

A Question of Authority

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Preacher: Canon David Short

[0 : 00] If you would take the Bible that is in front of you in the seat and open to page 904905, that would be great. My name is David Short, I am one of the ministers here at St. John's.

And in our house, one of the most serious series that was consumed recently was the new Netflix series, The Queen.

I'm sorry, The Crown. You can tell I didn't see it. It was watched by someone in our house, I assure you of that.

\$130 million traces the life of Queen Elizabeth II from around the time of her coronation in the early years, won all sorts of awards. And for her coronation, I understand, Queen Elizabeth needed lots of rehearsal, education, and the right husband.

In fact, to be able to wear the heavy crown that she wore on the day, she wore two on the day, for a couple of weeks beforehand, she wore a practice crown so that she could get used to the weight.

[1 : 09] There was 14 months preparation, 8,000 guests, music was written, heads of state invited, royal robes. And when she ascended the throne, of course, it changed everything for her, and it changed her relationship with everyone in Great Britain and the Commonwealth, including her husband and family.

I say this because the writer of John's Gospel, John, presents the trial of Jesus as his coronation. Jesus' suffering cross and death, which we say again and again is at the heart of our Christian faith, in John's Gospel, is not a miserable tragedy.

It's pictured as a masterful triumph. It's the beginning of Jesus ascending back to the Father. This is how Jesus himself speaks about it.

In chapter 3, in chapter 8, and in chapter 12, Jesus talks about being hoisted up, lifted up. And in chapter 12, when he says, my hour has come, the hour of his death, he doesn't say, oh no, my hour has come.

[2 : 21] He says, the hour for the Son of Man to be glorified has come. He says, now is the judgment of this world. Now is the ruler of this world to be cast out.

And I, when I am hoisted up, when I am lifted up, meaning on the cross, I will draw all people to myself. It's not that his death will have a happy ending.

It's not that the resurrection is going to reverse the humiliation, shame and suffering. It's that there is a dynamic at work and a power at work in the suffering and death of Jesus itself, which is the power of glory.

The crucifixion and suffering themselves shine the glory of God most brightly. That is his coronation. This is where Jesus draws us to himself.

So it's no surprise when we come to the trial of Jesus before Pilate, Pontius Pilate, or as my boys used to call him, Pontius Pilate.

[3 : 25] It's no surprise that there are two opposite processes, two contrasting processes at work. Stay with me on this, please. So on the one side, actually, let me put Jesus on this side.

On the one side is the true king and true judge, Jesus Christ. He is calm. He is glorious. He is marching through his suffering for the joy that's set before him.

And he receives the humiliations and the injustices because they are part of his coronation. He's repeatedly called king and he's every inch a king.

He's king of glory, king of judgment, king of truth, king of our hearts. But his kingship challenges every human power and authority. And so on the other side, there is another process at work.

It is embodied in Pilate, who thinks he is in charge. Certainly he has the political power, just as the chief priests have the religious institutional power.

[4 : 28] But Jesus' real power exposes Pilate as being fundamentally insecure and weak, who wants to work at all costs to keep his own power.

He's driven by fear and he's driven by anxiety. And Pilate doesn't want to deal with Jesus. He's like so many of us. You know, as the kingship and the lordship and the majesty of Jesus become clearer and clearer, he has to choose between holding on to his own power and authority or the pretense of it and be rid of Jesus or do something very radical instead.

But, you see, trying to be in control and trying to prove yourself is a big problem when you meet Jesus. Because you meet someone who's infinitely more powerful than yourself, who has all the authority of God.

And this is the fundamental challenge of life that God brings to every single one of us in the person of Jesus Christ. And as Jesus shines more brightly and his glory becomes clearer, Pilate makes a series of downward choices, more desperately trying to hold on to his power, to avoid the truth at any cost, and it has fateful and eternal consequences for him.

And you know that Jesus and Pilate are woven together. You can't separate them. Every day, somewhere in the world, even today, people speak the name of Pilate as Christians confess the creed.

[6 : 00] Pontius Pilate, crucified under Pontius Pilate. My mother calls him Pilate. And that's not how to pronounce it. It's Pilate. Just to make clear.

He's the Roman governor of Judea, appointed by Tiberius Caesar. He's got a large military detachment with him. He's got the full legal power to give the death sentence.

And he was not a good governor. He already, by this time, has two strikes against him. Twice, he's made silly decisions. And the Jewish authorities have written, have done an end run around him and written to Caesar.

