

John 19:12-15
We Have No King But Caesar
Ironies of the Passion Series #5
March 9, 2016

From then on, Pilate tried to set Jesus free, but the Jews kept shouting, "If you let this man go, you are no friend of Caesar. Anyone who claims to be a king opposes Caesar."

When Pilate heard this, he brought Jesus out and sat down on the judge's seat at a place known as the Stone Pavement (which in Aramaic is Gabbatha). It was the day of Preparation of Passover Week, about the sixth hour.

"Here is your king," Pilate said to the Jews.

But they shouted, "Take him away! Take him away! Crucify him!"

"Shall I crucify your king?" Pilate asked.

"We have no king but Caesar," the chief priests answered. (NIV84)

Growing up a Chicago Bulls fan in the late 1980's was tough--because each year you'd run into--and lose to--the hated Detroit Pistons in the playoffs. When I say they were "the hated Detroit Pistons", I don't just mean that they were hated by Bulls fans. I mean that they were hated by just about everyone outside of Michigan. Their nickname was "The Bad Boys!" And they not only lived up to the nickname, they even reveled in it!

One of the Bad Boys was Dennis Rodman. We Could Not STAND Him! It wasn't just because he was a good basketball player who helped beat the Bulls. Mostly (we told ourselves), our opposition to him was because he was "a bad person." We were taking a moral stand! We were defending America!

A few years later the Bulls were in need of a rebounder. They signed Dennis Rodman. All of us Bulls fans practically choked on our Cheerios when we first read about in the Chicago Tribune. But the first time he got a rebound simply because he outthrustled and out-elbowed someone to the ball, we became pretty big fans of Dennis Rodman.

"You have to admire his hustle. Sure, he's...uh...got a few rough edges--yeah, rough edges--but some of those things are what make him the type of guy you'd want in your foxhole."

In order to get what they want, people have always been willing to swear allegiances that contradict what they've said previously.

Bulls fans did it with Dennis Rodman in order to win a championship. In hopes of getting a political favor--maybe even a crack at the vice-presidency--politicians will endorse presidential candidates who just weeks before they were saying weren't fit to be president of the Hair Club for Men.

And the Jews did it in our reading for tonight as they swore undying allegiance to Caesar.

The situation itself is kind of ironic. It's certainly not what you'd expect. The Jewish leaders, who tended to pretty nationalistic, were here trying to get a fellow Jew killed, while Pontius Pilate, who cared little or nothing for the Jews and had even shown very little qualms in the past about killing Jews (cf. Luke 13:1), was attempting to have this Jew freed.

The Jews were afraid that Pilate was going to do the right thing. They were afraid that even though Pilate was the sort of man who appeared to be casually dismissive of the very concept of truth, saying to Jesus "What is truth?", Pilate would generally decide to do the right thing.

And the Jews couldn't have that.

So they decided to add something to the mix to give Pilate something to consider. It was pretty simple logic that followed this path:

1. Jesus claims to be a king
2. Caesar is king of this territory.
3. Therefore Jesus opposes Caesar.
4. If you let Jesus go, you oppose Caesar.

And then unspoken:

5. Opposing Caesar rarely goes well for anyone. Do you feel lucky, Pilate? Well, do ya?

Pilate decided that he didn't feel that lucky, and that he was probably going to "have to" sentence Jesus to death.

Undoubtedly irked that the Jews had gotten the best of him, he couldn't resist taking one last swipe at them, saying, "Shall I crucify your king?" It's almost as if he was saying, "A beaten and bloodied man with delusions of grandeur that are destined to fail? Jesus would be a pretty suitable king for a beaten and bloodied nation that had delusions of grandeur."

But the Jews couldn't resist, either. Although all they had to answer to the question "Shall I crucify your king?" was "He's not our king", they had to take it a step further and turn the hypocrisy dial up to 11 by saying, "We have no king but Caesar."

The fact is that the Jews did not like Caesar. They hated him, in fact--just as they hated having to come before this two-bit flunky that Caesar had appointed governor. You'd think they would have had to try a number of times to even get out the words "We have no king but Caesar"--practically choking each time they got to the word "Caesar."

I doubt it, though. When you have a singular, all-important goal in mind, you will swear allegiance to anyone and anything in order to get it--and nothing is too low in the pursuit of that goal. If you want to win an NBA championship, you will sign a player you cannot stand. If you want a role in government, you will endorse someone you loathe. If you want the Roman governor to carry out a murder for you, swearing allegiance to the king who has subjugated you is a small price to pay.

