



St. Andrew's By-the-Sea

*The Episcopal Church
in Destin, Florida*

CHRIST THE KING

NOVEMBER 24, 2024

A Homily by the Rev. James J. Popham

In my 30 years as an attorney, the most difficult thing I had to do was testify as a witness. On one hand, I knew the positions and arguments of the parties. So I knew what testimony would be harmful to our side. Facts I would be reluctant to admit under cross examination. On the other hand, as a lawyer and, therefore, an officer of the court, I bore an additional obligation to be completely honest beyond the general obligation of any witness to testify to the whole truth and nothing but the truth. Then, of course, I also was mindful of the seventh commandment's dictate not to bear false witness. So it is a very uncomfortable position to be in. And the squirming and hesitancy does nothing to enhance one's credibility. So ultimately I had to admit some things I would have preferred not to. Fortunately, only \$150,000,000.00 was at stake. So no big deal.

All this to say, I know how Pontius Pilate felt. Torn between condemning an innocent man to death and the political expedient of giving in to his accusers. How Pilate ended up in that unenviable position explains a lot about his predicament.

As procurator of a difficult Roman province, Pilate reported directly to the Emperor. So if the locals thought he had exceeded his authority, they could report him to the emperor. Not something Pilate ever wanted to invite. But his insensitivity to the local Jewish community had left him on thin ice even before Jesus was hauled before him.

Soon after arriving to assume his post, Pilate entered the city with a small garrison. On their standards, the soldiers had placed an image of the emperor, whom they believed was divine. That was offensive to the Jewish community, and his predecessors had removed the images from their standards. When Pilate left them in place, he was hounded incessantly by the Jews. He finally lured them into the amphitheater, where he threatened to kill them unless they left him alone. But they bared their necks, ready to die and inviting the sword. So Pilate relented. And he had the standards removed.

In a similar incident, when the Jewish community resented his taking money from the Temple treasury to build a much-needed aqueduct, they rioted.

Pilate mixed plain clothes troops into the crowd and clubbed and stabbed many of the rioters to death. It was not a popular move.

Pilate would later refuse to remove images of the emperor from so-called votive shields displayed around the city. The Jews demanded Pilate remove them, but despite advice from trusted advisers, Pilate refused to do so. And this time he was reported to the emperor, who instructed Pilate to remove the images.

So when Jesus appeared before him, he was unpopular and running scared. Indeed, after Jesus was crucified, Pilate crushed a revolt in Samaria with great ferocity and again was reported to the emperor. This time the emperor summoned him to Rome. But before Pilate arrived, the emperor died, and Pilate disappeared from recorded history.

By then, however, his infamous place in history was very well established. He had condemned Jesus to death by crucifixion and placed on his cross a sign calling him Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews.

Every day we, much like Pilate, confront Jesus standing before us. And, we, too, have to decide who Jesus is and how we will respond. Do we call him a king? Do we acknowledge him as our king? Or do we like Pilate use every human trick to avoid seeing Jesus as who he really is?

Pilate, whatever his flaws or blind spots was a capable administrator, or the emperor never would have sent him to govern a troublesome region like Palestine. So, Pilate had a bag of clever evasions he could employ to keep Jesus at arm's length.

First, he tried to avoid dealing with Jesus at all. He told the crowd to deal with him according to their own law – which did not allow them to sentence anyone to crucifixion. Now John calls the crowd, “the Jews.” But that was sadly misleading. In all likelihood, it was a crowd that had been riled up, maybe even paid off, to influence Pilate. And it would have been a Jewish crowd. But that hardly suggests that the Jews as a people wanted Jesus crucified. After all, Jesus himself was Jewish. His disciples were Jewish. His multitudinous followers were predominantly Jewish. But the Jewish religious authorities were threatened by Jesus' popularity and fearful of Roman retribution if Jesus created a movement that appeared to be a threat to Rome. So they enlisted a crowd to influence Pilate...and they did. And they were not about to let Pilate off the hook.

Pilate would have to deal with Jesus. Pilate would have to decide what to do with Jesus. Just as we all do. No one else can decide for us who Jesus is. No one else can decide for us how to respond to Jesus.

Pilate then tried to sidestep the decision entirely, offering to release a well-known criminal in his stead according to a local custom. That did not work either. And it will not work for us either. Each of us must decide to accept or reject Jesus. Because Jesus resides in our hearts, and we are part of the body of Christ. Our decision about Jesus unavoidable and inevitable.

Then Pilate sought compromise. He would have Jesus scourged. And he did. But that did not deter the increasingly hostile crowd. No compromise was possible. Nor is there for us. We cannot follow Jesus halfway. We cannot serve two masters. Jesus today and our own worldly desires tomorrow. We cannot hedge our bets. We have to be all in...or not at all.

Finally, Pilate sought appeal to the crowd's emotions, hoping they would pity the scourged and bloody figure he called their king. Again, to no avail. The crowd was unmoved. And the decision remained inescapably in Pilate's hand. The verdict was his alone. As it is for each and every one of us.

Pilate would sentence Jesus to death by crucifixion. His fear of the crowd and desire to protect his position overcame his knowledge of the truth, that Jesus was innocent. Even that Jesus might, indeed, be a King, even if in a way he could not understand.

Pilate would leave his encounter with Jesus perplexed and wistful that, perhaps, he had missed something in his life and in his encounter with this so-called king of a kingdom not of this world.

In the next few weeks, we will journey from the crucified king to the infant king. Born a manner that might make no more sense to us than the way he died, among farm animals in a manger far away from home. But always a king that defies earthly understanding. And always a king who beckons us to be his subjects and his alone.

Will we take the opportunity during Advent to get to know Jesus better? To really define who Jesus is. To discern his true place in our lives. To decide whether Jesus is our king.

Or will we wake up on the morning of December 26 like Pilate: wistful, still longing for the spirit of Christmas that got away. Still wondering whether

we saw the truth and let it be eclipsed by the incessant chant of the many kingdoms of this world.