

PALM/PASSION SUNDAY MEDITATION ONE

Matthew 27:11-26 (Jesus stands before Pilate)

King Herod, supporters of Caesar, those who wanted to maintain order and security in the Roman Empire, and the rulers of the Temple had different self-interests; but they all agreed about one thing, at least.

Jesus must die.

Caught in the middle of their scheming and plotting to make Jesus' death happen was a political official who no doubt would have rather been somewhere else. His name was Pontius Pilate.

Pilate's past record of service to Rome had been tainted by some serious errors in judgment. Now he had been appointed to govern an undesirable backwater region of the Empire known as Palestine. This assignment would probably be his last opportunity to get back into the good graces of the Emperor. The last thing Pilate needed in his struggling career was to get caught up in a local dispute involving a charismatic Jewish prophet and pompous religious leaders.

With his experience in these kinds of quarrels he could see right away that, in all probability, the man was innocent of the charges brought against him. But that didn't seem to matter to the angry crowd. The mob strongly insisted that Jesus was a threat to the Roman Empire. "He claims to be a king!" they screamed at him. "You need to do the right thing for Caesar!" As if they gave a care about the Emperor. Pilate laughed contemptuously when they had insisted, "We have no king but Caesar!" Did they actually think they could conceal their hypocrisy and insincerity from him? They were blatantly lying to his face in their attempt to do away with the man. Is this how their God of love expected them to behave toward one of their own?

No, the truth was that Jesus was clearly innocent. The truth was that the crowd was demanding the release of a murderer named Barabbas, and wanted Jesus to take his place on a cross. The truth was that the crowd was very close to pushing Pilate over the brink and destroying his already endangered career.

There is a huge difference between being a political leader and being a political opportunist, and Pontius Pilate was clearly the latter. His self-serving nature and

lack of morality made him indifferent to doing the right thing and seeking justice unless there was something beneficial in it for him. Honor and personal integrity weren't even on his radar screen. When it came to governance, Pilate's way of thinking was, whatever works, whatever is most profitable, whatever would benefit him and his political career the most is what he would choose to do.

Jesus once said it would be better to enter the kingdom with just one eye or one hand than to possess both eyes or hands and miss entering it altogether. I suspect it's also true that it would have been better for Pontius Pilate to enter the kingdom with a lesser profit, a rejection for an assignment to a more notable area of the Empire, or a denied promotion from Caesar than to have all those things and miss entering it.

Playing it safe, doing the thing that's most convenient and advantageous to yourself, is what usually works in this life. But often the safe, convenient and advantageous thing is also the dirtiest. Pontius Pilate knew and accepted that being the governor of Palestine was a dirty business that sometimes required him to make dirty decisions, and this was one of those times. So he called for a basin of water and washed his hands of the matter; but he could never wash away the dirt of his immorally convenient decision. Pilate passed judgement on Jesus: he would allow him to be wrongly crucified. Little did he know that the man he had judged would one day come again to judge the living and the dead.

PALM/PASSION SUNDAY MEDITATION TWO

Matthew 27:27-31 (Jesus is flogged and crowned with thorns)

What a pitiful sight!

There he stood, a young man with savage wounds all over his body from the flogging he had received, a scarlet robe thrown over his shoulders, his hands bound together, and blood running down his face from a cruel thorn of crowns that had been pressed down on his head. The Roman soldiers thought his torture was funny and entertaining. "Hail, King of the Jews!" they shouted, and laughed hysterically. But the soldiers weren't just mocking Jesus and laughing in his face; they were also mocking and laughing in the face of the Empire's proud claims about Roman justice.

This horrific scene of Jesus' scourging contained a hidden truth: that they were about to execute a king. The Roman troops had dropped a scarlet robe over Jesus' shoulders—scarlet, the color of royalty. And their mocking insult, "Hail, king of the Jews!" was directed at the One whose future kingdom and rule would never end.

The soldiers had placed a crown of thorns on Jesus' head, unaware of the strange paradox that it was through this servant-king who was a victim of their violence that God had chosen to make healing and peace available to all people. King Jesus had taken upon himself the sin, the guilt, and the death sentence of the whole human race. The One who had never sinned became sin for the world so that it might not perish, but might have eternal life.

The reed they put in Jesus' hand was a cynical gesture. Great kings don't rule with reeds; they rule with swords. The power to threaten, intimidate and impose death on the people he rules over is what many kings use to rule their kingdoms. But Jesus would rule with a reed, the symbol of life, because he had come so that we might have life, and have it more abundantly.