So outwardly, he looks like he has power and authority. But inwardly, he is driven by deep fear and anxiety over his position. And Pilate has a palace on the coast over at Caesarea.

And he has one in Jerusalem. It's called the Praetorium. So in 1828, where the scene, where the Pilate trial begins, it's translated as the governor's headquarters.

[7 : 05] It's a kind of a fortress for the Roman soldiers. And this is where the trial of Jesus takes place. And Dan, last week, took us through the first half of the trial.

I'm sorry about this. This week, we come into the second half of the trial. But I want to, I need to go back and just introduce again the first half of the trial.

Because John has written it as a perfect seven-act play. The same guy who writes the book of Revelation. No surprise.

A seven-act play. And the acts go from outside the Praetorium to inside the Praetorium. Judas is the key guy.

So the first is outside. Then he goes inside. Then he goes outside. Then he goes inside. Then he goes outside. And it's a great picture, a wonderful picture of what's going on inside the soul of Pilate.

[8 : 03] He goes outside to confront the Jewish authorities. He goes inside to confront Jesus. Backwards and forwards. Backwards and forwards. And I just want to remind you last week, in the first half of the trial, it begins outside the Praetorium in verse 28.

The chief pastors of Israel, the clergy of Israel under the high priest Caiaphas. I'm tempted to call him a bishop, but I won't. They deliver Jesus over to Pilate so that Pilate will kill Jesus for them.

They can't go into the Praetorium. At least they think they can't go into the palace because Pilate is a Gentile. And they would be contaminated and wouldn't be able to eat the Passover meal.

And they can't afford to pollute themselves because they want to participate in the Passover meal in just a day's time. And that is the first of a series of fierce ironies.

They want purity before God. And so they stay outside of where Jesus is. They think that by eating the Passover meal and keeping their hands clean and where they stand and doing the rules will give them purity.

[9 : 17] But the only true source of purity is Jesus Christ on the inside. The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. What is truly polluting and contaminating them is not where they stand.

But it's their envy and the hatred in their hearts that they have toward Jesus. And their scheme to have him murdered as soon as possible. And in the beginning, Pilate doesn't want to have anything to do with this.

He sees straight through their hypocrisy. He despises these clergy. And he taunts them. He says in that first little scene, he says, You go and kill them yourselves, you religious hypocrites who pretend to want purity.

Don't get me to do your dirty work for you. I don't want anything to do with this Jesus. And then in verse 32, we're reminded that this is a coronation. And that this is happening according to Jesus' word.

That Jesus has described his death as being lifted up, ascending to the throne. And this is his coronation, not despite the lies and the corruption and the injustice and the hatred, but because of them and through them.

[10:22] And then in verse 33, we're taken inside the praetorium for the first interview between Pilate and Jesus. And the first question Pilate asks Jesus is, Are you the king of the Jews?

That's the key issue that comes back again and again and again and again and again. Twelve times, kingship. And the irony is, and you love John, the irony is that everyone around Jesus speaks better than they know.

They don't think of Jesus as a king, but they keep calling him king. And Jesus' answer in verse 34 is remarkable and lovely. Just have a look at it.

Jesus treats Pilate as a real person. He reaches out to him searchingly to see if Pilate is really personally engaged and offers him an open door, a stunning opportunity to hear the truth of God from the lips of the Son of God.

He says, Do you say this of your own accord? Or did others say this to you about me? See, Jesus gets personal. It's a very dangerous turn of events for a man like Pilate.

[11:27] He is so busy with his career, he does not want to bother thinking about Jesus. He does not want to get personally involved. He does not. But Jesus won't let him off the hook.

And this is what happens. And many of us can testify to this. That when Jesus comes and reveals himself to us and reveals God's desire to redeem us, it's almost always inconvenient for us.

Particularly if we've made an idol of success or power or career. Pilate is using his authority to avoid taking responsibility for Jesus. And Jesus is using his authority to take responsibility for himself and for Pilate.

And he dodges the question, Pilate. And so in verse 36, Jesus reveals more to him about the nature, the true nature of kingship and serving. He says to Pilate, You have a kind of kingdom, Pilate.

Pilate is not. It's temporary, it's fragile, it's corrupt. Because it's about power and position and prestige. But my kingdom is not of this world. My kingdom is about serving and sacrifice and salvation.

[12:38] It is not about holding on to power. It's about giving away power. It's not about self-protection. It's about the love of others. It comes from heaven. It's full of glory.

Morey says at the end of that little section, Everyone who listens to my voice will hear the truth of God. Can you hear me, Pilate? And before he responds, the end of verse 38, Pilate races out again and blurts out to the Jewish pastors who want Jesus dead.

