

Who is Our King?

John 18:28-19:37 (19:15-16)

Also Isaiah 52:13-53:12; Psalm 22:1-21; Hebrews 10:1-25

Almighty God, Most gracious heavenly Father, who gave your Son to be the Passover Lamb.

Pour out on us your Holy Spirit, that in reading the story of his Passion, we might recognize that Christ died for us, and claiming him for our Savior, might dedicate all that we are to his service.

Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Hughes Oliphant Old

No King but Caesar!

“We have no king but Caesar!” This patriotic cry was not shouted by citizens of Rome, reveling the bread and circuses showered on them by the emperor; nor by newly absorbed peoples grateful for a better master than their previous overlords. This was the cry of a people who hated the Romans – the Jews who had escaped from the Babylonians and Persians only to be ruled and tormented by the Greeks. The Jews, who finally drove out the pagan Greeks and established a free nation, but not free for long. The Roman Empire, which devoured everything in its path, swallowed up little Judea. The Pharisees longed for a land of righteousness and looked for the promised Messiah. The Sadducees feasted off the riches of the temple and would not easily give up their privileged positions. The Zealots hated the Romans so much they were prepared to engage in armed revolt. All pockets of Jewish society hated the Romans. So why did they embrace Caesar as their king?

They Did it Again

This actually is a familiar pattern among the Jews. No sooner had God delivered them from slavery in Egypt than they begged to return. They would rather eat leeks and cucumbers as slaves than trust God as free men in the desert. God patiently led them to a lush, fruitful land, but again the Israelites tried to return to Egypt. They would rather live safely as slaves than trust God as free men fighting giants. Even after swearing to serve God and settling in the wonderful land He provided, the people refused to obey God. After centuries with God as their King the people demanded a human king. The judge Samuel agonized over this demand, but God explained that the people had reject Him as their king and they would have to experience the servitude of a human tyrant. Centuries later when Israel had become thoroughly wicked, God sent the Babylonians to rescue a righteous remnant and protect them in Babylon. God told them through the prophet Jeremiah to accept Babylonian rule, but they refused. They rebelled and were crushed.

The Jews of Jesus’ day came from a long line of people who made a habit of rejecting God as their king and seeking an earthly ruler. But Caesar? You’ve got to be kidding! Rome was powerful and glorious, but violent, ruthless, and bloody – and no Romans were more violent, ruthless, and bloody than the Caesars. There were some relatively noble emperors, Augustus and Marcus Aurelius for example – but most ranged from bad to awful. Sex, murder, and theft were the norm – and then there is Nero who used Christians as live torches for his garden parties. Politics is always a mess. The nature of human society is that we must work with people who do not entirely agree with us – and sometimes it is hard to tell where is the line between normal and acceptable compromise, and treacherous capitulation. But this was not one of those times. This was an obvious, easy choice. No good man would choose to embrace Caesar as his king if he had a better choice.

A Better Choice

What would you want in your ideal king? One who received his throne from a lawful authority? One who ruled justly? One who had the power to protect his people? Would you also want your king to care for the poor, the widow, the orphan, the outcast? Would you want him to provide free health care? And wouldn’t it be great if his speeches were so galvanizing that they attracted vast hordes? The Jews had this. Jesus was standing right there before them. Jesus had been anointed by God. He possessed unbelievable power, yet used it to care for the neediest people in the land. Jesus healed the sick wherever He went and

preached unbelievably good sermons. Jesus even gave every indication that He was God Himself come to earth in human flesh. And wasn't that the promise of the prophets? Speaking through Isaiah God said, "I looked, but there was no one to help; I was appalled, but there was no one to uphold; so my own arm brought me salvation, and my wrath upheld me." (Isaiah 62:5) God had sent many men to deliver His people from their enemies: Moses, Samson, David, Elijah, etc. – but no one was able to complete the task. So finally God came to earth Himself – "my own arm brought me salvation." Jesus performed the works of God: He commanded the wind and waves, He healed disease, He drove out demons, He taught righteousness, He forgave sins. No one but God could do these things. Jesus said, "I and the Father are One" – and if you are not persuaded that this was a claim to divinity, at least the Jews were persuaded. For that claim they sought to kill him.

An Unbearable Price

By every measure Jesus was a better choice than Caesar – far better – infinitely better. And He was God! Who in his right mind would reject Jesus and choose Caesar? What would move people to do such a catastrophically stupid thing? They would do it only if the price is too high. And it was. Relentlessly Jesus had attacked the smug false righteousness of the Pharisees. These men were deeply admired as very holy among the Jews, but Jesus had exposed them as insufferable imposters. If Jesus had His way, the Pharisees would lose their prestige. Jesus never directly attacked the Sadducees. Everyone knew they were spiritually impotent compromisers. But they controlled the lucrative temple and occupied the highest political positions. If Jesus had His way, the Sadducees would lose their wealth and power. The Zealots were hell-bent on killing the Romans and driving them out. Jesus' message of submission to authorities was hateful to them. Jesus was the best king a living person had ever seen, but no one could endure the price of His rule.