The goal becomes your god.

Most (every?) Christians have ended up in a place where they were saying something they would never have imagined that they would say or doing something they would never have imagined that they would do, swearing allegiance to things that they had abhorred--until it became a means of reaching their goal.

And in doing so, we have really said what the Jewish leaders were really saying. They were saying that Jesus was not their king. That was the question that Pilate had essentially asked them. He hadn't asked them whether Caesar was their king. He asked them if Jesus was their king. Their answer was an emphatic "No! In fact, given the choice between him and Caesar, we'd choose Caesar!"

This wasn't the first time the Jews had rejected a divine king in favor of a human king. God had been their king in the Old Testament, leading them in the wilderness by a pillar of cloud during the day and a pillar of fire at night. He had been their king as they entered the Promised Land, defending them from their enemies and defeating their enemies for them. He led them by speaking his Word to them through men like Samuel.

But they decided they wanted a human king instead. (1 Samuel 8:1-20) God let them have their way, and they ended up with King Saul (which ended badly). God knew what it meant. He told Samuel that the Jews had not rejected him, but rejected God himself.

And now 1000 years later, the Jews were doing the same thing. But the Jewish leaders weren't really choosing Caesar as their king. They were choosing themselves.

It's what people do. By nature, we also have no king but...ourselves.

But when we pursue the goal of serving ourselves, whether we know it or not, we ally ourselves, bind ourselves to, and actually subjugate ourselves to Satan.

And that is even more foolish and ends even worse than swearing allegiance to Caesar.

The Jews should have known what sort of a man they were claiming to love and honor. Caesar was a man who dominated his people, subjugated them rather than protecting them, and one who certainly wasn't going to give himself up for them.

In the end, it wasn't this Caesar, but it was one of his successors who laid siege to the city of Jerusalem barely one generation after this, destroying both it and the temple.

Maybe that was fitting--that the one to whom they had sworn allegiance should destroy the temple of the God whom they had rejected.

We need to check our lives regularly to see what things we have sworn allegiance to in our hearts.

What is your singular, all-important goal that leads you to say and do things you wouldn't have imagined? It probably changes according to your stage of life, and sometimes it changes from day to day—kind of a rotating cast of goals that attempt, and at times succeed at, getting you to reject your Savior.

Some of you know immediately knew what the answer was in your life. Others of you maybe weren't so sure. Maybe your allegiance is to a goal that isn't in and of itself sinful, a goal that is more socially acceptable, a goal that doesn't require you to make such grand and bold statements of rejection as the Jews made. But if it leads you to choose yourself and your goal over Jesus—even in “small ways”—it's become a false god.

After we find these things in our lives, we need to kneel before God, confess our sins of replacing him as the king of our hearts, and repent of and turn from those sins.

When you repent of your sin and when you vow to get rid of that sin in your life, Satan will say, "Shall you crucify your king? Shall you kill your lust for popularity? Shall you put to death your lust for money? Shall you murder your lust for...Lust? How about if you just promise to weaken it a bit, hamstring it some? You don't really want to crucify your king, do you?"

When he says it, it will make some sense to you. You'll wonder if maybe it is possible to swear allegiance to Jesus without entirely rejecting all other kings. That's about as foolish as the Jewish leaders thinking that they could kill God's Son while still claiming that God was their king.

When Satan attempts to get you to make compromises, when he tempts you to make peace with sin in your life, say "I have no king but Jesus!"

And what sort of a king is Jesus? Like most sinners, he is someone who has a singular, all-important goal in mind. But unlike the goals of sinners, his goal is a noble one--the salvation of sinners. His goal was so important to him that he would not swear allegiance to Satan in the wilderness even when promised all the kingdoms of the world. (Matthew 4:8-10) His goal was so important to him that there was nothing so low, nothing so humiliating that it could cause him to turn aside from, to abandon that goal of saving you from your sins. We've seen that again this year in the reading of the Passion History, as he endured all manner of humiliation and pain for you.

Unlike Caesar, you can count on Jesus. He loved his people, he gave himself up for them on a cross, and he protects us today and always.

Going forward, realize and relish that you have daily opportunity to answer a question very similar to Pilate's question of the Jews. We have daily opportunity to answer the question, "Are you going to crucify the one you have claimed as your king—or are you going to serve him?"

May we answer with our lips and with our lives, "We have no king but Jesus!"
Amen.