

The King of the Jews
Matthew 27:11-31

The King of the Jews. That's what the Roman soldiers called Jesus as they spat on Him and beat Him. That's what Pilate called Him when he addressed the crowd, and that's the title that Pilate put on the cross when Jesus was crucified. The Romans saw this title as ironic, as the highest form of mockery.

Why is that? Because they knew that the Roman Emperor Tiberius was really the king of the Jews, in a purely worldly sense. No, Rome technically didn't have a king. Tiberius technically ruled according to the will of the Roman Senate. But the Senate had given him the imperium, which made him commander-in-chief of all the legions of Roman soldiers throughout the empire. And it was on the obedience and loyalty of those soldiers that his power truly rested. Rome was thus, in reality, nothing more than a military dictatorship. And this kind of government extended throughout the empire. For the all-powerful emperor appointed governors over the imperial provinces, such as Israel, and gave them legions of soldiers to keep the peace.

For that is, after all, what the Roman world craved most of all – order and peace. After suffering through terrible civil wars in the years before Julius Caesar took power, the Senate and people of Rome had given up their freedoms, the substance of their republican traditions. They were willing to be ruled by a succession of emperors, who were increasingly tyrannical, to avoid falling back into political chaos. They preferred order to freedom, and so they acquiesced to a government based on force.

And Pilate was perfectly willing to rule in this way. The historian Philo records that Pilate was “naturally inflexible, a blend of self-will and relentlessness.” The historian Josephus also records several instances in which Pilate displayed this sort of character – for example, seizing money from the Temple treasury to pay for an aqueduct to supply water to Jerusalem. Oh, and when a crowd gathered to protest what they considered to be such sacrilegious actions, Pilate was more than willing to send in his soldiers to break up the demonstration – by force.

No, Pilate wasn't just trying to stir things up. In fact, in today's passage we see him trying to buy the goodwill of the crowd by doing them a favor – releasing a prisoner to them once a year. For remember: Pilate and the Roman soldiers were primarily interested in order, not justice. And releasing a violent insurrectionist like Barabbas from prison had nothing to do with justice. And it was equally unjust for Pilate to condemn Jesus to death, when it was obvious to everyone that Jesus was no threat to Roman Imperial rule.

For how could Jesus have posed any danger to Pilate's authority? How could Jesus possibly have led a revolt against the Romans when the whole city of Jerusalem was crying out for His blood? In fact, the meek way that Jesus submitted to Pilate proved that He had no desire to lead such a revolt. After all, He didn't even try to summon the crowd to His aid.

But none of that mattered to Pilate. Remember, he and the rest of the Roman world just wanted peace, peace at any price. So what if they had to garrison soldiers in hostile lands? So what if they had to release a few insurrectionists or crucify a few innocent Jewish rabbis? As long as there was peace, nobody cared about justice, and as long as someone like Emperor Tiberius was king of the Jews, there would be peace.

Well, after 2000 years, has politics really changed all that much? After all, in places like North Korea and Iran and Russia, arbitrary rule by brutal military dictators is still the norm. And let's face it – many of us Americans have been more than willing to turn a blind eye to the way the Communist Chinese treat their workers and oppress their religious minorities, as long as we can buy their manufactured goods at such low prices. And Western Europeans have been just as satisfied to buy a huge amount of oil and natural gas from Russia – that is, until those tanks rolled into Ukraine last month.

So, what are our true priorities? Are we just as happy as those ancient Romans to let governments push people around with lots of rules and regulations and taxes, or even with soldiers and tanks, as long as we aren't the

ones staring at the business end of Caesar's sword? Are we just as willing as they were to sacrifice freedom and justice for peace and prosperity?

But of course the Romans weren't the only ones who thought that force was the answer to their problems. After all, the Jerusalem crowd had given Jesus an enthusiastic welcome as He entered Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. They had hailed Jesus as the One Who was coming in the name of the Lord. They had covered his path with garments and palm branches, proclaiming that He was the Son of David. But that's only because they thought Jesus would be a military ruler like David was, and would lead a rebellion against the Romans – like Barabbas had done.

For the Jerusalem mob was convinced that was the only way to fight back against the Romans. They knew that the Roman legions were propping up Pilate's power, but they also knew that the whole mass of the Jewish people far outnumbered those few soldiers. So, if they could just get a charismatic leader like David – maybe that miracle-working rabbi from Nazareth to lead them.... But if Jesus wasn't willing to play along, another tough guy like Barabbas would have to do. No, the people of Jerusalem wanted the King of the Jews to fight for their freedom, and if Jesus wouldn't do that, they wanted no part of Him.

