

A Question of Authority (Evening Service)

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[0 : 00] Let's pray. Father, would you open our hearts to hear your word this evening. In Christ's name. Amen. Please be seated. So here we are. The sermon.

Right. So we're in the Gospel of John, obviously, and we're nearing the end. And just to give you some context, if you've been away, we're at the point in the story where Jesus is on trial, but he hasn't officially been condemned to death at this point.

That happens at the end of our passage. As a reminder, today's text is the second half of Christ's dialogue with Pilate. Okay, so Christ has this dialogue with Pilate that's like this long.

And last week's sermon was the first half. So we're tackling the second half. Do you know, Pilate, you've heard of Pilate? Very famous for the wrong reasons. Poor guy.

You do feel a little bit sorry for him that we kind of, you know, every week, like two billion Christians say his name as sort of like this infamous, this bad guy.

[1 : 06] You know, you feel a little bit sorry for him. But anyway, he was quite a conflicted character, as you can see in the dialogue. He clearly had suspicions about who Jesus might be and really thought Jesus was sort of an interesting and pretty good guy.

But he never followed through on those convictions. So let's dig in here. I'll tell you what I'm going to do over these next 20 minutes. We're going to first, we're just going to go through the story.

We're just going to go through the dialogue and dig it into a little bit. And then we're going to go back over it again. This time looking through the lens of irony. Because irony is one of John's great tools for speaking to us in this passage.

You'll get it when we get there. So but first, just the basic story. Let's just remind ourselves of the basic story. From last week, you remember, Pilate had been interviewed, or he was interviewing Jesus, and he says to himself, he says that like, he's clearly not guilty of anything.

This guy's done no wrong. And he brings Jesus before the crowds, and he says to the crowds, he goes, it's your custom, we can release one person. And he's assuming they're going to want to release Jesus, the good guy.

[2 : 20] And they don't. They yell, no. They say, we want Barabbas. And in the passage, Barabbas is called a robber. But in the Greek, actually, the term actually is more like insurrectionist, or today we'd say terrorist.

Barabbas was actually a terrorist. And so it gives you sort of an indication of the religious leaders' hate, hatred of Jesus. They would rather that this terrorist was released rather than Jesus.

So that's where we got to last week, which brings us to chapter 19. And chapter 19 begins with horror, violence. Pilate has Jesus flogged and whipped, and it's a brutal business.

And we could spend quite a bit of time on the brutality of it. Preachers like to do that. However, I mean, because there are like these three levels of whippings that the Romans gave a person, depending on how bad they were or how bad they thought they were.

And they've got these quite sort of euphemistic names, and they have this whip called the flagellum, and they did horrific damage. But the passage itself is actually quite constrained as it talks about the violence.

[3 : 29] And so I feel like we should be constrained when describing it. And I think it's constrained because the meaning of the passage is elsewhere. It's not in the violence.

So anyway, so Jesus was beaten and not just physically assaulted. He was mocked. Basically, what happens is he's handed over to these Roman soldiers who beat him, and they put this kind of crown on his head, which is made of barbie thorns and stuff, and this gaudy robe, and pretend to worship him.

I think the Roman soldiers, if they're like colonists, normal sort of colonists, they probably hated the indigenous Jews. And given the word from Pilate, were enjoying themselves with Jesus.

So the big question is this. Why? Why would Pilate do this? Why would Pilate, who has just said and says a few more times, I find no guilt in this man, why would Pilate have him beaten so badly? The answer is verse 5. Jesus was paraded in front of his Jewish leaders, and he would have looked terrible. I mean, he would have been covered in blood.

[4 : 43] He's dressed up in this mocking costume, and Pilate says, behold the man. And what he's saying is, here's the guy that you think is such a danger.

Look at him. He's nothing. I mean, Pilate was actually, I think, attempting to get Jesus released. He knew Jesus was guiltless. The religious leaders, though, really wanted Jesus to die.

But the law said that only Pilate could kind of make that happen. And Pilate didn't want to do it. So he thought, perhaps if I punish Jesus, if I ridicule him, if I mock him, if I beat him to an inch of his life, the priest might go, oh, yeah, he looks ridiculous.

