

March 18, 2018 “Power and Perspective” John
19:1-16

We have a tendency to believe that it is a modern problem, that those who serve in government are unable to make the significant changes they said they wanted to make, when they were running for office. Many who seek a career in what we call public life discover to their disillusionment and disappointment once they have gained power, that their options are limited. That the complexities of political survival prevent them from fully implementing their agendas, and keeping their promises. John and the other Gospel writers, and the writers of the New Testament letters remind us that is not a new reality at all. Even in the ancient world, in the era of the Roman Empire, those who appeared to have power had moments in which they collided with limitations they did not foresee.

At the opening of John 19, John tells us as a witness to the events, Pilate tried to set Jesus free. But the crowd led by the members and supporters of the Sanhedrin, the Rabbinical Council of Jerusalem, demanded that Jesus be crucified. That Barabbas who was guilty of being involved in a rebellious faction, be set free in accordance with the traditions of the Passover season in Roman Judea. I want to make this clear. This is not about holding the Jews responsible for the killing of Jesus. If anyone is guilty of that responsibility, it is we, and it is I.

Jesus made it clear. All of the New Testament writers make it clear. Jesus died to save sinners. While it is true the Rabbinical Council brought charges and that it had decided it was probably best for Judea that Jesus be sacrificed for peace and stability, only the Roman Procurator could issue a death sentence. Jesus makes it plain that none of them has the power to take HIS life. That power has been given from above, or they would not be able to accomplish a thing!

The very first thing we learn from John in chapter 19 is that Pilate took Jesus back inside the official residence in Jerusalem and turned HIM over to members of his military guard. He ordered that Jesus be flogged. It was a brutal, torturous and bloody process. Physicians who have studied the crucifixion of Jesus share with us that the usual sentence in cases such as these was 40 lashes. There were instances where bone was laid bare in process of such punishment. It is estimated again by doctors who have studied the matter that by the end of the whipping, Jesus had probably lost a half of the blood in HIS body by volume. In other words when Pilate takes Jesus back out before the crowd and HIS accusers, HE is weak and fragile. Alive....certainly. But weak and fragile. This flogging is the very reason that Jesus died on the cross in a matter of hours. Crucifixion often resulted in a week of suffering which led always to the victim's death.

When Pilate brings Jesus out in public HE has

been transformed. Blood loss and a terrible physical beating has reduced HIM to a physical shadow of what HE was an hour before. So it is fair to ask what game is Pilate playing here? The testimony of the Gospel writers and the other New Testament authors is that Pilate is trying to save Jesus from capital punishment. He is making the point that he is not soft on crime or those charged with criminal offences. Jesus is now a physical mess. But the cry that greets Pilate and Jesus is the cry...Crucify...Crucify!

John says Pilate was blunt. He declares that in the matter of Roman Law there is no reason to proclaim a death sentence. In response the members of the Rabbinical Council chaired by Caiaphas scream for the rest of Jesus blood. "He claimed to be the Son of God. By our Law he must die!" Pilate was afraid when he heard this. Why? It is becoming clear to Pilate that in the very act of trying to maintain peace, and negotiate his way through this matter there is danger or a disturbance, even a riot fueled by the religious fervor of this Judean population.

He takes Jesus back inside. He tries to learn more about Jesus. Clearly Pilate is frustrated and becomes more frustrated as Jesus greets questions with silence. In an outburst Pilate reminds Jesus his life is hanging by a thread. And he, Pontius Pilate, has the power to snap that thread. To this, Jesus does speak. He tells Pilate that as Procurator he has only the power that was given him by the Lord God of heaven. Jesus says, those who have

brought the charges and turned HIM over to the Governor are guilty of greater sin, than Pilate in this matter.

Back they go to the crowd outside. Pilate tries to free Jesus. That is when the bomb explodes. Someone shouts, heard clearly by everyone present, “If you let this man go, you are no friend of Caesar. Anyone who claims to be a king opposes Caesar!” And suddenly this is not about Jesus. And it is not about justice. Pilate has just been threatened that he in danger of political suicide. Pilate sees the limits of power. He sees that this is suddenly about survival...his own survival. So Pilate walks over to the judgement seat. He tries to argue. The cry goes up.... “Crucify! Crucify!” And then.... “We have no king but Caesar!”

Pontius Pilate is a soldier. Not a diplomat, not a philosopher, not a theologian. He is a survivor. He hands Jesus over to be crucified. Power is always limited, sometimes by the strangest of things. I am humbled by this. Jesus said HE would die for me, for you, for us. What I can see in these Gospel details, and can never forget, is Jesus meant it. “O how he loves you, O how he loves me, O how he loves you and me!”

Let us Pray;

Lord, we are tempted to want to change the truth. We want the trial to be about fairness. We want it to be about justice. Like Peter, we would prevent the crucifixion if we thought we could find another way. It

reveals our sinful nature. We would hold people responsible for your dying. We would prevent your saving grace from saving us....if we could. As Jesus gave Himself for us, forgive us for wanting to find someone else to blame. Thank you for loving us enough to trade our eternal lives for HIS earthly life. Amen

