

Peace Church, 3 June 2018

Sermon on John 18 and 19

Today's **gospel** story tells us a **broken** tale of **power**.

This **tale** is at the very **heart** of the **entire** gospel and provides us **fascinating** detail about the **key** turning points in the **biographies** of **Jesus** and His **disciples**.

Not even **Netflix** couldn't **put** on a better **drama**.

Nor could **Hollywood** produce a more **poignant** story on what **fear** and **power** can **do** to people **through** other **people**.

Our **reading** from John is **taken** from chapter **18**.

Together with chapter **19** this section **tells** us about the **Arrest**, Crucifixion and **Burial**, of **Jesus**.

That is: **Heavy** material.

We have the **archetypal** villains: **power** hungry **high** priests.

We have the **betraying** opportunist: **Judas**.

We have the **passionate** but **fearful** disciple: **Peter**.

We have the **powerbroker** and **imperialist**: Pontius **Pilate**.

We have the **dumbed** down **mob** manipulated by **populists**.

And, **finally**, we have the **quintessential** scapegoat...

killed by a **breathtaking** mix of

worldly power,
religious fervor,
mass psychosis
and **geopolitics**.

I'll try to **untangle** this a **bit**,
and help it come **alive** in all its **vibrant** reality...
a **reality** we know **personally** ourselves,
much **more** than we'd **like**.

So our **reading** starts **just** after a **long** night of **inquisition**
in which the **high** priest Caiaphas,
his **father-in-law** **Annas**
and the **whole** court of Jewish **judges**
had tried to **convict** Jesus of **blasphemy**.

Much of that **time** they had spent
fishing for **grounds** to **execute**
this inconvenient **messenger** of a **truth**
they **simply** could **not** appreciate,
as it was **eroding** their very **claim** to power.

Are you **noticing** a **sense** of **corruption**?

There was never **meant** to be a **fair trial** for Jesus.

The main guy **driving** this scheme is **Caiaphas**,

is **literally** the **son**-in-law of the **former** high priest **Annas** who **still** wields **tremendous** power with the **court**. So **basically**, high priest **father** and high priest **son** are **worried** that their grip on **power** might **falter**, and they're **using** their **power** to **engineer** a **verdict** for **Jesus**. **Blockbuster** material, don't you **think**?

This is where our **text** comes in:

After that **long** night of **inquisitions** at the **court**, the religious **authorities** of **Jerusalem** take Jesus to the **political** chambers of Pontius **Pilate**.

Pilate's **basically** the **colonial** overlord in the **region** and was put in **charge** of running the **show** for the Roman **empire** in **Galilee**.

So that is the **next** level of **power** play going **on**:

Tiberius, the Roman **emperor** at the time, puts **Pilate** into **Galilee** to keep the **locals** in check.

After **all**, the **Romans** had an **empire** to run, and couldn't use **rebellions** at **all**.

Their **style** is to get **involved** in **some** stuff, but not **all** the stuff.

Not **every** local **quarrel** is **relevant** for that Roman **power** play.

They just **want** to make **sure**
they **manage** expectations and **maintain** control.
Trade and **taxes** would have been **relevant**,
rebellions and **protests** would have been **relevant**,
and **everything** that affects **resources** and **security**.
A small **religious** dispute over **theological** details of Jewish **law**
would **not** have been among those issues **relevant**.

The **earlier** charges against **Jesus** concerning **Sabbath** laws,
for **instance**, the **Romans** really **couldn't** care **less** about.
And even **blasphemy** claims would **not** have **stoked** imperial
interest...

so why **bother** at all with this **theological** nonsense?

That was the Roman **power** logic at the **time**:

Disinterested in **cultural** affairs
as long as **political** obedience is **kept**,
and **political** power remains **unchallenged** in the **public**.

So it **does** make **sense** that **Pilate** is **confused** when
these Jewish **authorities** show **up** and demand **execution**...
a **serious** claim reserved **mostly** for **terrorists**
who **do**, in fact, **challenge** Roman power.
So of **course** Pilate is **hesitant**, because
he can **just** not **see** why this **Jesus** dude
should **somehow** be **relevant** to the Roman **power** scheme.

“**Who** even **is** this **guy**?”

Pilate **clearly** doesn't **know** about the **details** of the local **religion**.

And he doesn't **care** much – he's only a **colonizer**, after **all**, with a colonizer's **mindset** and pragmatic **power** interest.

You **would** think he'd at least know about the **politics** of religion.

You would **think** he'd get **educated** and **care** about the **details**, but **nope**: not **Pilate**.

He has **no** clue what's **coming** at him.

So from **his** perspective it must have been **quite** the **sight**:

A bunch of **Jewish** dudes come in **front** of him

and he can **see** they're **upset**.

They **don't** want to come **into** his **house** because they think he's **unclean**.

But for **some** reason they want **him** to do their **dirty** work.

So they're like: **DUUUUDE... KILL THIS GUY**.

And he's like: **worrrrrrr!?** [look confused]

They're like: **YEAAAAH KILL THIS GUY**.