The Pharisees would rather be admired for their superior holiness under Caesar's bloodthirsty rule than be exposed as hateful frauds under Jesus' benevolent rule. The Sadducees would rather be rich and powerful and risk the volatile whims of Caesar than lose their wealth and power in Jesus' peaceful kingdom. The Zealots would settle for nothing less than driving the Romans out, and Jesus' tolerance of Roman rule was abhorrent to them. For three years the Jews have been watching Jesus and He never wavered. His message and ministry was consistent every day. Early in His ministry the Jewish leaders understood that Jesus was a threat to their way of life and they talked about doing away with Him. But after three years they could endure no more. It was clear that Jesus would always be a threat as long as He was alive – so He had to die.

And so the Jews made a horrible choice. Their ancestors had rejected God as their king, but had been content to ignore Him or seek refuge under another king. But this generation was so intoxicated with their own wealth, power, prestige, and hate that they were determined to eradicate God's anointed king completely. So Judas betrayed Jesus for 30 pieces of silver, the Jewish authorities demanded the ultimate capital sentence, the crowds whipped up a bloodthirsty frenzy, and they dragged Pilate to order the execution. Pilate was unwilling at first, but eventually he gave in to their demands when they threatened him with the charge of treason. "The enemy of my enemy is my friend," they say – and so it is here. On this night the Jews became friends with the Romans in order to eradicate a worse enemy. For the sake of wealth, power, prestige, and hate the best king this world had ever seen was crucified as the worst criminal. And to amplify the wickedness beyond all understanding – they did this to a man who any reasonable person would say is God. The ancestors of these Jews had rejected God. These Jews killed God.

An Unbearable Result

So they crucified him. In the ancient world a high public figure who was a threat to the state was often banished. In many societies a nobleman who must die is executed with dignity. There was no dignity in Jesus' death, but the horrifying torture of crucifixion – His body torn apart by whips, nailed naked to the cross, the object of mockery and ridicule for any common peasant or criminal. Death was too good for this man. He deserved the worst that humans could imagine and execute, and that's what he got.

Before He died Jesus told a parable about a landowner who had a vineyard which he rented to tenants. When he sent someone to collect the rent, the tenants beat the collector and sent him away empty-handed. This happened many times until finally the landowner sent his son, thinking that the tenants would respect him. Instead the tenants killed the heir and seized the land. Jesus concluded by asking the Jews, "What will the owner of the vineyard do? He will come and destroy the tenants and give the vineyard to others." (Mark 12:9) The Jews sought all the more to kill Jesus because they perceived that Jesus meant them to be the tenants. If a landowner is justified in destroying rebellious tenants who kill his son, how much more will God be justified in destroying rebellious servants who kill His Son. On this night it appeared that these rebellious Jews got away with killing God. It was an unbelievable crime – a crime that did indeed deserve the worst punishment, but by nightfall Jesus was dead and the Jews were alive. They lived for 40 more years as God tested them to see if they would repent of this awful crime. Then in 70 A.D. God sent Caesar, the king they had chosen, to Jerusalem to exterminate those Jews who still refused Jesus as their rightful king.

Our Unbearable Condition

The preacher of Ecclesiastes said that there is time for everything. Last night was an occasion for feasting, and Sunday is the greatest feast of the whole year. But tonight is a time for sober reflection. Tonight we see the absolute depths of sin. On this day the ultimate possibility of human wickedness was realized. The brutal torture and agonizing death of an innocent man was bad enough, but to do that to God? Indeed these people committed the worst deed in history. We come here not to glory in what happened, nor to satisfy our own bloodlust vicariously, nor to become satisfyingly depressed. We come on this most solemn day of the year to confront once again the true nature of sin and the full glory of Christ's death. This year we are horrified at the war in Ukraine, a peaceful people attacked by a madman and victims of terrible atrocities. But that is far away, and most of us are no closer to the suffering than our television or computer screens. The sins we confront personally on a daily basis are gluttony, anger, jealousy, and the like – sins which we can comfort ourselves into thinking that they don't hurt others much – at least not physically. Americans are good people. We give generously, as a nation and as individuals. We send aid workers around the world. More controversially, we send soldiers to help other nations. Criminal activity and incidents of violence disturb us because such things do not represent who we are. American Christians are the best of the best, and we send missionaries all over the world to share our virtues.

