

## Reflections for Good Friday from John 19

### Part 1: Jesus Before Pilate<sup>1</sup>

There are so many aspects to Good Friday that we have to be selective this morning; moreover, each Gospel writer stresses different things. This year we consider John's account, which also contains *his* interpretation of events. He mentions Judas' betrayal of Jesus, followed by Peter's use of a sword to chop off an ear of Malchus, the high priest's slave. Jesus rebukes Peter – violence is *not* the Jesus-way. After Jesus' arrest, he was first questioned by Annas, and then by the high priest, Caiaphas, who had earlier said that "it was better that one man die for the people..."<sup>2</sup> It was during this period that Peter denied Jesus three times. After Caiaphas, Jesus was taken to Pontius Pilate and we are familiar with that scene because, among other things, Pilate asks Jesus: "What is truth?"<sup>3</sup> Pilate *couldn't* find a reason to justify the death of Jesus. But the religious leaders were not satisfied. Pilate was in a bind and under pressure, what was he to do? We read in John 19 that:

*<sup>1</sup> Pilate took Jesus and had him flogged severely. <sup>2</sup> The soldiers braided a crown of thorns and put it on his head, and they clothed him in a purple robe. <sup>3</sup> They came up to him again and again and said, "Hail, king of the Jews!" And they struck him repeatedly in the face.*

*<sup>4</sup> Again Pilate went out and said to the Jewish leaders, "Look, I am bringing him out to you, so that you may know that I find no reason for an accusation against him." <sup>5</sup> So Jesus came outside, wearing the crown of thorns and the purple robe. Pilate said to them, "Look, here is the man!"*

John places this whipping and mocking by the soldiers in the *middle* of the trial, *not* as part of the sentence at the conclusion of the trial, as in the case of Mark and Matthew.<sup>4</sup> The chief priests *don't* witness this act as they are *outside* of Pilate's residence, because – ironically - they want to remain ritually pure for Passover. John therefore seems to be telling this detail for the benefit of his readers. His focus seems to be on the dressing of Jesus in royal purple and the placing of a crown of thorns upon his head. It's a cynical enthronement of Jesus as "King of the Jews" by the soldiers. Jesus *continues* to wear the purple and the crown when he is returned to his trial.<sup>5</sup> Pilate presents King Jesus to the chief priests and says: "Look, here is the man!"<sup>6</sup> Jesus' kingship becomes, then, a visible and tangible part of the proceedings in John's skillful retelling. What is the reaction of the religious leaders? John writes:

*<sup>6</sup> When the chief priests and their officers saw him, they shouted out, "Crucify him! Crucify him!" Pilate said, "You take him and crucify him! Certainly I find no reason for an accusation against him!" <sup>7</sup> The Jewish leaders replied, "We have a law, and according to our law he ought to die, because he claimed to be the Son of God!" <sup>8</sup> When Pilate heard what they said, he was more afraid than ever<sup>9</sup> and he went*

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<sup>1</sup> See John 18-19.

<sup>2</sup> John 18:14; 11:50.

<sup>3</sup> John 18:38a.

<sup>4</sup> Mark 15:15b-20; Matt 27:26b-31. (Flogging was normally a preliminary to crucifixion.)

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Matt 27:31; Mark 15:20.

<sup>6</sup> The meaning is unclear; does it echo Caiaphas' earlier remark (see [2]) in John's retelling?

back into the governor's residence and said to Jesus, "Where do you come from?" But Jesus gave him no answer.

In John's account, it's *only* the religious leaders who are shouting, "Crucify him," *not* the crowds.<sup>7</sup> They want him condemned by a Roman court. For the *third* time Pilate says, "I can't find a reason for the accusation against him!"<sup>8</sup> And then he taunts the chief priests saying, "You take him and crucify him," knowing full well that they don't have the jurisdiction to sentence a crucifixion, that's a Roman prerogative and what power the chief priests have has been granted by Rome himself. The political gamesmanship jumps up a level when they reply: "According to our law, he ought to die because he claimed to be the Son of God!" They are referring to the Old Testament law concerning blasphemy,<sup>9</sup> which demands death by stoning. They are reminding Pilate that his role as governor requires him to keep local customs, especially if he wants to keep the peace. If Pilate puts a foot wrong here, there could be *political* ramifications that might even threaten his own appointment. No wonder he is afraid! Pilate goes back to Jesus and asks, "Where do you come from?" But Jesus does not reply.

