

MINISTRY BY MAIL
Lutheran Conference of Confessional Fellowship
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Third Sunday in Lent, March 4, 2018

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(Hymns found in The Lutheran Hymnal, CPH, 1941)
Hymns: 149, 18:1-2, 148, 151:1-3, 644.
Lessons: Numbers 21:1-9, Acts 2:22-23, Mark 15:1-5.
Sermon Text: John 18:28-38.
Sermon by Pastor Robert Mehlretter

In the name of Jesus Christ, Dear Fellow Redeemed,

The leaders of the Jews, his own people, wanted Jesus dead. The very ones who should have been leading the Jewish people in their worship of God and looking for the fulfillment of the Scriptures should have been examining Jesus more carefully in the light of the Scriptures. They would have been able to see what Jesus' followers at that time and the Christian church ever since that time has been able to see: Jesus is the promised Savior, the Messiah.

But that was not their goal. Nor was it God's plan. God had foreordained that his only-begotten Son be put to death on a cross. Thus in some prayers we speak of the fact that death came to mankind through a tree – the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil – so the redemption of mankind must come through death on a “tree” – a wooden cross.

After they condemned him in their outward semblance of a trial, they needed approval from the civil government to put him to death. So today we see that

JESUS IS DELIVERED TO PONTIUS PILATE

- 1. The Jews bring harsh accusations against him, but**
- 2. Pilate finds no basis for these charges.**

They “*handed him over*”. This is the figure of speech used even today when a jury or a judge finds someone guilty, and hands him or her over to receive the punishment which is due for the crime committed.

Two evangelists call Pilate, “*the governor*”. As the representative of the Roman government all capital crimes had to go through him. He was the one who had to approve capital punishment. The manner of death is also important. If the Jewish nation had possessed the power of execution, the death would have been by stoning. But Scripture tells us that “*Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: ‘Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree.’*” Gal. 3:13 (NIV) This is explained by words in Deuteronomy: “*If a man guilty of a capital offense is put to death and his body is hung on a tree, you must not leave his body on the tree overnight. Be sure to bury him that same day, because anyone who is hung on a tree is under God's curse. You must not desecrate the land the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance.*” Deut. 21:22-23 (NIV) In fact, Jesus himself made this prophecy: “*Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up.*” John 3:14

As punishment for their sins, God brought the Jews under the domination of the Romans, whose method of execution was crucifixion. At some point in their recent history before Jesus came to earth, the Jews had lost the right to execute people for crimes. At this time, the Romans reserved for themselves the right to inflict the death penalty.

When the Jews later executed Stephen and the apostle James, the brother of John, they acted as a mob, not following the Roman laws. But it was necessary that Jesus must be condemned according to the law. After all, it was God's law that Eve and Adam broke, and God's law must be appeased and fulfilled. Man must die for sin. The Son of Man, Jesus Christ, is the one who would die for sin. And everything connected with that death must conform to God's will and prophecies.

“Early in the morning, all the chief priests and the elders of the people” and “the teachers of the law and the whole Sanhedrin” “came to the decision to put Jesus to death. They bound him, led him away and handed him over to Pilate, the governor.” From the trial in front of the high priest ***“the whole assembly rose and led him off to Pilate.”***

Very early in the morning, Jesus was delivered, bound, to the Roman governor. This would typically involve shackles and tying him up. According to their thinking, Pilate must be made aware that this was a dangerous man they were delivering to him.

Although Pilate actually lived in a different city, he must have been in Jerusalem for the time of a great feast, the annual Jewish Passover. So we don't actually know where ***“the palace of the Roman governor,”*** or the “judgment hall”, the governor's courtroom, also called the Praetorium, was actually located,

“By now it was early morning, and to avoid ceremonial uncleanness the Jews did not enter the palace; they wanted to be able to eat the Passover.” This was early in the morning. The Jews could not delay. The day of preparation for the Sabbath had begun, and their work of executing Jesus must be completed today, before sunset, when the Sabbath Day, a great holy Sabbath, the Passover, was to begin.

Scripture tells us that they could not enter the house of Gentile, which would make them Levitically unclean, but they are free to murder the Righteous One. Do you see how terribly blunted and benumbed by sin the conscience can be? Haven't we even experienced such a thing? At times sin seems so acceptable and even “right” that we, even God's people, are tempted by the devil, and those around us and even our own sinful flesh to ignore the horribleness of any sin, especially in ourselves.

Pilate could not have sentenced Jesus to death based on the Jews' accusations of blasphemy. The Romans did not interfere with the forms of worship in their provinces as long as there was no conflict with their ruling the people. ***“So Pilate came out to them and asked, ‘What charges are you bringing against this man?’ ‘If he were not a criminal,’ they replied, ‘we would not have handed him over to you.’ Pilate said, ‘Take him yourselves and judge him by your own law.’ ‘But we have no right to execute anyone,’ the Jews objected. This happened so that the words Jesus had spoken indicating the kind of death he was going to die would be fulfilled.”***

Since they wouldn't come in to the judgment hall, Pilate went out to them. He asks what they are accusing him of, because he was bound, and had been beaten so he was not a pretty sight. They try to make it obvious that they wouldn't be bringing Jesus to him if he weren't guilty and should be executed. But Pilate needs more than just their say-so to condemn him to death, so he tells them to judge Jesus by their own laws. They complain that they don't have the right to execute anyone. ***“This happened so that the words Jesus had spoken indicating the kind of death he was going to die would be fulfilled.”*** This happened so that Jesus would be executed by crucifixion.

