

Responses with Consequences

A Sermon preached at the Church of St. Peter & St. Paul, Marietta, GA

by The Rev. Tom Pumphrey, March 30, 2018

Good Friday: John 18:1b - 19:42

This Lent, we walked in the wilderness with Jesus. We walked with Jesus on the road to Jerusalem. We shouted with the crowds as he entered the city on Palm Sunday. Last night, we ate the Last Supper with him, and wept and prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane, and watched as he was betrayed and arrested. Today we watch his trials with the priests and with Pilate. We see him tortured and crucified, his dead body taken from the cross to be buried.

There are so many characters in this story. Whether you were a reader in the narrative or not, who are you in this story? Are you in the crowds, or among the soldiers? Are you like the bystanders by the fire, curious for gossip? Are you like Peter at the gate? Perhaps you are like the high priest and his friends, or like the women who came to embalm Jesus' body. Each character responded to Jesus in different ways. But the day had come when their response had consequences. What would they say about Jesus—what would they say about themselves?

Perhaps you are like Pilate. Pilate seems to me to be a very practical man, an able bureaucrat, troubled from time to time by local disputes. The mob brings Jesus to him and he questions him, but finds nothing deserving punishment. Part of Pilate seems to know that he has a responsibility to justice. Regardless of what he thinks of the Jews under Roman occupation, and regardless of what he thinks of this strange man the crowd has brought to him, he knows that justice is supposed to matter. Four times in John's account, Pilate tells the crowd he has no case against Jesus.

Not that Pilate is a fan of Jesus. He probably thinks Jesus is a bit comical at first. Jesus won't defend himself or plead his case, even to the powerful Roman governor. Pilate uses Jesus to mock the Jews, taking every opportunity to present Jesus as a mock king of the people Rome has conquered.

All these factors together make Pilate appear a bit ambivalent to Jesus. He could take him or leave him. He looks down on Jesus, even mocks Jesus and his people. But he also doesn't find any crime in him and tries to release him. Pilate is curious about Jesus—he asks him lots of questions to try to understand him. But ultimately, when Pilate's response to Jesus has consequences—if justice to Jesus has consequences to Pilate, well, Jesus would be disposable. The crowds would accuse Pilate of supporting a rival to Caesar. That would risk Pilate the loss of regional stability and the loss of his position. Pilate has to look out for himself first, of course, regardless of ideas of justice. What is truth, after all?

I think we are a lot like Pilate. We often treat other people that way. Sure, we have values and principals like kindness and forgiveness, but when it costs us something, well, we have to protect ourselves first. I think we often treat God this way. We are often ambivalent toward Jesus. We get curious about Jesus, perhaps enough to ask a lot of questions. But when we don't understand

God, or when following Jesus would cost us something, then we back away and look to ourselves first.

And yet, I think we are like Pilate in another way too. The Bible doesn't really spell this out, but I wonder if Jesus had a deeper impact on Pilate. I wonder if Jesus got inside Pilate's head, so to speak. You know how something keeps coming to mind and you can't quite shake the importance of a nagging question, something unresolved that seems more important than it looks on the surface. I wonder if Pilate kept thinking through what Jesus said.

Here is this strange man that the crowds say was trying to be a king, yet Jesus relied on the testimony of others, and he had no defenders or supporters. He stood there in chains and spoke with confidence and not with fear. He claimed to have a kingdom not of this world, a kingdom that claimed to be the source of Pilate's power to govern. He spoke of the truth and listening to his voice if you belong to the truth.

One reason I think that Pilate continued to think about Jesus is that he allowed Joseph and others to take down Jesus's body after only a short time on the cross. This was unusual in the case of crucifixion. Bodies were usually left on the cross for days as a graphic reminder of the brutal power of Rome. But Pilate let them take Jesus' body. I wonder if Pilate second guessed his decision to yield to the crowds, even if it seemed the prudent thing to do. I wonder if Pilate couldn't stop thinking about Jesus. I think Jesus gets in our heads the same way.

At some time in your life, you became curious about Jesus. Perhaps you heard his name for years but didn't know him. Perhaps you started asking more questions about Jesus in recent years: who was Jesus? What did he teach? What did he say about himself? Is he really the Son of God? What does that mean? Those questions are mostly a kind of nagging speculation that feels important in some way. But at some point, answering those questions has consequences.

Like Peter and Caiaphas and Pilate, there comes a time when we put ourselves on the line when answering those questions about who Jesus is. When it matters—when your response to these questions would cost you something—how do you answer? When obedience means more of your time or money or priorities or a loss of social status, how do you answer? Who is Jesus for you?

Pilate wasn't the only one intrigued by Jesus. Peter followed him and swore that he wouldn't leave him, but he denied Jesus just when Jesus needed a witness. And what about Nicodemus? Do you remember him? Nicodemus was the Pharisee who came to Jesus by night, asking his questions, curious about Jesus. Nicodemus thought Jesus' words about being born again were a kind of joke. But perhaps he couldn't stop thinking about Jesus's comment that God loves the world so much to give his son so that those who believe in him would have eternal life.

Perhaps that experience stayed with Nicodemus. Perhaps Jesus got inside Nicodemus' head, so to speak. And there was Nicodemus when Jesus died, coming back in the darkness to collect Jesus' body and anoint it for burial. He must have learned to hear the truth in Jesus enough to follow him to his grave.

What about you? You have heard the story of Jesus' humiliation and death. You have heard about how his death is a sacrifice for our sins—a way to deal with all the failures of our lives and to bring us forgiveness and new life. You have heard of his resurrection and promise of new and eternal life in him. And you have the opportunity to see in the Christian community the grace of Jesus at work. Who is Jesus for you? Do you believe? Do you believe enough to follow him? Will you follow him even when that has consequences?

Jesus answered questions like this too. For Jesus, the question was: who are these people? Who are they that I should go to them? Who are they that I should put myself on the line for them? When it has consequences for me, who are the people of the world and what will I choose to do when it costs me? Jesus asks this kind of question in the Garden of Gethsemane, and he chooses obedience to God. When his choice about you has consequences, Jesus still chooses to love you. He chooses to love you enough to give all of himself for you. Even while we were still sinners, still rejecting and turning away from him like Peter and others, Jesus died for us. When Jesus' choices had ultimate consequences for him, Jesus chose us. He paid the consequences and died for us that we would be set free from sin and death.

Jesus answers human sin and human ambivalence and indifference with the cross. Jesus gives all of himself for you and for me. The power of that gift is the same power that changes lives. If you let him, he can even change your life.

The darkness of Good Friday captures the darkness of this world and the darkness of the human heart. But on Good Friday, we find God with us in that darkness. We find Jesus with us in that darkness and even in his death, that darkness does not overcome him. The gift of Jesus' death and resurrection is the gift of new life for the world.

When the answer has consequences for you, how much do you love Jesus?
When the answer had consequences for Jesus, how much did Jesus love you?