Let's just forget the whole thing. He's fine. So that's what he does. He parades them in front of the religious leaders in this mock royal gear, all bloodied and beaten. And I think he's basically trying to say, come on, look, this whole thing is absurd.

This is the guy you think is going to ruin your life and take over? Come on. Well, the strategy doesn't work. Anyway, it doesn't work. They yell, crucify him. Crucify him. And there is a sense that they're screaming it, or like a two-year-old having a tantrum, crucify him.

[5 : 58] There's a frenzy about it. Pilate's very frustrated. He says, well, you guys do it then, which they're not allowed to, of course. So the religious leaders try a new strategy.

They say, but he's got to die. He has to die because he has said that he's the son of God. And this actually throws Pilate off a little bit.

He takes a pause. He takes a moment. Why? Because the Romans were really superstitious. And they believed in many gods.

And they believed from time to time that, you know, the gods would come down to earth and they'd mate with the locals and produce these kind of half-divine, half-human creatures.

You know, like in Greek mythology, it's like Hercules, I think, was one of these guys. And who's the guy with the heel? Achilles. Achilles, right? I think these are these guys, right? And so Pilate knows Jesus is special and he's quite impressed by him.

[6 : 58] But all of a sudden he thinks, oh, maybe there's something. Maybe there's a whole other level to this guy. Maybe he's some sort of God man guy. So he goes back in there to Jesus and he says, where are you from?

Like, where are you from? Jesus doesn't answer, which really annoys Pilate and prompts the outburst. Don't you know who I am, Jesus? Don't you realize who you're dealing with?

I could have. I could have you killed or I could have you released. Don't you know who you're dealing with? And there's a very interesting response that Jesus gives. He says in verse 11, So what is Jesus saying here?

He says two things. It's two things. First, he says, you have the authority, Pilate, because God allowed it. Your authority in this situation is actually it's part of God's plan.

Second thing he says, because then there might be this idea of him thinking, well, you know, it's like I'm not cobble ball because it's all God's plan. So it's, you know, it's not my problem. But Jesus adds the second thing.

[8 : 09] You're responsible for your part of the evil. I think that's what's going on there. Two things. He says, God is sovereign. You're responsible. Now, how those things kind of like, you know, work together, the Bible affirms both of them.

It doesn't explain how they work together. But there are two huge themes in Scripture, and Jesus speaks these truths to Pilate. Now, I can't imagine everyone's spoken to Pilate like that before. Pilate's probably used to people begging at his feet and not telling him that it's all part of God's plan, but he's still responsible for it. We're at verse 12, by the way, at this point. But despite Jesus, his candor with Pilate, Pilate still knows he hasn't really done anything wrong, and he should be released.

But the religious leaders, the Jewish religious elite in this community, have one more trick up their sleeve, and they use it. They play their ace, and here's the ace.

They say, if you release this man, Jesus, you are not Caesar's friend. Everyone who makes himself a king opposes Caesar. That phrase, Caesar's friend, I think it's like *amicus caesarus* or something. [9:22] It's actually like an official title, and it's a title that you wanted. So what's that all about, though? Think, when you're thinking this place, think North Korea.

Think Kim Jong-un, right? If you're a leader under him, you're in a precarious situation. You put a foot wrong, you could be in trouble. You could just be gone. That's what it was like in the Roman times.

So this threat to Pilate was, if you don't handle this properly, you're going to look weak. And that weakness could come back on you. In fact, we could actually let people know that you're weak, that you didn't handle this well.

That's the threat. And to give you a sense of how serious that threat was, because it sort of sounds like, you know, oh, the locals are just sort of like, I'm going to tell on you. No, it was actually like a very serious threat.

If we traveled in time a few years ahead from this event here, there was a thing with the Samaritans, and Pilate didn't handle it very well.

[10:27] And he handled it pretty badly. And the Samaritans complained to Tiberius, and it all gets a bit murky in the middle about what happens, but the end result is that Pilate was forced to commit suicide.

So that's how Pilate dies a few years ahead of this. So it's not an empty threat to say, you need to handle this well. Back to the story. So here we've got Pilate.

He's got, he's had a fantastic conversation with Jesus in his mind. He thought Jesus was really interesting. He wondered if he was perhaps more than just a normal person.

