

Wading River Congregational Church

SERMONS IN PRINT

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Luke 23:1-25

"Corrupt Powers"

As we approach Holy Week, it's appropriate that we look at two more men who met Jesus that week, but to whom he had nothing to say. That in itself is a remarkable thing, given that Jesus had a great deal to say to many unlikely people about many deep things, and that here he is confronted by two men who held the power in Israel in the 1st C. – Herod Antipas and Pontius Pilate. Why would he not answer most of their questions? What was it about them that made the one who had come to seek and to save the lost unwilling to talk to them?

1) *Herod the King*

The King Herod we meet in the Passion narratives is one of four Herods we find in the Gospels and Acts. The first of them was Herod the Great, so named not for his character but for his building projects – the expanded Temple, the royal palace, and the Antonia fortress in Jerusalem, and the coastal city that he named Caesarea in honor of his Roman sponsor. Herod was not a Jew but an Idumean, from the area to the south beyond Jordan known historically as Edom – one of the many enemies of ancient Israel, the home according to tradition of the descendants of Esau. Herod was made "King of the Jews" by the Romans in the 30s BC, and had a close relationship with the Emperor Augustus.

He had at one time been a supporter of Mark Anthony in the battle for leadership of the Empire after the assassination of Julius Caesar; but when Octavian defeated Anthony and took the name Augustus as Emperor, Herod switched sides. He was a profligate and ruthless man who had ten wives, at least 14 known children – three of whom he had executed – and the biblical story that he ordered the murder of young boys in an attempt to get rid of the infant Jesus, born "king of the Jews," is entirely in character.

Herod 'the Great' died soon after Jesus was born, and three of his surviving sons inherited his kingdom; still, of course, under Roman occupation. Herod Archelaus ruled Judea, Herod Antipas ruled Galilee, and Herod Philip I ruled Perea beyond the Jordan. All inherited their father's traits. Archelaus was so bad that the Sanhedrin appealed to Augustus to remove him, and from 6 AD onwards, Judea became a direct-ruled Roman province under prefects and procurators. Antipas, the "King Herod" of the Passion narrative, was educated in Rome, and became a protégé of Tiberius, Augustus's adopted son who became Emperor in 14 AD. In response, Antipas built

the new lakeside city of Tiberias, which became the new name for the Sea of Galilee.

Herod Antipas' interactions with Jesus are few in number, but revealing for all that. As ruler of Galilee, he was aware of Jesus' reputation and scared of it. At one point he determined that this miracle-worker must be a resurrected John the Baptist, whom he had imprisoned after John had publicly condemned Antipas' divorce and re-marriage to his sister-in-law Herodias. You know the famous story of John's execution on a whim of Antipas, after he has made a fool of himself over the dancing of his step-daughter Salome. Afraid to lose face in front of his dinner guests, afraid of John, afraid of his wife, Antipas agrees to the demand of the vicious Herodias for "John's head on a platter."

Jesus refers to Antipas as "that fox," one of the most derogatory remarks he made about anyone, and tells the people and his disciples to "beware" the king. We learn, unsurprisingly, that Antipas "wanted to kill Jesus." They met only once. Arrested by the Temple police, interrogated by Caiaphas, and sent to Pilate the governor for sentencing, Jesus is then sent to Antipas who was in Jerusalem for Passover, on the excuse that Jesus was a Galilean and so under Herod Antipas' jurisdiction. Antipas, we are told, had "wanted for a long time to see Jesus," and hoped he might perform a miracle for him. He plies Jesus with many questions, but Jesus answers him not a word. Jesus has no time for corrupt and manipulative "men of power."

2) *Pilate the Governor*

So Jesus is sent back to the real power in the land, Pontius Pilate the prefect or governor of Judea, who is also in Jerusalem for Passover to keep the peace among the crowds. Pilate had been in charge of this

difficult province for 5 years, and in that time had earned the contempt of all Jews for his insensitivity and brutality. He had allowed Roman ensigns to be displayed near the Temple, and was astonished that the Jews petitioning for their removal said they would rather have their throats cut than permit such sacrilege in the Holy City. He massacred Samaritans whose pilgrimage he took for an uprising. He stole Temple funds for his own construction projects. There had already been enough complaints about him to Tiberius that by the time he met Jesus he was very vulnerable, and his protector Sejanus, head of the Praetorian guard, had just fallen from favor and been executed under Tiberius.

In that atmosphere, Pilate is called on to pass sentence on this Jesus, whom the Sanhedrin accuses – in a quick switch from their verdict of blasphemy – of being a trouble-maker who "subverts the nation, opposes payment of taxes to Caesar, and claims to be Christ, a king." "Are you the king of the Jews?" Pilate asks Jesus. It is one of the few questions that Jesus answers. "As you say," says Jesus – which is probably affirmative, but is just ambiguous enough to perhaps mean "is that your idea?" But Jesus goes on to say that his "kingdom" is not at all of the kind Pilate might imagine, and he is not leading an insurrection.