For the first time, he says, Jesus is absolutely, completely and entirely innocent. There is no guilt in him whatsoever. And the obvious question is, what's the right thing for Pilate to do? It's to release him.

But he cannot help himself. He tries to prove himself, even in the way that he does this. And so he offers to release one prisoner under his special Passover release program.

And the response of the clergy is to howl. If you look down to verse 40, that little word cried out.

[13:45] It's a very interesting word. It's the word used for a herd of animals, a herd of pigs, swine as they squeal.

It's also used in the Gospels of the noise that demons make when they come out of people. It is an animal, frenzied, screaming roar.

And this is the sound that all the pastors and religious leaders make when Pilate offers to set Jesus free. It's not something you usually expect from religious leaders.

Although I have heard it done. And so we come to the second half of the trial, chapter 19.

That's not the longest introduction I've ever done to a sermon. But it's close to it. We had to have that in mind. So chapter 19, second half of the trial. The first three verses, we go back inside the praetorium.

[14:42] What do you expect the governor to do if he knows that Jesus is innocent? He's supposed to release him. But instead of releasing him, instead of a dialogue between Pilate and Jesus, Pilate has Jesus flogged.

And he throws him to the guards in the garrison to torture and play with. It's a scene from Abu Ghraib. It's interesting that at this point, all the Gospel writers become very reserved. Because the focus in the death of Jesus is not the physical detail as it is in the movies. Because that's not the meaning and that's not the heart of it. We're told enough. I mean, we're told that the soldiers whip him and plait a crown of thorns and press it on his head. And they bow down to him and they sarcastically say, Hail, King of the Jews.

And then they stand up and whack him in the head with their hands. And I don't think they've got anything personal against Jesus. If anything, their mockery is directed to the Jewish people.

[15:47] They're saying, here's what we think of your king. Whack. And again, they speak better than they know. This is God's king. This is his coronation. Jesus has come to serve and to suffer and to sacrifice himself for these men while they are treating him as an enemy, just like us.

Still, it's a very strange choice for Pilate, don't you think? I think the best construction we could possibly put on it is that perhaps Pilate wants Jesus to look so beaten and pathetic that when he drags him out in front of the Jewish clergy, they won't see him as the threat.

But it's still a terrible decision. Then in verse 4, he goes outside again, back to the chief pastors of Israel. And he declares a second time that Jesus is completely innocent.

And then he drags out Jesus, bloodied and beaten. And he says in verse 5 of chapter 19, Behold the man. And again, Pilate speaks better than he knows.

When he says, behold the man, it's both a statement of humiliation and dignity. But the opposite way around from what he means.

[17:08] One of the interesting things is in the original, throughout the whole trial until the very last word, the chief pastors of Israel refuse to call Jesus him.

They refuse to use a personal pronoun of him. They call him this, that. You know, they have a distaste for Jesus. They can't even see that he is a real human being.

But since the opening of the gospel, we know the fact that Jesus is a man is an astonishing miracle of God and of love. That the eternal word of God became flesh to dwell among us.

And to say that he is the man is to declare this is God taking human form. And their reaction, verse 6, is fast and furious. They roar and they rage.

Same word again. Crucify, crucify. And by the way, we want the most agonizing, humiliating and excruciating death for him. And Pilate mocks them.

[18:11] Again, he says, you do it. You clergy who want clean hands. And a third time, Pilate states, there's no guilt in him. And so in verse 7, the authorities quickly change track.

You've got to admire this swift change of track. They call Jesus. They say he says he's the son of God. And if you look down at verse 8, at the beginning of verse 8, we are taken inside the headquarters and inside Pilate's heart.

And we read that he is filled with fear. He hates the Jewish authorities, but he is afraid of them. Because his position and his power are on the line.

And it's this fear that stops him from listening to Jesus or from responding to Jesus or from doing what is right. Because that's how fear works, isn't it?

You know, being afraid of what others think stops all of us from listening to Jesus. And now inside we have the last dialogue between Pilate and Jesus before Jesus is sentenced to death.

[19:23] We have the last words of Jesus before he is hanging on the cross. Pilate demands to know where Jesus comes from. But he is silent. And by now Jesus knows that Pilate is too self-absorbed.

He's not listening. And Pilate is furious in his response, verse 10. Literally he says, me? You won't speak to me? Do you know who you're dealing with?