Finally, Jesus' throne would be a cross. And from that throne of suffering he will rule against anything that can separate us from God's love. The powers of evil, darkness and death were doomed; they would ultimately be destroyed by this King of Kings whom evil, darkness and death were trying so desperately to destroy.

One of the greatest mysteries of Jesus' passion is how, without their knowledge, grown men behaving with such self-indulgent stupidity and unthinkable cruelty were actually proclaiming the glorious truth of Christ the Lord, the King of heaven who was crucified, died and was buried, and on the third day rose again for the forgiveness of sins and everlasting life that was available to all people—even his executioners.

PALM/PASSION SUNDAY MEDITATION THREE

Luke 23:26-43 (Jesus is crucified)

They were the very first words Jesus spoke from the cross.

“Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.”

“Father, forgive them . . .” That is the message of the Gospel.

“Father, forgive them . . .” That is the heart and the purpose of this horrifying event,
Jesus’ passion.

“Father, forgive them . . .” is God speaking the promise of divine grace, for which this tragic scene is the price tag.

The Apostle Paul claimed that the preaching of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but it is the power of God to those who are being saved. The cross is central to our faith, but to us it’s a horrifying and repulsive sign. So we try to avoid it. First, we take Jesus’ body off the cross so it won’t repel or offend us. Then we turn it into a pretty piece of jewelry. We will do almost anything to avoid seeing and accepting the cross for what it really is: an instrument of execution.

God so loved the world, God so loved you, that God gave us God’s only Son to wash away our guilt and overrule the sentence of death all human beings live under, and replace it with the divine gifts of redemption, salvation, and eternal life.

No, Jesus’ crucifixion is ugly, horrific and revolting. But strangely enough, it’s also overwhelmingly beautiful. It’s not beautiful because of its pain and suffering, but because in it one can glimpse how beautiful the infinite love of God in Christ Jesus is—a love so great, it triumphed over sin and death. And that triumph has made us all beneficiaries of divine grace, forgiveness and life everlasting.

Jesus is crucified. And Jesus asks God on our behalf, “Father, forgive them.”

And through sign of the cross he died on, the light of God's divine love and mercy shines brightly.

PALM/PASSION SUNDAY MEDITATION FOUR

John 19:23-37 (Jesus dies)

Everyone who had wanted Jesus out of the way thought they had finally succeeded. The spear that had pierced his side made it clear to the witnesses on Golgotha that he was now dead; and that made some individuals extremely happy.

Having completed the gruesome task, we can imagine the captain of the Roman soldiers saying, "Okay, men, it is finished. We're done here. Time to go back to the barracks."

A lot of other people who saw Jesus die on the cross had said, "It is finished," as well. Certainly the chief priests congratulated themselves for successfully stopping a religious movement they believed to be dangerous. "It is finished," they said.

Pontius Pilate saw in Jesus' death an end to the threat of rioting and Jewish revolt against him, and hoped he would now be looked at favorably by the Emperor for having served him and Rome so well in the face of adversity. "It is finished," he said.

For those who had followed Jesus, loved him and had believed him to be the promised Messiah, his death crushed their hopes for a new day of promise. "We were wrong. It is finished," they said among themselves as they wandered away from *the Place of the Skull* and went home.

Yes, a lot of people had said, "It is finished" when Jesus died on the cross; but they were wrong. What they thought was over and done with had actually only just begun. Because Jesus himself said, "It is finished." And those words referred, not to something that was destroyed, but to something that had been accomplished.

Everything necessary to keep the world from perishing was now completed, finished by Jesus.

All the self-destructive guilt and the sense of fear and powerlessness before evil, it is finished!

All the frustration about our inability to attain perfection, it is finished!

All the desperate efforts to attain salvation by our human efforts, it is finished!

All of our grief over the loss of loved ones who have died, it is finished!

All of our fear of sin, the grave and Satan and their ability to destroy us, it is finished!

And after completing the redemptive, saving work of his Heavenly Father, Jesus prayed in trust as he breathed his final breath on the cross, "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit."

That is why we can approach our own deaths in trust and loving confidence and say, as well, "Father, my mortal life here on earth is coming to an end. My life is finished, but thanks to Christ, so is the work of salvation. Therefore, with faith and hope, into your hands I commend my spirit."