

LUKE

Part 81: “Jesus Against the World”

Luke 23:1-25

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Scripture Reading

“Then the whole company of them arose and brought him before Pilate. And they began to accuse him, saying, ‘We found this man misleading our nation and forbidding us to give tribute to Caesar, and saying that he himself is Christ, a king.’ And Pilate asked him, ‘Are you the King of the Jews?’ And he answered him, ‘You have said so.’ Then Pilate said to the chief priests and the crowds, ‘I find no guilt in this man.’ But they were urgent, saying, ‘He stirs up the people, teaching throughout all Judea, from Galilee even to this place.’ When Pilate heard this, he asked whether the man was a Galilean. And when he learned that he belonged to Herod’s jurisdiction, he sent him over to Herod, who was himself in Jerusalem at that time. When Herod saw Jesus, he was very glad, for he had long desired to see him, because he had heard about him, and he was hoping to see some sign done by him. So he questioned him at some length, but he made no answer. The chief priests and the scribes stood by, vehemently accusing him. And Herod with his soldiers treated him with contempt and mocked him. Then, arraying him in splendid clothing, he sent him back to Pilate. And Herod and Pilate became friends with each other that very day, for before this they had been at enmity with each other. Pilate then called together the chief priests and the rulers and the people, and said to them, ‘You brought me this man as one who was misleading the people. And after examining him before you, behold, I did not find this man guilty of any of your charges against him. Neither did Herod, for he sent him back to us. Look, nothing deserving death has been done by him. I will therefore punish and release him.’ But they all cried out together, ‘Away with this man, and release to us Barabbas’— a man who had been thrown into prison for an insurrection started in the city and for murder. Pilate addressed them once more, desiring to release Jesus, but they kept shouting, ‘Crucify, crucify him!’ A third time he said to them, ‘Why? What evil has he done? I have found in him no guilt deserving death. I will therefore punish and release him.’ But they were urgent, demanding with loud cries that he should be crucified. And their voices prevailed. So Pilate decided that their demand should be granted. He released the man who had been thrown into prison for insurrection and murder, for whom they asked, but he delivered Jesus over to their will” (Luke 23:1–25, ESV).

Prayer


Our Heavenly Father, as we enter into this most Holy of Weeks, I pray that your Holy Spirit would direct our gaze toward that which is good and beautiful and true. I thank

you that you have called your people out of darkness and into your marvelous light. May we live as those who bear the image of your cross and the power of your resurrection. We pray this in the name of Christ, our King. AMEN.

Introduction

My lovely wife Kate is from the state of Ohio. And in the great state of Ohio there is a state religion that almost all citizens share, whether they are men or women, young or old, secular or spiritual. That religion is the Ohio State Buckeyes, and it has been successfully exported to the Ritchie household, as all three of my sons have adopted their mother's fanaticism.

Ohioans are proud of their Buckeyes. And I have studied the Buckeyes over the last few years, I have observed something about the Ohio State mentality. If you are not absolutely for the Buckeyes, it is presumed that you are against the Buckeyes. There is no neutral.

So when the big games come every year, there is a slogan that the state of Ohio unites around. That phrase is "*Ohio Against the World*" [show image ].

And for me, this slogan of Ohio State sums up an experience that we've probably all shared at some level when the world seems against us. Especially in today's world, in which the Coronavirus has launched a cascading reaction that affects our homes, our businesses, and our schools. We have those moments when it seems like the very universe has conspired to oppose us on all fronts. It seems like everyone, and everything is out to get us, and we are all alone.

But in our more honest and clear-headed moments, we are able to see that, yes, there are times when we face challenging people and circumstances, but rarely is the whole world against us.

However, in Luke 23, we see a moment in which Jesus Christ is opposed by everyone and defended by no one.

Just a few chapters ago, Jesus was hailed and celebrated as a prophet sent by God. Everywhere he went, crowds of people would surround him to hear his teaching and witness his miracles. His disciples said they were committed to following him even unto death. The people wanted to make him king by force.

Just two chapters ago in Luke, as Jesus entered the Holy City on the first-ever Palm Sunday, people greeted him with palm leaves on the road as they cried out, "Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord."

But now Jesus stands accused. And he stands alone.

Why the sudden and dramatic change? After all, isn't Jesus just filled with love, kindness, and good deeds? Why do people want to murder him?

The answer to that question is not something that modern audiences often like to hear. The reason people want to murder Jesus is that they have understood all too well the claims that Jesus is making against the world.