So ***“they began to accuse him, saying, ‘We have found this man subverting our nation. He opposes payment of taxes to Caesar and claims to be Christ, a king.’”*** ***“When he was accused by the chief priests and the elders, he gave no answer. Then Pilate asked him, ‘Don't you hear the testimony they are bringing against you?’ But Jesus made no reply, not even to a single charge--to the great amazement of the governor.”*** ***“The chief priests accused him of many things. So again Pilate asked him, ‘Aren't you going to answer? See how many things they are accusing you of.’ But Jesus still made no reply, and Pilate was amazed.”*** False accusations, false charges. These are designed or crafted to appeal to Pilate, the Roman governor, the representative of the real power in Israel at this time. Pilate tries to impress upon Jesus the seriousness of the accusations they are making. But there was no reply. Again we are reminded of the words of Isaiah: ***“He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; he was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth.”*** Isaiah 53:7 (NIV) And Pilate was amazed at Jesus' behavior.

So they bring another accusation against Jesus. If anyone claimed to be a king, that would obviously be something the Roman governor would be concerned about. This could lead to rebellion against the Roman government and would directly affect him and his political future. If he couldn't control the Jewish people in Palestine, his future in politics would be dead.

“Pilate then went back inside the palace, summoned Jesus and asked him, ‘Are you the king of the Jews?’ ‘Is that your own idea,’ Jesus asked, ‘or did others talk to you about me?’ ‘Am I a Jew?’ Pilate replied. ‘It was your people and your chief priests who handed you over to me. What is it you have done?’ Jesus said, ‘My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jews. But now my kingdom is from another place.’ ‘You are a king, then!’ said Pilate. Jesus answered, ‘You are right in saying I am a king. In fact, for this reason I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me.’”

If Jesus claimed to be a king, Pilate could have some major problems. He was the governor, representing the Roman emperor in Palestine. There were also several figurehead rulers in the sons of King Herod the Great, the king at the time of Jesus’ birth, all of whom in a sense helped the Romans rule. It was one of these, Herod called the tetrarch of Galilee to whom Pilate later sent Jesus.

Now if Jesus were another pretender trying to be a king, there was a real risk of revolt among the followers of this Jesus. Pilate, at first, had to take this threat seriously. Jesus asks where Pilate got the idea that he was a king. At this moment, he certainly didn’t look and behave like a king. He was bound and had been beaten, he had no visible army, and he was probably not dressed at all like a king should have been, even if he had been dressed like a king when he had been taken captive. In fact, when he was later taken to Herod, his enemies dressed him in a fancy robe and mocked him as a king. So Jesus didn’t look very ‘kingly’. Pilate tells Jesus that he didn’t come to the conclusion that Jesus was a king, but the Jews had brought him to Pilate claiming Jesus was a threat to the state, even claiming he was a king.

So Pilate asks ***“What is it you have done?”*** Then Jesus explains about his kingdom. You know about Jesus’ kingdom. It is a kingdom of God’s grace ruling in the hearts of all believers on earth. It is also a kingdom of eternal happiness and glory in heaven after he comes to judge the living and the dead to take all believers to be with him in heaven. But right now in Jesus’ life on earth, he says his kingdom is from another place. ***“‘You are a king, then!’ said Pilate. Jesus answered, ‘You are right in saying I am a king. In fact, for this reason I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me.’”*** To rule in the hearts of men with his grace is why Jesus came to earth. He came to earth to save mankind, and everyone who believes this will be saved eternally.

When Jesus says he ***“came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me”*** Pilate asks the famous question: ***“What is truth?”*** Was Pilate asking sarcastically? Was Pilate mocking the Jews? Or was he wearily looking to find some truth in his own life and existence? We don’t know what he was actually thinking. But these verses remind us that Jesus is ***“the way and the truth and the life.”*** John 14:6 (NIV)

“Then Pilate announced to the chief priests and the crowd, ‘I find no basis for a charge against this man.’ But they insisted, ‘He stirs up the people all over Judea by his teaching. He started in Galilee and has come all the way here.’” Pilate declares that as a judge he has determined that there is no basis for the charges. A good, righteous judge would have dismissed the charges then and there and freed Jesus. But there is a large crowd, and they include influential leaders among the Jews, who had power to guide, direct, lead, the Jews and tell them or encourage them how to behave toward the civil powers. Pilate, as a politician, no doubt realized this and wanted to keep peace in his province. He wants to free Jesus. But he knows they have power to incite the crowd, and this is obvious from the things that happen. ***“With this he went out again to the Jews and said, ‘I find no basis for a charge against him. But it is your custom for me to release to you one prisoner at the time of the Passover. Do you want me to release ‘the king of the Jews?’”*** Pilate sees a glimmer of hope. He wants to exchange Jesus for a guilty, terrible criminal, Barabbas.

In addition, if this man is a Galilean, then he should send him to King Herod! But it doesn’t work out that way. Pilate doesn’t get off the hook. Herod will send him back to Pilate.

So in this trial before Pilate, Jesus is falsely accused, treated unfairly, and you know what the result will be. He will be crucified. Crucified for our sins. Crucified for you. Crucified for me. Crucified for all mankind. But still, we find great comfort in this, that Jesus died for me. Amen.