And **he's** like: but **why**?

And **then** comes an **interesting** moment.

The **whole** situation **moves** from **crazed** emotion to **strategic** thinking...

the **high** priest and his **gang** make a move so **brilliant**

that we can **just** not **vindicate** them for their **emotions**...

The **scheme** was not just a **momentous** act of **defense**
against the **threat** and **preacher** Jesus...

it was **strategic** design for his **murder**.

The **move** I mean is their **decision** to push **Caesar** buttons in
Pilate.

The **theological** stuff would have **never** compelled **Pilate** to
action.

But the “**king**” language **could** - if **played** right.

Because “**King**” implied **worldly** power.

It meant **political** influence over **people**

and therefore **was** indeed **relevant** to the Roman **authorities**.

That’s why **Pilate** wants to hear **clearly** from Jesus
what **kind** of **king** he **claimed** to **be**.

It is **actually** quite **comical**...

because **Pilate** asks **Jesus** to accuse **himself**,

because the **charges** from the **accusers** are so **vague**...

So **Pilate** says: “Are you the **king** of the **Jews**?”

And **Jesus** says: “Is that your **own** question? Or did **others** tell
you **about** me?”

Jesus **knows** there are **forces** trying to **paint** him **dangerous** to
Pilate.

But **Jesus** is so **disarming** that even **Pilate** is **charmed** despite the “**king**” word.

Pilate just **cannot** see how this **meek** peaceful **guy** relying **only** on his **word** and does **not** take up **arms** should be **put to death** as a **terrorist** and **rebel**.

“**What** have you done **wrong?**” Pilate **asks**.

“My **kingdom** is **not** from this **world**” Jesus **replies**.

Here, Jesus is **signaling** to Pilate:

Don’t **worry**, I’m **not** a **terrorist**.

It’s a matter of **theology** and **faith**.

I do not **intend** a **coup** on **Rome**.

“My **kingdom** is from **another** place.” he **says**.

“So you **are** a **king**” says **Pilate**.

“**Sure**” Jesus says.

“But I’m **not** laying worldly **claims** against **you**.

For the **purpose** of my **kingdom** is **TRUTH**.”

“Okay... **truth**”

Now Pilate is **really** confused...

“**What** is **truth?**” he **asks**.

I **do** sometimes **wonder** why he **asks** that.

Is it **because** he had **actually** never **heard** this **word** before?

Is it because he's a *Realpolitik* kinda **guy** and

just **cares** far more about **pragmatic** consequence of an **action**

and **not** so **much** for its **abstract** "truth"?

Or is he **stating** it **merely** as a **rhetorical** question

to **mock** the very **concept** of truth?

[ask sarcastically...]

"Ahhhhh... guuuuys... what is truth?"

We don't really **know** the answer,

because **instead** of **waiting** for the **answer**

Pilate just goes **ahead** and **decides**

that this **man** might **well** be **some** kind of **king**

but **certainly** not the **kind** he needs to **worry** about.

So **Pilate** goes out and **dismisses** the case:

"I find **nothing** to **charge** this guy **with**."

But Pilate **doesn't** want this **thing** to blow **up** and **start** a **rebellion**,

so he **goes** into **appeasement** mode.

"It is our **custom** to release one **prisoner** to you at **Passover**.

So **who** do you want?

This king **Jesus** guy

or the **terrorist** Barabbas?"

[Note: Romans referred to **revolutionaries** as “**robbers**”
to **emphasize** their cheap **criminality** and
eliminate the sense of **honor** and **cause** in their **attempts**]

The crowd had gone **mad** and cheers for **Barrabas**.

So Pilate **stages** a bit of **torture** and **humiliation** for Jesus
and tries **again** to let **Jesus** go.

But the crowd **keeps** pushing.

Quote:

“**After** this, Pilate **tried** to let Jesus **go**.

But **some** in the crowd **shouted**:

Anyone who makes himself **king** is against **Caesar**.

If you **let** this man **go**, you **yourself** are no **friend** of **Caesar**.”

WHAM!

...

There it is.

The **Caesar** card.

There is **no** way that **Pilate** can **now** let that **fly**.

Whatever **sympathy** he **had** for **this** guy **Jesus**,

he could **not** let **anyone** **doubt** that he was **loyal** to **Caesar**.

His **own** life and **power** **depended** on it,

So he’s like: “**Whatever**, I give **up**, just **crucify** him

and let’s be **done** with this.”

Reflecting on the **Star Wars movie** “**Han Solo**” the other **day**,
Megan said a **sentence** that **applies** to this **very** moment:

...

“There **comes** a **time** when your **ultimate** loyalty is **tested**.”

When **that** time **came** for the **powerful** leaders of **religion**,
their **ultimate** loyalty was not with **God**, but **themselves**.

When **that** time **came** for the **powerful** leader of **politics**,
his **ultimate** loyalty was not with **God**, but the **empire**.

When **that** time **came** for the **powerful** masses of **people**,
their **ultimate** loyalty was not with **God**, but their **riled** up
pleasures.