Well again, what about us? Do we ever fall into the same kind of worldly thinking, trying to fight fire with fire? Where it comes to politics, do we ever find ourselves attacking the other side with the same sort of reckless accusations and contempt for the truth that we think they demonstrate? Isn't it easy to justify any sort of tactics as long as we can throw the bums out and put our own preferred people in charge? We've all heard it, and perhaps we've even said it: "Politics ain't beanbag. If you can't stand the heat, stay out of the kitchen." That's the way the real world works, right?

Or let's take things to a more personal level. What do you do when someone lies about you or stabs you in the back? Do you ever just want to get even, to fight lies with lies, or hate with hate? Deep down, do we ever find ourselves preferring the violence of Pilate and Barabbas to the admonitions of the Prince of Peace?

But there was one more group that rejected Jesus as their king – the chief priests and the elders, the religious leaders of the day. Now, make no mistake. They wanted no part of any sort of violent revolution against the Romans. No, they didn't want to upset the delicate balance they had managed to achieve – holding onto their religious authority over the people while maintaining some semblance of cooperation with their imperial overlords. And so they had absolutely no interest in Jesus rocking the boat by assuming any sort of authority over the people they claimed to lead.

Now, they insisted they were only acting out of concern for theological purity. They maintained that Jesus was worthy of death because He claimed to be the Son of God. But no matter how these religious leaders may have clothed their opposition to Jesus in pious rhetoric, Pilate could see right through them. He was a good enough student of power politics to tell that the real reason they hated Jesus was because they envied Him – His mastery of the Scriptures, His miracles, and, at least up to the point of his arrest, His popularity with the people.

Yes, it was because of their envy that the chief priests and the elders stirred up the crowd to cry out for Jesus to be crucified. For you see, they thought they ought to be the kings of the Jews, just as the priests and prophets had governed God's people in the days of Moses and the Judges. That's really why the religious leaders plotted against Jesus – they simply wanted to eliminate him as a rival.

And when you get right down to it, are we so different? For how often do we cling to our own little areas of influence, our own roles of leadership in our own institutions, instead of focusing on the advancement of God's Kingdom? How willing are we to let other folks take the lead, instead of insisting that everything be done our way? In our workplace, in our home, in our church, do we ever find ourselves thinking that if only we were in charge, everything would be set right?

More seriously, how often do we insist that we know better than Jesus, that we can do a better job of managing our lives than He can? For whenever we embrace injustice in order to preserve our own peace and

prosperity, whenever we bully others in order to get our own way, aren't we really just putting our personal pride ahead of our loyalty to King Jesus? Aren't we walking in the way of the world, the violent, scheming, selfish way of Pilate and Barabbas, of the Jerusalem mob and their religious leaders?

So, what about Jesus? What kind of king is He? At the end of chapter 26, we saw Him admitting to the religious leaders that He is, in fact, the Son of God and that He did, in fact, have all authority in Heaven and on Earth. But as He stood before Pilate and the crowd, He refused to employ any of His tremendous power. Instead, He insisted on putting His own teachings, the teachings He gave us in our responsive reading, into practice.

For even though He could easily have done it, He refused to resist the evil that was all around Him. He refused to push people around, to give as good as He got. He refused to take an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. When the Roman soldiers beat Him in the face, He turned the other cheek, letting them jam a crown of thorns down on His head as well. And this, He said, is the way to be perfect, the way to be children of the Father in Heaven. This, Jesus demonstrated, is the way the King of the Jews rules and reigns.

But why? Having all power in Heaven and on Earth, why did Jesus let Himself be mocked and rejected and abused? Well, what did He tell us to do in the Sermon on the Mount? "Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you."

And as He went through that terrible ordeal at the hands of the Roman soldiers, that's exactly what Jesus was doing. He knew that none of the people surrounding Him believed Him or wanted to obey Him or follow Him. It was obvious to Him that none of them were living by His teachings and that none of them wanted to follow His commands. He knew that everyone around Him was more interested in pride and power than in the life of self-sacrifice to which He was calling them. And He knew that the same things would be all too true of us as well.

And yet He insisted on loving His enemies. By His sacrifice of Himself, He gave us the greatest blessing, taking upon Himself the curse of sin that Adam brought on all of us. And in doing such great good even for those who hate Him, even for proud and pushy sinners like us, Jesus proved beyond a doubt that He truly is the King of the Jews, the Son of the God Who is Love.

So, doesn't He deserve all our allegiance, all our devotion? Shouldn't we follow His example, walking in the way of love? For isn't His kind of unconditional, self-sacrificial, humble love – the kind of love He has for us – truly wonderful?