There is a fad right now in the intellectual world that wants to put Jesus in the category of moral teacher. He is like one of the many great spiritual teachers of human history like Buddha or Confucius. He is like a wise, moral philosopher who was ahead of his time like Socrates. These are acceptable views for people in the world have about Jesus. Because according to these views, Jesus is allowed to be a great man, but only a man.

But if we take Jesus at his own words, we cannot afford to look at Jesus in the convenient categories that are allowed by the world. At the end of the last chapter, as Jesus stood before the religious leaders of the Jewish Sanhedrin, he announced that he is the "Son of Man." He is the one prophesied of in Daniel chapter 7. He is the judge of the living and the dead. He is the one to whom belongs an everlasting kingdom of all nations that knows no end.

These are not statements of a simple, moral philosopher. These are statements of one who believes himself to be king and God over all creation!

So why is Jesus against the world? It is because he has claimed Lordship over the world, and the world does not appreciate such claims.

In the passage that is before us today, I think we can see three different ways that the world responded in opposition to Jesus in the ancient world. They are three different ways that the world can still respond to Jesus today. And these responses are important to understand because these are ways that we might be tempted to respond to Jesus as well.

So for the rest of today's sermon, we are going to look at *1.) Jesus Against Pilate, 2.) Jesus Against Herod, and 3.) Jesus Against the Crowd.*

Exposition

1.) Jesus Against Pilate


Jesus has been captured by the Jewish religious leaders. They bring him bound, and they present him before the Roman governor of Judea – Pontius Pilate (Lk 23:1). They accuse Jesus of teaching people to refuse to pay their taxes to the Roman Empire, and that he is claiming to be the king of the Jews (Lk 23:2). Both of these charges are intentional misrepresentations of Jesus's words and teaching.

These are serious charges. The Roman Empire was not known for their mercy and toleration, especially when it came to people who opposed Roman rule. If you were guilty of treason, you would be executed by crucifixion.

Moreover, history does not remember Pontius Pilate as a particularly soft-hearted man. We've already seen in one place in the gospel of Luke in which Pilate ruthlessly executes a group of men from Galilee who tried to start a revolution (see Lk 13:1).

That is what makes Pilate's response to Jesus so fascinating. Pilate interviews Jesus. He pokes and prods him with a few questions that would normally provoke an impassioned reaction from an anti-Roman would-be revolutionary. But Jesus responds with a sense of calm control and spiritual wisdom.

Of all four gospel accounts, the gospel of John gives us the most extended recording of the words exchanged between Pilate and Jesus: *"So Pilate entered his headquarters again and called Jesus and said to him, 'Are you the King of the Jews?' Jesus answered, 'Do you say this of your own accord, or did others say it to you about me?' Pilate answered, 'Am I a Jew? Your own nation and the chief priests have delivered you over to me. What have you done?' Jesus answered, 'My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would have been fighting, that I might not be delivered over to the Jews. But my kingdom is not from the world.' Then Pilate said to him, 'So you are a king?' Jesus answered, 'You say that I am a king. For this purpose I was born and for this purpose I have come into the world—to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice.' Pilate said to him, 'What is truth?' After he had said this, he went back outside to the Jews and told them, 'I find no guilt in him'" (John 18:33–38, ESV).*

Pilate is a perceptive man [show image  "Christ before Pilate" (1881) by Mihaly Munkacsy]. He has had conversations with rebels and insurrectionists. He knows what they look like and what they sound like. He quickly discerns that Jesus of Nazareth is no political revolutionary (Lk 23:4). He is simply a rival religious leader that the high priests of Jerusalem have captured and charged with crime out of jealousy.

Pilate cares a lot about Rome. He cares about Caesar. He cares about moving up the ladder. He cares a lot about his political career. He couldn't care less about intermural squabbles among people of a strange and foreign faith.

So, Pilate adopts a response that defines the first response of the world toward Jesus – *he ignores Jesus.*

Much of the world today can find Jesus and his gospel simply irrelevant to every-day life, in the same way that unicorns and fairies are irrelevant to every-day life.

Why? Because for Pilate, and for many people in the world today, reality is nothing more than matter in motion. We are imprisoned within what Canadian Philosopher Charles Taylor calls the *"immanent frame."* The here and now is all there is.

And hauntingly, this outlook on life is even possible for those who would consider themselves Christians. How do you know if this might be you?

Here is a helpful, double-edged question: *what are your greatest hopes and your greatest fears? Are your greatest hopes and fears focused on temporary things or eternal things?*

Pontius Pilate was a politician who wanted nothing more than the approval of Caesar because Caesar was the most important and powerful being in the world, or so he thought.

