

Sermon #1,255: St. John 18:36-38, 19:9-11

3-15-17, Lent 3 Midweek, Bethany-Princeton MN

(Hymns: 333.1-4, 378.5-6, "My Song ...," 561.1-3.8; Kingo: "Jesus, Judge ...")

HIS MIGHTY POWER DOTHTH WORK UNSEEN

The Text, St. John 18:36-38, 19:9-11. ³⁶ Jesus answered, "My kingdom is not of this world. If My kingdom were of this world, My servants would fight, so that I should not be delivered to the Jews; but now My kingdom is not from here." ³⁷ Pilate therefore said to Him, "Are You a king then?" Jesus answered, "You say rightly that I am a king. For this cause I was born, and for this cause I have come into the world, that I should bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth hears My voice." ³⁸ Pilate said to Him, "What is truth?" And when he had said this, he went out again to the Jews, and said to them, "I find no fault in Him at all." ... ^{19:9} And Pilate went again into the Praetorium, and said to Jesus, "Where are You from?" But Jesus gave him no answer. ¹⁰ Then Pilate said to Him, "Are You not speaking to me? Do You not know that I have power to crucify You, and power to release You?" ¹¹ Jesus answered, "You could have no power at all against Me unless it had been given you from above. Therefore the one who delivered Me to you has the greater sin." Lord, this is Your Word and these are Your words. Sanctify us by the truth. Your Word is truth.

Only and eternal Prince of Peace, Jesus Christ, You said: "*Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden and I will give you rest for your souls.*" My soul hungers and thirsts for You and finds no peace until it has found You. Have mercy upon me! Judge me not according to my failings and do not reject the prayer in which my heart this evening draws near to You. I am poor, You be my wealth! I am weak, You be my strength! I am a child of death, You be my life! By Your own good Spirit teach me to believe in You with all my soul and by this faith remain God's child. Let me be Your own special possession and always serve You in a holy and godly life. At this evening hour make me acceptable to Your heavenly Father for the sake of the blood You shed for me. Let me rest during the night under Your wings and awaken in communion with You. Amen. (ELH p. 169, *Prayer for Tuesday evening*, edited slightly)

Dear people loved by God, who reveals His power chiefly in showing mercy and pity:

Jesus, who has all power in heaven and earth, was brought before the earthly power. Isn't this wrong? Why should the omnipotent Lord submit to the limited power of this Roman official who thinks he's something? We sang: "*Jesus, Judge of every nation, under Pilate's judgment came.*" Again this is out of whack. Why should the Judge of all the earth submit to the faulty judgment and mere worldly wisdom of Pontius Pilate?

This is something that human reason cannot understand. The whole subject of power is a problem for us. Human reason loves power. It is something that our sin-darkened mind desires. So Jesus' use of it - or failing to use it - is confusing to us. What we understand of power is that it is used to dominate people. We see that in Pilate. He existed in the realm of power, the kind that is ruled and motivated by sinful impulses.

In fact, what we see going on between Pilate and the Jewish leaders, in this part of the Passion History, is a good old-fashioned power struggle. The Roman government had complete power over the Jewish people. The Romans actually kept the high priest's robes and vestments under lock and key, and when the high priest needed to use them he had to come to the Roman officials to ask for them! This humiliated the Jews. Also the Jews who wanted to put Jesus to death, who with great pomp issued a verdict that He was deserving of death, could not actually carry out the death sentence themselves. Only Rome could do this.

But the Roman governor, Pilate, himself was beneath a higher power: Caesar. The power struggle happens as Pilate is threatened by the Jews with displeasing Caesar. They will say, "*If you let this Man go, you are not Caesar's friend. Whoever makes himself a king*" - of which they accused Jesus - "*speaks against Caesar.*" They were threatening to contact Caesar and accuse Pilate of treason, a capital offense. Also, when Pilate sensed "*that a tumult was rising*" and there might be a riot, this also threatened to bring Caesar's wrath down on him. At the least he would be disgraced and removed from office, at worst put to death.

This is the way power works in this world of sin. This is why Pontius Pilate doesn't understand Jesus. When he says to Jesus, "**Are You a king?**" and "**Where are You from?**" He is giving Jesus a chance to clear His name. Pilate knows that Jesus hasn't been elected or appointed to any of-

fice, doesn't have an army or any of the trappings of power. He is giving Jesus a way out, a way to be found innocent. But Jesus does not take it.

We also exist in the realm of earthly power that is ruled by sinful impulses. You may think that temptations of power only affect the rich or those in politics or government. But it affects us too, beginning in childhood, being competitive and trying to get the upper hand, even in conversation, trying to get the final word or "win" the argument. The American way validates and encourages this approach. We can hardly imagine not advertising your accomplishments. But look, it produces jealousy and bitter feelings, and a constant restlessness and need to do more.

Our constant pushing to be first or best, or better than others, includes getting noticed more, getting recognition, which feeds our sinful pride. Invariably in this push someone will experience rejection and being ignored or left behind. Or perhaps you want someone's friendship over that person's, so that person gets ignored and left behind by you, feels hurt, and your actions were the reason. The craving to be in what C.S. Lewis called "the inner ring," to be part of the "in" group, is basic to fallen humanity. It leads you to do worse things. Your wanting to be approved by a certain person or group of people influences you to change what you say and do, and how you present yourself, in order to gain approval or remain "relevant." This is destructive in the church when outward success tempts churches to change what they teach and practice.

This is the world inhabited by Pontius Pilate, who says to Jesus: "**I have power to crucify You. I have power to release You.**" We are speaking Pontius Pilate's language when we obsess over our accomplishments, what we achieve in life, how far we advance or how others see us.

Christ came to free us from this. He who has all power in heaven and earth comes into this realm of earthly power. He rejects it, casts it aside.

Instead of talking up His attributes, when Pilate gives Him the floor "**Jesus gave Him no answer.**" Instead of competing with Pilate for whose kingdom is greater, Jesus said: "**My kingdom is not of this world. My servants will not fight.**" Instead of coming to be recognized for His mighty power, He comes to be scorned and despised as weak and pitiful.

In fact, on this earth the victory of Christ to this day still has never been seen openly. *"His mighty power doth work unseen."* We walk by faith, not by sight. Everything in His church on earth is believed, not seen. You never see His victory. You never see the splendor of His kingdom. The sins that are forgiven, you don't actually see going away; sometimes you still feel them and struggle to forget them. You never see the victory over death and entrance into eternal life but struggle to retain God's comfort.

The church on earth looks like her Lord, the bride looks like her Bridegroom did before Pilate: persecuted, harassed, ragged, beaten, stumbling, almost falling down, looking poor, weak, and defeated.

But Jesus *"came in fashion poor and mean, and took the devil captive."* As He was submitting to the judgment of Pilate, and placing Himself at the mercy of Pilate's power, He was placing you out of the devil's reach. Nobody could see this. Still nobody can see this. But the one standing before Pilate was the only sinless man. He was standing before the judgment seat of God in your place. He came to be judged guilty for you.

So all your sins do go away when the word of forgiveness is spoken, and you will be judged not only innocent but perfectly worthy in God's sight. In Jesus you have achieved and accomplished everything God requires because Jesus did all things well and it is credited to you. You have God's approval and acceptance for Jesus' sake. The least in His kingdom - you - are also the greatest in His kingdom. He frees you from the restlessness of the need for approval and the need to do more. You rest in the contentment of all that He gives you in Christ. Amen!