

John 19:1-16 Who is king?

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So as you know, a couple of weeks back,  
I went up to teach the rural lay elders the basics of preaching.  
One of the skills we were teaching  
is to find the main thing in the passage.  
And there are a variety of ways you can try to find that main thing.  
One of the ways is to look for a repeated word.  
And the repeated word is the clue  
that gives away the main thing in today's passage.  
Five times we hear the word 'king'.  
And it's not just the word king.  
There's the crown of thorns and the purple robe.  
These are signs of a king.  
And as you read the passage with the idea of kings in your mind,  
you quickly discover that there are two potential kings in this passage.  
Pilate is offering up to the Jews the option of Jesus as their king.  
The Jews are saying to Pilate,  
"No. Caesar is our king."  
So that gives us the title of the sermon.  
Who is king?  
Who is king?  
Is it Caesar or is it Jesus?

Well I guess the closest we have to a king in Australia  
is the Prime Minister.  
And we are being asked that question at the moment.  
Who will be Prime Minister?  
Will it be Scomo? Or will it be Albanese?  
Metaphorically, who will be king?  
And the thing about our national contests for who will be king  
is that they are full of politics.  
They will promise us the world before the election,  
but will they actually deliver what they promise after the election?

Do they even have the power  
to deliver what they promise after the election?

The good old, if you vote for me,  
I'm going to stop global warming and get rid of the pandemic  
election promises.

Really. OK. You must be a pretty powerful politician then.  
Politics is actually all about power.

Who's got power.

Who hasn't got power.

Who wants power.

And with a great desire for power comes a special sort of nastiness.  
There are lots of ways you can be nasty to someone.

But when there is politics in the air  
a special kind of nastiness comes to the fore.

It's called mocking.

Mocking is when a powerful person pokes fun at a powerless person.

Or a person who thinks they are powerful  
pokes fun at a person who they think is weak.

It's pathetic behaviour really.

Because if you need to poke fun at the weak  
to reassure yourself of how powerful you are,  
you can't actually be that secure about your power.

Anyway, just like in our political system,  
there's a power struggle going on in our reading today.  
Jesus is actually not participating in the power struggle.  
The power struggle is between Pilate and the Jewish leaders.  
But when there's a power struggle it's no surprise to find mocking.  
So let's explore the politics of Good Friday.

19:1 "The Pilate took Jesus and had him flogged."

You could wonder why Pilate did this.

In the passage right beforehand,

he had said to the Jews 18:38,

"I find no basis for a charge against him."

It seems rather extra ordinary conduct of a justice system  
that a person gets flogged  
when there is no basis for a charge against them.

But you have to understand,  
this isn't really a justice system.

This is politics.

Pilate's boss is Caesar.

Does Caesar care

if justice is administered with absolute fairness in Israel?

No. Not a bit.

The Jews are not even Roman citizens.

He really doesn't care if they get justice.

He cares that his conquered province stays relatively calm  
so that he doesn't have to commit more troops to maintain peace.

That was Pilate's brief.

Keep this rabble vaguely calm and you will have served Caesar well.

Pilate has some ideas of justice in his own mind.

He'd like to set a peaceful non threatening fellow like Jesus free.

But his personal ideas of justice

will always take a back seat to doing his job.

And his job is to keep the Jews quiet.

A job he's not succeeding in very well.

So he has Jesus flogged.

Not because he thinks Jesus deserves it.

But because he thinks if he flogs Jesus,  
then the crowd might calm down.

He might be able to set Jesus free.

Which he would like to do because he views himself as a civilised man.

His soldiers on the other had are not civilised men.

They've heard the charge against Jesus,  
that he claimed to be the King of the Jews.

And they decide to mock him.

It's powerful people picking on the weak.

They dress him up in a crown of thorns and a purple robe.

Signs of kingship.  
Then they bow before him,  
"Hail king of the Jews!"  
And slap his face.  
Maybe there's a new job for Will Smith.  
But I'm sure John records this for us  
not just because he wants us to identify  
with the indignities that Jesus faced.  
He wants us to see these soldiers speaking better than they know.  
Just like Caiaphas said one man should die for the people.  
The soldiers call Jesus the King of the Jews.  
John says, despite appearances,  
Yes he is.  
Jesus is King.

So Jesus has been brutalised.  
No doubt he has blood trickling down his face from the crown of thorns.  
Blood running down his back from the flogging.  
And Pilate brings him out to crowd.  
"Here is the man!"  
Look at him,  
surely this sorry character evokes some sympathy from you.  
He's been well chastised.  
I can't find any reason to charge him.  
How about we let him go now?  
But the Jewish leaders were not to be placated.  
And they shouted, "Crucify! Crucify!"

Well Pilate is a bit annoyed with them now.  
Not because of their callous lust for blood.  
But because they aren't respecting his role as governor.  
He's there to decide the guilty and the innocent on capital charges.  
He's told them plainly  
that he thinks there is no reason to execute this guy.  
They aren't listening to him.

They aren't respecting his authority.  
So he gives them a gentle reminder of who is boss.  
19:6 "You take him and crucify him.  
As for me, I find no basis for a charge against him."  
It was not a genuine offer.  
He was mocking them gently.  
The Jewish leaders had no legal right to execute anyone.  
If they had, they would fall foul of Roman law.  
Pilate may well decide to execute them.  
"You take him and crucify him."  
Oh, no you can't can you?  
You have to come to me.  
So perhaps you'd better remember who's in charge round here.  
You bring him to me for trial.  
Maybe you should accept my judgement.