But now there stands before him one who is infinitely more powerful and more significant than all of the Roman Caesars put together. There stands before him one whose very word created the galaxies, filled with billions and billions of stars. There stands before him one who is so glorious that angels will sing into eternity of his holiness.

But because his eyes are so fixed on the things of this world, he misses the eternal one.

If your greatest hopes and your greatest fears are fixed on things like your career, your body image, your kid's athletic feats, your perceived social standing, you are in danger of missing Jesus.

It is even easy for self-identifying Christians to fall under this spell. But if we can say anything good or positive about this present trial of COVID-19, it is that we have an opportunity to consider that which is *most important*; that which is *most essential*; that which is *eternal*.

Train your heart to value the things that won't be in a junkyard in 100 years. Train your heart to cultivate a longing for that which is good and beautiful and true. Cry out to the Holy Spirit to give you eyes to see Jesus as he is.

For if we see Jesus as he is, we cannot ignore him.

2.) Jesus Against Herod

Pilate learns from the religious leaders that Jesus is from Galilee. This means that, technically, he would be a citizen under the jurisdiction of Herod Antipas, who had been given authority to rule over the region of Galilee (which is to the north of Jerusalem and Judea). Herod Antipas happened to be in Jerusalem that very moment. So Pilate does what many politicians have done with difficult political issues for centuries. He attempts to pass his problem to someone else (Lk 23:6-7).

So Jesus is taken to Herod.

Now, just for clarity's sake, this Herod is not the same ruler who tried to have Jesus murdered as a baby in Matthew 2. That guy was King Herod the Great [show image

3“Herod the Great” (b. 37 B.C. – d. 4 B.C)]). Herod the Great was the father of the Herod described here in Luke 23. This Herod, from Luke 23, is remembered as Herod Antipas [show image of 4“Herod Antipas” (b. 20 B.C. – d. A.D. 39)].

Herod the Great was not good man. And his son, Herod Antipas, didn’t fall far from the tree. This was the ruler, if you remember, who beheaded John the Baptist (cf. Lk 9:7-9).

But when Jesus stands before him, Herod Antipas is filled with glee. He has heard about Jesus. He knows about Jesus. He would never be like Pilate and ignore Jesus. He wants to be entertained by Jesus [show image 5“Jesus at Herod’s Court” (1310) by Duccio].

Even when the religious leaders hurl vehement and impassioned accusations against Jesus’s supposed crimes against humanity, Herod Antipas doesn’t care about all that. He just wants Jesus the miracle-worker to do a magic trick for him (Lk 23:8). He wants to see a “sign” (σημεῖον).

And whenever Jesus, stands in silence before him, Herod and his courtesans mock and abuse Jesus, before dressing him up in royal clothes as a juvenile prank and sending him away (Lk 23:11).

Herod Antipas adopts a second response of the world toward Jesus – *he trivializes Jesus*.

There are people in our world who have heard of Jesus. They might even know all about Jesus. But instead of honoring the name of Jesus, they trivialize Jesus.

Trivializing Jesus is what happens when we view Jesus, not as the object of our worship, but rather the stepping stone that gets us the thing we worship.

Herod Antipas wanted to instrumentalize Jesus into a means that fetched him good entertainment. Tragically, there are people who view Jesus as nothing more than a means to fetch health, wealth, and power. Many have taken our national idolatry of prosperity, painted in the veneer of Jesus’s name, and called it a gospel.

The good news of the gospel is not that Jesus can fetch us the things we want. The good news of the gospel is that through Jesus we have been reconciled to God.

We worship Jesus not because Jesus gets us stuff. We worship Jesus because, in Jesus, God gives us himself.

3.) Jesus Against the Crowd

Nothing unites people like a common enemy. Pilate and Herod Antipas were once at odds, but today they have become friends (Lk 23:12). They represent the world united in rebellion against God. They are the fulfillment of the first few verses of Psalm 2: *“Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth set themselves,*

and the rulers take counsel together, against the LORD and against his Anointed...”
(Psalm 2:1–2, ESV).

Now, Jesus is brought back to Pilate, and Pilate again states that he has found no crime in Jesus worthy of execution and death (Lk 23:13-26). Pilate presents Jesus before the crowd who has gathered before him [show image 6“Ecce Homo” (1871) by Antonio Ciseri].

The crowds that once supported Jesus and gathered to hear his teaching have now been stirred up into a frenzy. Now, they revile Jesus and cry out for his public execution.

Admittedly, this is an absurdly quick change of tone from the crowd. But we see the same dynamic at play in mob mentality and cancel-culture today. Crowds can idolize and faun over celebrities, and then in an instant, turn against the same celebrity with a torrent of hatred.