So that’s the **third** level of **power** in the tale:

[SHOW NUMBER ONE]

After the **religious** authorities made their play,

[SHOW NUMBER TWO]

Pilate felt forced to make his play,

[SHOW NUMBER THREE]

because the **crowds** had made their play.

It was a **chain** of **events** that Jesus **himself** had **anticipated**.

Knowing human **nature**,

he had **always** considered it **inevitable**.

He had **prayed** to let this cup **pass** him...

but **now** the **chicken** had **come** home to **roost**.

Three **mutually** reinforcing **powers** are at work:

Religious power.

Political power.

And **people** power.

If just **ONE** of those **powers** had **resisted**,

none of **this** would have **happened**.

The **messiah** would have **lived**.

If **religious** authorities had **seized** to **seek** their self-**interest**,

Jesus would have **lived**.

If the **political** authorities had **cared** more for **truth** than **appeasement**,

Jesus would have **lived**.

If the **people** had been **thoughtful** and **less** anxious to **go** along with the **current**,

Jesus... would have **lived**.

Ohhhhh, what an **indictment**.

But now **whoever** says:

Ohhhhh... I would have **fought**.

Ohhh... **I** would **resist**.

Oh... I would stay **strong** and I'd save the **savior**.

GET **REAL**.

GET...

REAL...

How many times have **you** fallen **short** of **convictions**?

How many times have you sought **cheap peace**, where **justice** was **due**?

How many times did **you** end **up** giving **in...**

to **fear...** to **hate...** to the **seductive** powers of **POWER**?

How many times?

I myself **know** deep **down** in my heart,

that I **indeed** have failed...

faaaar too many **times...**

to live **up** to my **call**,

to my **hope**,

to my **deep-down desire** for **truth...**

and my **thirsting** for **justice...**

I **KNOW...** I have **failed...** too **many** times to **count**.

So **let's** not point **fingers**.

For there is **always** a **choice...** another **way...**

Like the **one** we **heard** of from **Isaiah** today:

“If you **remove** the **yoke** from **among** you,
the **pointing** of **fingers**, the **speaking** of **evil**...
if you **offer** your **food** to the **hungry**
and **satisfy** the **needs** of the **afflicted**
then your **light** shall **rise** in the **darkness**.”

So **DO** NOT point **fingers**.

We **all** are **Peter**.

We **all** deny **truth** when **we** are **afraid**.

We **all** are **truly**... **deeply**... **flawed**.

For **yes**, we are **human**.

We're **clearly** not **God**.

While **God** remains perfect, **WE** remain fallen.

While **God's** everlasting, **WE** remain **finite**.

While **God** love's eternal, **WE** are in **need** of **support**.

And **yes**, that is **frustrating**.

It **does** sometimes **feel** like
there **is** no **relief**.

Like the **high** priests
we can **abuse** our **religion**
to **disguise** our **desires**...
and to **use** it as **cover**

for our **frail** human **hearts**.

Despite our **intentions**

we **have** to **confess**

that **all-too often**

we lose **sight** of

God's **great** gift of **life** ...

and **truth**... and **beauty**... and **justice**...

Every **day** we fall **short** AND **STILL**...

And **still**: God **loves** us.

And **still**: God **loves** us.

Hallelujah... what a **wonder**.

Hallelujah, what a **miracle**.

Halleluuuuja, that is **GRACE**.

The **great** power of **grace**.

Grace we all **need**.

In **Grace** lies our **hope**.

And **Grace** is the **way**...

The **only** way...

And the **gift** that **does** save us...

That **truly** saves us

from **all** the **despair** that **we** all will **find**

when we **look** at **ourselves**...

deep **into** our **souls**...

DESPITE all this **frailty**...

Jesus comes in his loneliest hour...

and **says** about **us**:

“Father...

forgive them...

for **they** do not **know**

what they’re **doing.**”

What an advocate!

What an advocate we **have**... in **Jesus**...

“Amazing grace...

how **sweet** the **sound**...

that **saved**...

a **wretch**...

like **me.**”

“How precious did...

that **grace** appear...

the **hour**...

I **first**...

believed.”

You need **Grace**.

I need **Grace**.

Pilate needs **Grace**.

Peter needs **Grace**.

Paul needs **Grace**.

We **all** need **Grace**.

We...

All...

Need...

Grace...

AMEN?

[Amen.]

Can I get an **AAAMEN?**

[Amen.]

Let us **pray...**

Dear **God**...

“You have **searched** us...

and you **know** us...

You’re **acquainted** with **all** of our **ways**...

With your **mercy**...

you **surround** us...”

Your **love** we’ll **never** repay...

Look **down** on us with **grace**...

For **you** know our **hearts**...

You know us **well**...

Much **better** than **we** know **ourselves**.

Help us use **power** in the **way** that you **did**...

Not to **oppress**...

but to lift **up**...

not to **enslave**...

but to **always** set **free**...

For we we’re set **free** by your **love**...

We give **thanks** for your **grace**...

And in **Your** name we **pray**...

Amen.