No idea that I'm the one in power here? I mean, I have the authority to set you free. You can go off and live a long and happy life. And I have the power to take your life slowly by crucifixion.

How dare you not answer me? And in verse 11, Jesus simply says, 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. Now, I think this statement shows how upside down things are and how much like a coronation it is.

[20 : 27] And here is the accused prisoner who is beaten and bloody, deciding and apportioning relative guilt. Pilate is speaking to the true judge.

And it's the kingliness of Jesus that exposes the motives of the heart. He knows where real guilt lies. And while Jesus remains calm and sovereign, he's not detached or philosophical. He's still reaching to Pilate, still trying to draw him away from his guilt. And Pilate is acting as a moral agent. And the longer he pretends to be neutral about Jesus, the worse it gets for him. Because you just, you can't be neutral about Jesus. If you try to not make a decision about Jesus, that is making a decision about Jesus. And it puts us on Pilate's path.

So Pilate has to decide. He cannot bring himself to do the right thing. And so in verse 12, he goes out for the last time. And in verse 12, the Jewish clergy change tactic again.

[21 : 36] And they use the trump card. And they say, if you release Jesus, you're not a friend of Caesar's. Well, that's Pilate's ultimate audience. Here is the one guy he wants to please.

So Pilate collapses and capitulates. The Jewish authorities have put their finger on Pilate's true God, his career and his reputation. In verse 13, everything slows down.

14, we're told the place, we're told the time. By the way, it is the exact time when the Passover lambs are killed in the temple. And in verse 14, he sits on the judgment seat outside the praetorian. And he says to the Jewish leaders, behold, your king. And they howl Pilate down saying, away, away, crucify him.

Finally, they use the personal pronoun. And though Pilate has announced three times Jesus is innocent, and though he is still condemning himself, he says, shall I crucify your king?

[22 : 36] And the chief priests yell out, we have no king but Caesar. And with one phrase, they disown God. They seize any pretense to be the people of God.

They disavow the Lord God himself as their king because they will not have Jesus as their king. And the passage finishes in verse 16, as Pilate delivers Jesus over to be crucified.

Let me just make two reflections as we close. The first is this. Who is responsible for the death of Jesus? And the answer is cleverly woven through this in the little phrase, delivered over.

It's exactly the word used through the gospel for what Judas does when he betrays Jesus. Seven times we're told that Judas betrayed Jesus.

You could translate it, Judas delivered Jesus over to the chief priests, knowing that they would kill him. In chapter 18, it's used three times of the chief priests who deliver Jesus over to Pilate.

[23 : 46] The high priest himself took the lead in that farcical trial of Jesus. Couldn't get two witnesses to agree. Yet they deliver Jesus over to Pilate to be crucified. And then in verse 16 of 19, Pilate himself fearful, exposed, weak.

He delivers Jesus over to be crucified. So who was responsible for Jesus' death? It was Judas. It was the leadership of Israel. It was Pilate.

But the word comes one more time. And it's in verse 30. And I just want you to look down at that verse, please. It's just over the page.

It comes at a critical moment. It's at the point of Jesus' death. In verse 30, when Jesus had received the sour wine, he said, it is finished.

We'll look at this next week. And he bowed his head and gave up his spirit. Literally, he delivered over his spirit. It's the same word.

[24 : 48] So in the end, no one took Jesus' life away from him. Only Jesus had the power to lay down his life of his own choosing.

And that's exactly what he did. As he delivered his life over to death, he became the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world for us. And that means that all of us are part of this.

We either want to avoid him or see him as our king. And the second question is, why? Why does this all happen? Well, the answer is, again, simple.

It's the coronation. Queen Elizabeth, she needed the right preparation and the right education. And she needed the right husband for a coronation. Jesus has come from above with the words of God. Throughout the gospel, he's loved and revealed and shown the glory of God. He's given himself as the bread of life and the water of life and the resurrection and the life and the way, the truth and the life. And he has a crown.

[25 : 53] And it's a crown of thorns. And it's forced on him by those who don't know him to show that he is the Lamb of God who's come to take away the sin of the world. And his coronation demonstrates that Jesus rules by serving.

That he gives life by dying. That he's come to serve for our salvation. And that's the way of the kingdom. And our choice today is to soften our hearts.
And to pray that God would help us to declare Jesus to be God's king and God's lamb. And to receive the life, his life, that he gave over his death for us. To trust the truth he tells.
Or we could hold on to those things that we use to prove ourselves. The better thing is to come to him with all our fears and to say to him, You are the Christ, the Son of God.
I trust in you. Amen.