Initially, Pilate seems like he is willing to let Jesus go free. But at the end of the passage, he succumbs to the voice of the shouting mob.

Why does Pilate give in to the will of the crowd? It is my conviction that Pilate is a deeply practical politician. He does not want to cause drama by executing a popular leader that the Jewish religious leadership happen to hate. So he judges Jesus’s popularity based on crowd response. When the majority demands his death, he gives in to the will of the people as a way to earn political favor (Lk 23:24).

The crowd demands the death of Jesus. Pilate obliges and washes his hands. For him, this is just another day at his job. But it will be under his direction, that Jesus goes to the cross. It will be under his authority that one of the most pivotal events in human history will take place.

But it in is reference to the response of the crowd that I want to discuss the third response of the world to Jesus – *the crowd hates Jesus*.

In a sense, the world has always hated Jesus. In the year A.D. 64 [show image 7“Emperor Nero as Rome Burns in A.D. 64”], after a colossal fire broke out in the city of Rome, the Emperor Nero used Christians as a scapegoat to blame the tragedy on. And there are still people today, who still will jump at the opportunity to blame just about any evil in the world on Christians. Just last week, the *New York Times* even published an Op-ed article entitled, “The Road to Coronavirus Hell Was Paved by Evangelicals” [show image of 8“*The Road to Coronavirus Hell...*”].

Now sadly, there are plenty of examples of sin within the church, wherein the world has plenty of valid opportunity to cast just criticism upon the church. And woe to Christians, when our words and actions dishonor the name of Jesus.

But the deepest reason for the animosity of the world against Jesus is because Jesus has claimed Lordship over our lives. And the world rejects the claim of Jesus.

The crowds that cried out shouts of “Hosanna!” on the first Palm Sunday, on Good Friday will cry out, “Crucify him!”

Conclusion

Now, before we conclude our time together today, I want to take a closer look at a very minor character of the story. His name is Barabbas (Lk 23:18) [show image of “Barabbas in The Passion of the Christ (2004)”]. Up until this point, we have heard nothing about Barabbas. But the fact that he is mentioned in all four gospels suggests that he is much more important to the story of the gospel than we might first expect.

Remember, this is the time in Jerusalem of the Passover feast. And apparently, as a way to curry favor with the Jewish people, Pilate would release one prisoner every year during this feast. The question he poses to the crowd is: do you want Jesus, or do you want Barabbas?

How could this ever be a legitimate question of comparison? Jesus is the healer of the sick, feeder of the hungry, and deliverer of the demonically oppressed. He is the living word of God, the radiance of the glory of God, and the exact imprint of God’s divine nature!

Who is Barabbas? Barabbas was a murderer and anarchist who attempted to lead an insurrection and revolution (Lk 23:19). In other words, Barabbas is guilty of all the accusations that have been brought against Jesus.

Barabbas is everything that Jesus is not.

Barabbas is a murderer. Jesus is the Prince of Peace.

Barabbas – a combination of the words “bar”(meaning son) and “Abba”(meaning father) – has a name that literally means “son of the father.” But Jesus is truly the only begotten son of God the Father.

Barabbas deserves death on the cross. Jesus deserves worship into eternity.

Yet, Jesus takes the place of Barabbas. Jesus becomes his substitute. And Barabbas goes free (Lk 23:25).

As we look into Luke 23, and we see all the ways that the world stands in opposition to Jesus, we might be tempted to see ourselves in the wrong place in the story. We might be tempted to see ourselves as victims who are opposed by the world? And in some cases, that may be true.

But what is always true, what is most fundamentally true of every person who calls themselves a Christian, is that *we are Barabbas!*

We have rebelled against God. We have fractured creation. We have worshipped ourselves instead of our Creator. We have merited death.

But Jesus Christ the righteous became our substitute so that we might become sons of the father. Jesus was hated and condemned so that we could receive God's love by grace and grace alone!

Jesus did not die for you in your best moment. Jesus did not die for you because he saw your best efforts. Your very best discipline and devotion cannot earn the love of God! Our righteous deeds are as but filthy rags before God. No, Jesus died for us at our worst moment, when we were his enemies. As Paul says in Roman 5: *“For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die— but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us”* (Romans 5:6–8, ESV).

So at the end of the day, there are *four* ways we can respond to Jesus.

We can ignore Jesus, like Pilate. We can trivialize Jesus, like Herod. We can hate Jesus, like the crowds. Or we can receive freedom that we do not deserve because of Jesus, like Barabbas.

Redeemer Christian Church, as we walk into this Holy Week, may we be those who receive the freedom and grace that is found only in Jesus.

AMEN.

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