But nothing actually changed in Pilate's life. And when push came to shove, despite his convictions, despite what he thought, Pilate was still all about protecting Pilate.

Pilate was about Pilate. So when the religious leaders threaten to go over his head, Pilate protects Pilate, and that's what happens. Pilate relinquishes. He brings Jesus out to the religious leaders and says, Behold your king, shall I crucify him?

[11:29] And the religious leaders' response is very telling in terms of the sincerity of their beliefs. They say this. They say, we have no king but Caesar. And Jesus delivered over to be crucified.

But before that happens, do you note verse 14? It's quite, it feels like a bit out of place. All of a sudden in the middle of this conversation, it's, you know when people in offices and they get invoices and they get those stamps, so they stamp the date on it?

You know, received, bam. It's like there's this verse which like date stamps it, time stamps this event. It says, this happens on the day of preparation for Passover, at midday.

Why that? Why that detail? What's that trying to tell us? There's no throwaway lines here. Why is that significant? Because it's significant because of this. The moment that Jesus is delivered over, at that same time, up the road, in the temple, the lambs were beginning to be slaughtered for the Passover feast that night.

So that's the story on a simple level. Now, let's go back and look at it through the lens of irony. Now, I've said that irony is one of the great literary devices that John uses to make his points there.

[12:44] First, what is irony? It is not rain on your wedding day. It's like 10 people got that, right?

It's not a free ride when you've already paid. It's not some good advice you just didn't take. I thought I'd get a lot more response than that, to be honest. Isn't Alanis Morissette like a cultural icon in Canada?

Anyway, she's ruined irony, hasn't she? Irony is when, on one level, you have something that appears to be true, and on another level, the opposite is true.

On one level, something appears to be true, but on another level, the opposite is true. So in John, all through John, there's often this great contrast between the appearance of something and the reality of something.

Now, we saw a lot of this in Revelation, you remember. Okay, so let's go through the passage again, and we'll look at a couple of the ironies. There's tons of them. We'll just look at a few. First one. Three times in the passage, Jesus is called king.

[14:01] What's the irony? The irony is this. They believe they are mocking him. That's the appearance. They're mocking him. But what they're saying is true. So the irony is that these people who have no idea of the truth proclaim the truth, and the Bible speaks to us through them.

It's wonderful, right? A related irony. Jesus is charged with the crime of blasphemy, which is only a crime if you are not God.

But he is God. Another one. There's a lot of going inside, going outside. I don't know if you noticed that from last week and this week. A lot of going inside, going outside. Pilate goes in to speak to Jesus, comes out to speak to religious leaders, goes in, comes out, goes in, brings Jesus out, goes back in, there's that.

So seven times there's the in-out business. So what's that all about? Well, the Jews, religious leaders, were preparing for Passover, and they wouldn't go into the house of a Gentile because that would make them ritualistically unclean.

Okay, makes sense in using, in Jewish culture, right? The irony, they are committed to remain ritualistically unclean whilst trying to get somebody murdered.

[15:18] So they appear pure but are rotten. Now, there are lots of others. But the big irony, the biggest revolves around this idea of power and authority.

Power and authority. So in the story, let me explain, in the story, who appears to be in charge? Who appears to have power over Jesus? The soldiers? They give no thought to beating Jesus and mocking him.

They give no second thought to that. Who else has power? Now, Pilate, in his mind, he's the ultimate judge in this situation. He's the grand authority, the ultimate authority in this situation. The religious leaders, they're just rolling out their plan to manipulate the situation to get Jesus killed. So without any sort of knowledge of who Jesus was, if you just got this bit of the story, had no idea who Jesus was, you would read this account and you would think, this poor, deluded carpenter, how did he get himself into this situation?

See, that's how it appears. That's the appearance, right? That's the appearance. Seems like everyone has power except Jesus. And lots of different types of power, did you notice?

[16:29] Lots of different types of power. These are the political power of Pilate, the physical power of the soldiers, and we'll call it the religious elite, I'll call it vested power, like vestments, like this vested sort of power that the religious elite had.

And it's all brought to bear on Jesus, and Jesus looks like the ultimate loser here, but the irony is the opposite is true. Things are not as they seem in the Gospel of John. Jesus is in control of the whole situation.