That's the critical question, and the obvious response is "*from God.*" John has already told *his reader* this information *six* times in his Gospel,<sup>10</sup> and Jesus said as much to Pilate earlier, so why repeat it.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, John has already presented *three* times<sup>12</sup> the ignorance of the religious leaders as to *where* Jesus is truly from, and this aligns Pilate's lack of knowledge with theirs. With Jesus' silence, that question remains lingering in the air. *Where does Jesus come from? Is he from God, as John claims? How will we answer today?*

Then something apparently happens in the mind of Pilate. If before he was toying with the chief priests concerning releasing Jesus, now John says Pilate "*tried* to release him" and the religious leaders knew that was his intention. They shouted: "If you release this man, you're *not loyal* to Caesar! Everyone who claims to be a king *opposes* Caesar!" Pilate has a serious dilemma. He knows Jesus is innocent of the charge against him. Yet, if he lets Jesus go, Pilate himself could be accused of being a traitor to Rome.

John writes that Pilate brought Jesus outside and then sat down on the judgment seat to pass sentence. Jesus was still dressed in purple and wearing a crown of thorns. Pilate said to the Jewish leaders, perhaps mockingly, "*Look, here is your king!*" Ironically, he was speaking truth.<sup>13</sup> They shouted: Crucify him!" Pilate asked, "Shall I crucify your king?" The high priests replied, "We have no king except Caesar!"

That response is chilling and damning.<sup>14</sup> In wanting to condemn Jesus they renounce everything that gives them their distinctive identity as God's people. *The chief priests deny God.* The trial drama is now over. Political expediency wins the day and Pilate handed Jesus over to be crucified.

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. Matt 27:22-23; Mark 15:13-14; Luke 23: 18, 21, 23.

<sup>8</sup> John 18:38b; 19:4b, 6b.

<sup>9</sup> See Lev 24:13-16, cf. John 5:18; 8:59; 10:31, 33. This is ironic given 18:31.

<sup>10</sup> See John 1:1-3, 18; 3:34; 6:33; 7:29; 16:27-28. (cf. 18:36-37).

<sup>11</sup> See John 18:36-37.

<sup>12</sup> See John 7:27-28; 8:14; 9:29.

<sup>13</sup> Particularly in light of Pilate's earlier question, "What is truth?" (John 18:38).

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Judg 8:23; 1 Sam 8:7; Isa 26:13.

## Hymn 233: Where You There (v1-4)

### Part 2: The Crucifixion and Death of Jesus

John continues:

*So they took Jesus,<sup>17</sup> and carrying his own cross he went out to the place called “The Place of the Skull” (called in Aramaic, Golgotha).<sup>18</sup> There they crucified him along with two others, one on each side, with Jesus in the middle.<sup>19</sup> Pilate also had a notice written and fastened to the cross, which read: “Jesus the Nazarene, the king of the Jews.”<sup>20</sup> Thus many of the Jewish residents of Jerusalem read this notice, because the place where Jesus was crucified was near the city, and the notice was written in Aramaic, Latin, and Greek.<sup>21</sup> Then the chief priests of the Jews said to Pilate, “Do not write, ‘The king of the Jews,’ but rather, ‘This man said, I am king of the Jews.’”<sup>22</sup> Pilate answered, “What I have written, I have written.”*

The soldiers take charge of the crucifixion and Jesus is taken to the place of execution, *Golgotha*, which was located just outside of the city. There is no mention of Simon of Cyrene helping Jesus carry the cross in John’s account,<sup>15</sup> Jesus carries his burden *by himself*. No details are mentioned of the actual moment when Jesus is nailed to the cross: just saying that ‘Jesus was crucified’ is enough, the readers knew what that entailed.

But John makes a big deal about the sign above Jesus’ head which said, “*Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews.*” On a legal level, it stands as the formal political charge against Jesus of treason. On a theological level, however, this inscription brings further attention to John’s theme of the kingship of Jesus within his Gospel. Kingship was a central discussion of Jesus before Pilate, who then had Jesus dressed in purple and paraded mockingly as a king. Jesus is *lifted up* on a cross, *enthroned* as it were, with a universally understood sign stating his kingship written above his head in three languages. The chief priests are annoyed because they had tried to appease Rome by denouncing Jesus as a *political* criminal and by renouncing loyalty to any governance but Caesar’s. Yet, in the final analysis, they have achieved nothing because Pilate insists that Jesus will be crucified as *their* king. Ironically the pretensions of power by both the Jewish leaders and Pilate are overshadowed by Jesus’ enthronement on the cross because the crucified Jesus really is the King.