Tonight we confront the shocking truth that the stories we tell about ourselves are not true. We are just like the Jews of Jesus' day – good people who obey God and help others. And this is indeed who the Jews were. They were not ax murderers, they did not indulge in debauchery, they gave to the poor and they worshiped God. These were the people who cried out for Jesus to be crucified. And this describes us at Lehigh Valley Presbyterian Church and all Americans. This is the truth about all people everywhere in all times. Everyone of us wakes up each morning with plans for the day, and everyone of us is angry when those plans are interrupted. Criminals wake up to rob or sell drugs, businessmen wake up to make money, pastors wake up to write sermons, mothers wake up to do laundry. And when Jesus knocks in the form of a crying child or a distraught parishioner or a struggling customer or a policeman to arrest the drug deal, we lash out, "This man will not rule me!" We are just like the Jews. We hate Jesus' meddling in our affairs. We hate the grubbiness of broken relationships. We hate the loss of business, We hate having our wonderful plans interrupted. Christians will not admit it, but we hate God for screwing us over. You would rather be married to a greedy husband who makes you rich than a godly man who will keep you poor. You would rather work for a world-class business that makes you famous than a small company in a distressed neighborhood. I would rather pastor a church where I can read theology peacefully without dealing with troubled people than to pastor a struggling church in a depressed neighborhood. Folks, we're all like this! And if by chance anyone has taken the better path, from time to time we regret it and silently wish for wealth and fame and comfort.

This is sin. This is our hearts. What are the particular idols of your heart tonight? Where, in the dark recesses of your heart lurks the sullen cry, "I will have no king but myself!" We all have those places. Are you willing for Jesus to be your king except in the matter of your standard of living? Are you willing for Jesus to be your king except that you will not obey Him if He calls you somewhere dangerous? Are you willing to follow Jesus unless He calls you patiently to love and serve the poor? Or the rude and obnoxious? Are you willing for Jesus to be your king as long as He gives you a happy family? If Jesus allows you to suffer ill health, will you rail against Him and demand that He comply with your wishes? All of us, everyone of us have these dark crevasses where the poison of sin lies – silent until circumstances disturb it. Then the venom of hatefulness spews forth and poisons everyone around us. We're not talking about the standard cast of evil characters. This is the truth about the best of us. The Sadducees were decent people. The Pharisees were very respectable – rule-followers. And you. You are a good person, too. And the truth is that good people will not have Jesus as their king. Good people demanded Jesus' crucifixion 2100 years ago, and good people in every generation reject Jesus when He threatens their vision of the good life. Tonight, watching Jesus body twitch in it final death-throes we see who we really are. "I will have no king but myself!" If there is any hope for the human race, God will have to kill us and resurrect us as new people.

As horrible as our sin is, Jesus' death was even more horrible. And therein lies good news for us. In dying on the cross, Jesus paid the penalty for our sins. There are no sins so horrible that Jesus' death did not cover them. And for those who believe in Jesus – who trust Him – we can honestly face the blackness of our sin because it is all paid for and God will never bring it up again. No matter how often you reject God, no matter how angry you get at Him, no matter how frequent your little sins or how awful your big ones, the death of Jesus was sufficiently big and awful that it was sufficient payment for anything you have done or might do – if you trust Him. There is more good news on the way. But the good news tonight is that this awful miscarriage of justice against Jesus satisfied God's divine justice toward us, and we are free from condemnation – all condemnation – forever.

The End

And then it was over. "It is finished," Jesus said – and He was dead. Now, some 2100 years later we know that more was accomplished on Friday than an unjust death, and we know that a glorious morning awaits us in three days. But tonight we face the awfulness of our sin, the horror of the crucifixion, the death of God, and the end of the world. When the light of the world died, all the lights went out; when the life of the world died, the earth shuddered. Standing alone in the dark on the quaking earth, our only hope is that somehow God would come back to life.

Prayer

Truly, Eternal God, we are as sinful as the Jews who killed Jesus. Truly we resent Jesus when He interferes with our plans and we hate you when you do not give us what we demand. Yet even in acknowledging these things, we secretly cling to the belief that we are basically good people. Lord, we confess that sin is lodged so deep within us that we are incapable even of an acceptable confession. On this night when all reason and affection point to weeping, our hearts are hard and cold, and we plan how to use the remaining hours of the day most profitably. O God, forgive us! O God, work in us a better confession. Stir up Your Spirit in us to push out anger and hypocrisy. Kill us so that sin will be powerless and resurrect us to a new life in the Spirit. For only in You may we truly live and move and have our being in righteousness. Hear us, O Lord. Answer us for the sake of Your Son who died to accomplish these prayers in us. Amen.

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