But here's why it's not obvious. It's not obvious because the power of God looks so different to the power that we're used to seeing and experiencing. Because here, the power of God, it looks like serving.

The power of God in this passage, it looks like sacrifice. Now, sacrifice is in the end goal. Jesus is not trying to look weak because weakness is a virtue. No, he uses his power to serve in order to save.

So Christ, this whole thing happened because this was the way for him to get to the cross, to serve humanity in the ultimate way because cross is salvation for us.

[17:41] So, and one of the great and deepest ironies of this whole thing, these soldiers and the religious leaders and Pilate, by using their power so badly, by abusing power that they've been given, they were helping Jesus show us what power is for.

It's forgiving. It's for serving. It's for giving away. Real power is service. Jesus gave his life as a ransom for us. This whole thing, this is just like this beautiful picture of how the kingdom of God works, isn't it?

And how we should operate. What our community should look like. Power that we are given, our power should be used in service.

Now, let's just think about power for a moment more before we finish up here. Power historically has been used to make people do things, which might be fine if we had pure motives.

In the early 90s, the president of Czechoslovakia, who was a very interesting man, he was like a philosopher, poet-y sort of guy who literally became president overnight.

[18:56] Vaclav Havel. Anyway, so he won the award. He won this award, the special award for his contribution to European civilization. So this is 91, 92, I think.

And he had this, at the awards ceremony, he had this remarkable speech, a very short speech called The Temptations of Political Power. And he starts off by asking the question, why is it that when people long for political power, and why is it when they achieve it, they're so reluctant to give

it up?

Which is a great question, isn't it? To start off the speech. And he goes on to explain, he says, people that seek office have several motivations. And he goes, one of them is usually to use power to serve the truth, to make your city or your country a better place.

He goes, but the second motivation, he says, is people want power as an end in itself to feed your heart. And he talks about this.

It's remarkable. He talks about we all have this inner longing for self-affirmation. We all want to be affirmed. And he says, nothing does that better than political office. And he goes on to say, at the end he goes, being in power makes me permanently suspicious of myself.

[20 : 14] Harville, The Temptations of Political Power. It's a very short speech. I encourage you to read it. It's great. The big thing I got from this was this subtlety at which power corrupts, corrupts our hearts.

You'll get a lot more if you read it yourself. And you might say, oh, that sounds terrible. Yeah, awful. Good thing that doesn't happen in the church. One of the ugliest forms of power is when political power and religious power become sort of welded together in a really unhealthy way.

And when that happens, Christianity loses its heart and it loses its genius, which is why passages like this are so important, which is why I think they don't dwell on the violence of the act.

Because the point is, oh, no, look how sad it is that Jesus was beaten. Look how awful it is the way Jesus was treated. No. It's this. It's look. Here is what the abuse of power looks like.

See how power corrupts. See how power turns us inwards. But also see what saving power looks like. See what Christ did for us and see how we should live.

[21 : 37] So this is the way of the kingdom. This is our way. Apart from Jesus, the rest of the figures who look so strong in this passage are tragic figures.

They want to hang on to their power because it feeds them. They want to hang on to their career, and they want to hang on to their money, and they want to hang on to their place in society. And if you hold on to those things at all cost, you have to kill Jesus because he is a threat to you.

Now, we don't kill Jesus physically today, but we do it by building an ideology that sidelines him.

This is, yes, Jesus. I like Jesus.

Jesus, the moral teacher. Jesus, the philosopher. Jesus, the advocate for the poor. He is all of those things, but if he's just those things, if you don't make him the Lord of your life, you've got to get rid of him, really, or at least put him on the far margins of your life.

If you can't have him at the center of your life, you really don't want him anywhere near you. Let me finish up here. So we have two ways before us, the way of the power of the world, the way of the power of the kingdom, and let me tell you, the kingdom way is so much better.

[23 : 01] The kingdom way is so much better. It can be painful. You can look weak, but it's ironically, it's where there is life. Now, at this point, I should bring up how we need more kids' church workers, or I should bring up how we need more greeters or something, but I won't do that, because you need to work this stuff out in your own life.

You need to work out what this looks like in your situation. The Bible says that we are to work out our salvation with fear and trembling, and what does that mean? It means knowing that you are saved, how are you going to live?

That's the application for the passage. Go do it. Amen.