balance due to his past heavy handedness with the local Jewish population. The last thing he needs is a riot on his hands with Jerusalem swelled to past capacity, filled with zealous Jews on one of the holiest weeks of the year. But his fear is deeper than that. In a dream his wife has warned him to have nothing to do with this man Jesus (Matt 27:19). The more he's had to do with Jesus the more he's been affected by his regal demeanour and the reality of his innocence. He's already flogged an innocent man and now

that the true charge has come out, Jesus' claim to be the Son of God, in the superstitious ancient world Pilate's hackles have risen. He's dazed and confused, his power slipping through his fingers, his pride taking a beating, and yet the worst of it is the noble silence and intensity of the man before him. 'Damn it, he wears that crown of thorns with the nobility of Caesar himself. It's not even 9am in the morning, great start to a Friday, what have I gotten myself into!'

And so he withdraws again into his palace to further interrogate Jesus, his questioning more feverish with the growing mob outside.

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swer. 10 'Do you refuse to speak to me?' Pilate said. 'Don't you realise I have power either to free you or to crucify you?'

The great irony in Pilate's words is that he is powerless to free Jesus. The chief priests and their officials have his measure and are further inciting the crowds outside even as he speaks. In this moment Jesus is freer than Pilate, and exercises his freedom offering no defence against the charges laid out against him. Pilate is aghast, caught between a rock and a hard place in this unpleasant business. He'd started out to spite the Jews but is now captivated by this man, intrigued by him, his pride stings to be sure but in this moment there is something deeply wrong about sending Jesus to his death. The mo-

ment will fade, but momentarily at least Pilate is torn. Jesus comes to his aid,

‘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.’

Behind Pilate’s power is the hand of God. Even the worst evil cannot escape the outer boundaries of God’s sovereignty, yet God’s sovereignty never mitigates the guilt and responsibility for the evil actions of leaders in our world. God is bringing about these events according to his great plan of salvation but Pilate to a lesser degree, and the Jewish leaders and Judas Iscariot to a much greater degree, will be held accountable for their actions. As moral agents with free will they will be held to

account for the decisions that they have made – just as we all will. But as we'll read tomorrow Jesus' words have a powerful effect on Pilate, even if ultimately to no avail.

Think & Pray

As you think back over today's passage you might like to reflect over the shame that Jesus was subjected to and the powerful influence he had on Pilate through it all. Think about the times that you've felt shame for being a Christian. It's often in these times, times when we stand out as different to the world around us, when we go against the crowd, that we witness most powerfully for Jesus. Model your prayers this morning around Rom 1:16, that speaks about both shame and power,

16 For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes: first to the Jew, then to the Gentile.

Jesus' shame brought salvation to the world. Pray that your moments of shame might do the same.