In John 13:1, we read: “*Now before the festival of the Passover, Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.*” John’s subsequent depiction of Jesus’ arrest, trial, and exaltation on the cross is one that is filled with dignity, as if Jesus himself is controlling events - for he knows that “his hour has come.” After the soldiers had gambled for his tunic and he had said his goodbyes to his mother, Mary, John reports:

*<sup>28</sup> Jesus, realizing that by this time everything was completed, said (in order to fulfill the scripture), “I am thirsty!”<sup>29</sup> A jar full of sour wine was there, so they put a sponge soaked in sour wine on a branch of*

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<sup>15</sup> See Matthew 27: 32; Mark 15: 21; Luke 23: 26. It's well documented in Roman literature that the criminal carried his own cross to his execution.

*hyssop and lifted it to his mouth. <sup>30</sup> When he had received the sour wine, Jesus said, "It is finished!" Then he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.*

The phrase, "Jesus realized that everything was completed," implies he faced his death knowing that he has finished the work God has given him, namely, to reveal God and his love to the world. Jesus then says, "I am thirsty" and they put a sponge soaked in sour wine and lifted it up on a stick to his mouth. All the Gospels make the connection to Psalm 69:21, which says as much. But let's not forget that at Jesus' arrest, he says to Peter: "Put away your sword! Do you imagine I'm *not* going to drink the cup my father has given me?"<sup>16</sup> Jesus' thirst and his drinking of the bitter vinegar symbolizes willingness to embrace his death. Ironically Jesus' public ministry begins with the good wine of Cana and ends with sour wine on the cross.

John tells us that Jesus then said, "It is finished," and "he bowed his head and gave up his spirit."<sup>17</sup> The Greek tense of the verb "finished" here is one signifying a past action but whose effects continue in the present. Yes . . . right up to today, even now. Jesus has been faithful to the divine mission, and it has in this moment been achieved.<sup>18</sup> For John, this is *not* a moment of defeat or despair. Rather, this is an expression of the extent of Jesus' love for his own<sup>19</sup> and his love for God.<sup>20</sup> Earlier, John says that chief priests "hand over" Jesus to Pilate<sup>21</sup> who, at the end of the trial, "hands over" Jesus to be crucified.<sup>22</sup> In the end, Jesus himself freely "hands over" this spirit – his very life, and we are reminded of his earlier words: "No one takes my life from me, but I lay it down of my own accord."<sup>23</sup>

In conclusion, let's recall what Jesus said to some curious Greek pilgrims just a few days earlier.

*Jesus said, "The time has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. <sup>24</sup> I tell you the solemn truth, unless a kernel of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains by itself alone. But if it dies, it produces much grain. . . <sup>32</sup> And when I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw all people to myself. <sup>24</sup>*

In using this language of being "lifted up" or being "glorified," John explicitly links it to Christ's death rather than his resurrection.<sup>25</sup> But Jesus also hints that his death will not be the end. The death of one seed will one day – in God's good time - produce a harvest throughout the whole world. While the events of Good Friday have reached their climax, the story is far from over.

Amen. Let us pray.

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<sup>16</sup> John 18:11, NTE.

<sup>17</sup> John 19:30.

<sup>18</sup> For John, this is *not* a moment of defeat or despair; his Gospel contains *no* account of Jesus' agony in Gethsemane.

<sup>19</sup> John 13:1; 15:13.

<sup>20</sup> John 14: 30-31.

<sup>21</sup> John 18:30, 35-36; 19:11.

<sup>22</sup> See; 19: 11, 16, 30; 13: 2, 11, 21 see also 10: 18

<sup>23</sup> John 10:18. (This is in the context of Jesus as the good shepherd.)

<sup>24</sup> John 12:20-36, esp. 23-24, 32, 36.

<sup>25</sup> John 12:33. (Though the resurrection is also part of the "Christ event" package, as it were.)