

Jesus Before Pilate

As we go deeper into the passion story, we're always confronted with the question - why did Jesus die? The answer to that question has to be both theological and historical. Let's first deal with an answer that I think is incorrect...and you definitely can't get to it from John's gospel...or any of the gospels for that matter. That's that he died as a substitute for humans to appease God's wrath for the sin of humanity.

Sin is indeed what Jesus dealt with on the cross, but I don't believe it was to take on God's wrath as a substitute for us. That lets us off the hook too easy. And it flies in the face of all Jesus' talk about God's love for us.

It also isn't in any of the gospels. That theory was formalized by Anselm 1000 years after Jesus. It's become the dominant understanding in much of Christianity, but it's far from dominant in the Bible. There are a few verses in scripture that could offer support of it. But even those I think can be interpreted other ways. In any case, there are other better answers in scripture. Using this scene, which is a continuation of last week's story, we'll walk through a different way to think about it.

The trial of Jesus began last week with the high priest – the head of the religious rulers. It continues this week with Pilate, who represents the state.

Sometimes when I'm not sure where to go with a sermon, I start looking at the history, particularly that which isn't in the Bible. Sometimes that leads me down a rabbit hole that can waste hours.

But I did learn some things that were at least a little helpful. Although Pilate here looks like he doesn't have a clue why the priests, scribes, and elders want Jesus dead, he is most likely manipulating them to put Jesus' death on them and not himself. Jesus was popular with the masses. And this was Passover. Executing Jesus at Passover carried some risk to Pilate.

While Rome allowed a certain level of self-government, the King of the Jews – Herod – was appointed by the Emperor. And the high priest was appointed by the prefect – in this case Pilate. There is a historical account of Pilate building an aqueduct with money from the Temple. That would have to have involved the high priest. There was an alliance between Pilate and Caiaphas that existed before this scene. It was kind of a you scratch my back I'll scratch yours thing.

The religious ruling elite, led by Caiaphas, wanted Jesus dead because Jesus cast judgement on their actions.

When Jesus cleared the Temple of the sellers and money-changers, he quoted from the prophet – God’s house is to be a house of prayer. But you have made it a den of thieves.”

Those thieves were the priests, scribes, and elders. Jesus repeatedly challenged their authority and their morality. And he was popular with the Jewish people. They needed to get rid of Jesus before his movement upset the whole status quo.

But Pilate wasn’t going to execute Jesus for religious reasons. There needed to be a political reason too. As I said last week, John is in some ways the least political of the four gospels. But even though in John’s gospel Jesus almost never mentions the kingdom, clearly there was enough of a concern for Pilate to bring it up at this interrogation.

And although we won’t read it until next week on Palm Sunday, Jesus did ride into Jerusalem in the fashion of a king. And that was a direct confrontation with the power of Rome. Pilate almost certainly knew that and had no qualms about executing Jesus from that standpoint. He was just nervous about executing a popular leader at Passover and so he skillfully shifted the blame.

So that’s the historical and political explanation for why Jesus died. But of course, that’s not all there is to it. If it was, it wouldn’t help us much. We weren’t even born.

But it does provide the backdrop. The unholy alliance between the religious rulers and the Roman Empire is the kingdom of this world. It represents the kingdom of this world in all times and places. Underneath the kings and emperors and dictators and tyrants and all systems of oppression is the power of evil...Satan if that’s a helpful image.

That kingdom represents a particular truth – the truth of power and violence as a way to rule.

Jesus represents a completely different kingdom – and in that kingdom, Jesus not only testifies to the truth, he is the truth. The truth that in the end, love is what wins.

When those two kingdoms collide, it seems obvious that power and violence have to win. And it looks like it will here.

But when we are confronted with God in flesh hanging on a cross, we are forced to face our own participation in a system of power, domination, and violence. We are forced to face the ways we have not acted with love.

Jesus knew this collision of kingdoms would get him killed. But he also knew that as he is lifted up on the cross, he will draw all of us to him...he will draw all of us to see where our sin leads...it leads to God on a cross.

But we are also drawn to see the truth of what ultimate love looks like. As Jesus said, if his kingdom was of this world, his followers would have come in swords flashing and in a bloody battle would have tried to rescue him.

But that is not Jesus' truth and it's not the truth of his kingdom. In Jesus' farewell to his disciples, he said no one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends.

True love takes the weight of all the sin of this world onto the cross. In love, Jesus went to the cross with all the violence the world could muster hurled at him. God didn't kill Jesus as a substitute for us. Humans...humans of all times and places killed Jesus...humans, like us, who all too often put our faith in the ways of this world.

So the religious rulers tell Pilate, no don't let Jesus go. Here...here's Barabbas. Let him go. The term bandit doesn't really get at what Barabbas was. He was actually a rebel. He was possibly a Zealot or a precursor – the Zealots favored violent overthrow of Rome. But more likely he wasn't in anything that organized. He was maybe more like an anarchist – undermining Roman rule by sowing chaos.

The religious authorities were OK with him being released. He wasn't as much of a threat because his way of being meshed with the way of their world.

While Jesus' death, resurrection, and ascension are assurance that his truth, his way of love, the life he brings ultimately win, the two kingdoms still clash.

The way of violence and power continues to wreak havoc in governments, churches, families. People are still crushed by the arrogant and powerful. We still give in over and over to the seduction of a world where might makes right.

But we also know another truth...that there is another system operating. A system of love and a willingness to lay down power, and even life, for the sake of the world. And we know that because of Jesus, we are a part of that system...that kingdom that is not of this world.

In that kingdom we find forgiveness for the times we fall for the seduction of power and violence...in that kingdom we find the strength and courage to operate by a different truth...the truth that is life...the truth that is Jesus.