Well the Jewish leaders are not going to accept Pilate's judgement.  
They want Jesus dead.  
And they zero in on Pilate's weak spot.  
He may well be the only person who can order an execution.  
But they can get him to do what they want him to do.  
Because at the end of the day, he's there to keep the province quiet.  
All they have to do is threaten a riot,  
and he will give in.  
The Jewish leaders insisted,  
"We have a law, and according to that law he must die,  
because he claimed to be the Son of God."  
For them, this is a theological crime.  
It's blasphemy.  
But for Pilate, this is something different.  
Who does he know who claims to be the Son of God?  
His boss Caesar back in Rome.  
Caesar called himself the Son of God.  
This charge against Jesus is potentially sedition.

So Pilate heads back to question Jesus further.  
But he doesn't get very far.  
Jesus doesn't want to answer him.  
Pilate can't believe it.  
Surely Jesus has picked up that Pilate wants to set him free.  
Surely Jesus has picked up that the Jewish leaders want him dead.  
Why doesn't this stubborn Jew give him an answer?  
Well of course Pilate is presuming that Jesus would like to be set free.  
But actually Jesus is determined to do the will of his Father.  
He is determined to go to the cross.  
But he eventually gives Pilate some answer.  
"You would have no power over me  
if it were not given to you from above.  
Therefore the one who handed me over to you is guilty of a greater sin."  
There's a lot in Jesus words.  
They tell us that Jesus believes that Pilate does have genuine authority,  
not just from Caesar but also from God.  
When we look at our secular rulers,  
we have to conclude that they too have authority from God.  
That is true whether we like the way they exercise authority or not.  
Jesus has just been flogged by Pilate's lackeys.  
But he still acknowledges Pilate's God given authority.  
That means we need to acknowledge  
the God given nature of the authorities we come under.  
You might not like whoever wins the election.  
But they will exercise God given authority in Australia.  
It also means that when we exercise some authority,  
we need to remember that our authority has come from God,  
and it ultimately belongs to God,  
so we don't have authority to do what we want to,  
we have authority to determine as best we can what God wants us to do,  
and do that.

Jesus is also saying that Caiaphas is guilty of a greater sin than Pilate.  
Caiaphas handed Jesus over to Pilate.

Caiaphas was being malicious  
trying to have an innocent man put to death.  
Pilate is merely being negligent in handling his God given authority.  
Jesus says it's worse to be malicious than negligent.

Well something about Jesus' response convinced Pilate  
that this was no wannabe revolutionary  
come to set himself up as rival to Caesar.  
This was some kind of Jewish holy man.  
And Pilate wanted to set Jesus free.

But the Jewish leaders kept at it.  
They knew where Pilate's weakness was.  
He couldn't be seen to be disloyal to Caesar.  
"Anyone who claims to be king opposes Caesar."  
And so Pilate decides that he has to give in to their demands.  
He's not happy about it.  
19:14 "Here is your king," he says to the Jews.  
He knows very well the Jews don't regard Jesus as a king.  
But Pilate thinks they are a rabble that is beneath contempt.  
And that they would be aptly ruled over  
by a sorry brutalised figure like Jesus.  
For Pilate, greatness is a matter of power.  
And there's no one much more powerless  
than a man wearing a crown of thorns  
who's been flogged to within an inch of his life.  
What a weak group you would have to be, to be ruled over by him!  
Pilate is mocking them.  
They take up their, "Crucify him" chant  
and he taunts them again.  
"Shall I crucify your king?"  
The Jews answer, "We have no king but Caesar."  
Well it's a damning thing for a religious leader to say.  
It means that they are acknowledging that God is not their king.

I'm sure as we read this,  
John wants us to see Pilate's words as speaking better than he knew.  
He was mocking.  
But he was accidentally speaking the truth.  
When he presented Jesus to them,  
he was presenting them with their king.  
He was handing over to them their king to be crucified.

The whole passage is really presenting to us the question,  
"Who is king?"

Is the great Caesar king?

Well in this passage,

his representative, his governor,

is not able to get the outcome he wanted.

Caesar is not even able to succeed at a basic task of kingship,  
dispensing justice to his subjects.

Caesar's courts are not about justice.

They are simply a political exercise in crowd control.

What would we think about our own court system

if a rabble outside chanting and waving placards

was able to influence the ruling made by the judge?

Justice is meant to look only at the evidence.

Caesar's court in the end ignored the evidence.

It looked only at the clamouring of the crowd.

But is Jesus king?

Jesus is actually able to get the outcome he wanted in this passage.

He was determined to go to the cross,

and to the cross he went.

But he is also able to achieve justice.

God's justice demands that sin be punished.

As God's subjects, we sit under his justice.

On the cross, Jesus meets the just requirements of the Father.

As our king, he makes sure justice is done.

But as our redeemer, he pays the price himself.

Pilate was given power over Jesus from above.  
But only for one reason.  
Because the Father wanted us to have the forgiveness of sins.

Can you recognise your king  
in the crown of thorns and with the purple robe?  
When we look at that,  
we don't want to see something pathetic like Pilate did.  
An object of scorn to hold up to the Jewish leaders  
as a ridiculous excuse for a king.  
We want to see loving self sacrifice.  
And when we see loving self sacrifice,  
we want to say,  
"Yes. That's my king."  
And when you do that,  
you will be mocked.  
Really? You follow a king like that?  
Yes. My king wears a crown of thorn.  
He had the flesh torn from his back.  
He was nailed to a cross.  
That's my king.  
He went there so I wouldn't have to.