Pilate has no doubt that Jesus is innocent of the charge of sedition. "I find no basis for a charge," he says; "what crime has he committed?" Pilate is even warned by his wife to beware this innocent man whose plight has come to her in a dream. Jesus' claim to be a teacher, even an embodiment, of the "truth" sets up Pilate's famous question, "What is truth?" He clearly was not expecting an answer – it is the cynical response of a man of power: "truth – what truth?" Power is what matters, and he tries to impress on Jesus that he has the power to

condemn or release him, only to be told that the power is not his but God's! Jesus knows he is secure in God's hands, but Pilate cannot begin to grasp what he means by that.

So Pilate tries to release an innocent man: "Behold, the man!" he says; and later, "Behold your king." But the priests know how to turn the screw on a fundamentally insecure man: "if you let Jesus go, you are no friend of Caesar's." "Not Caesar's friend" - three words, you could say, that changed the world. That is all it takes for the death sentence to fall on Jesus - but even then, Pilate tries to excuse himself by infamously "washing his hands" in public and claiming "I am innocent of the blood of this man."

3) *Weak Men in Power*

What are we to make of these men? They had their moments in the presence of Jesus, but neither one could get past "who they were" to begin to see "who he was."

They are tragic examples of weak men in powerful positions who are corrupted by the opportunity power gives them to appear strong. One NT commentator said of Pilate that he was "a weak man who covered it with obstinacy and violence" (that's a British way of saying he was stubborn and violent!). You can no doubt come up with other historical examples, and such men have led the world into some terrible troubles. It was bad enough when such people inherited their positions; it is tragic when they succeed in confusing people enough to get elected to power.

But apart from powerful leaders, the temptation to "appear tough" is one that we all face. At some level, we all know our own inadequacies, and we attempt to compensate for our weaknesses with a show of force. We all know the sound of someone who is just too loud, too assertive, too argumentative,

too defensive, too afraid to be wrong. There are moments when we may hear that in ourselves.

Jesus has nothing to say to people who are wrapped up in proving their own importance, their own strength, their own power. Those are precisely the things, he said, that keep people out of his kingdom. And Jesus had no time either for those who were simply curious to see what he could do - who wanted to be entertained by something "spiritually impressive." Antipas wanted a miracle, but got silence. There is a warning here for any of us who want God to "do something for us" - he is not in that business, and we may get only silence in return. He wants people who recognize *his call on their lives*, who are ready to submit to his lordship, who acknowledge that they need his mercy and deliverance because they are weak and sinful. People like that hear his answer when they call; or hear his voice calling them and gladly respond. If you are hearing only silence, perhaps you should examine your requests.

Jesus has little time for people who think "truth" is a joke. Pilate has many followers today - perhaps more than Jesus in some places. "Truth, what truth?" It's not just university professors of humanities who don't believe in truth any more. It's politicians, who are only concerned with spin; with what gets them into power and keeps them in power, and not at all with truth. It's media executives, who are only concerned with ratings and the advertising income that's tied to them. It's "religious" people who want to sell you the idea that all religions are really the same, that all paths up the mountain lead to the same peak; that nobody knows the "truth." It's confused people who have no idea what virtue means, or where morals come from, or how you might legitimately decide an ethical issue - and who fall back on "it's just how you feel."

It's people who say nobody has a right to "impose their morality" on others, because there is no absolute right or wrong – that is, no truth or falsehood.

But Jesus claimed he embodied "the truth" – the truth about God, the truth about how God wants his people to live, the truth about how God is dealing with evil in the world. Jesus brought, it was said, "grace and truth" into the world, and he gladly embraces anyone who themselves will embrace him as the best and final revelation of the truth of God.

Jesus could not, and cannot, be manipulated by people in power for their own purposes. Even today, there are followers of his who foolishly believe that if *they* can get their hands on the levers of power, they can remake the world. But Jesus is not ready to be used by people who want power, and he has no time for those who worship power and strength and influence.

He is himself the *King of Kings*, but he keeps his power "under wraps," so that those who lust for power do not think they can "sign on" for a share in his. Jesus will one day rule over all the "powers that be" in this world, and he has shown that already in ways clear enough for those with eyes to see. His ways, his truth, his grace, his love, are more powerful than all the political forces in the world, in the 1st C. or now.

His truth is open, public, proclaimed, powerful, dependable. He wants followers who believe that and are prepared to live it, not in their supposed strength, but in his. What is truth? It is that Jesus is not only the "King of the Jews," but he is the First and the Last, the King of Kings.

Let us pray...