

Good Friday - Chief Service
29 March, Anno Domini 2024
St. John 18:1-19:42

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and from our crucified Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Our Lord asked the crowds that had come to arrest Him a very simple question - "Whom do you seek?" As we gather this day and focus our eyes and ears on the sufferings and death of Jesus, I ask you the same question - "Whom do you seek?"

Of course there are a lot of ways that any of us could consider that question and our answer largely stems from what is going on in our lives at the moment. Perhaps we are looking for a healer, a mentor, a friend, a counselor, or a financial adviser. But I doubt that many of us would respond with a king, someone to rule over me.

Perhaps that's a strange thought in a nation that threw off its monarchy in favor of a representative government. And yet, look at how much we expect from whoever holds the office of President in our day. Rather than simply executing the laws and policies put in place by our representatives, Presidents today are expected to be the one's setting the tone of the nation. Speech after speech is filled with promises of "the first thing I will do if I am elected is..." That sounds more like a king than what was originally put in place.

I believe it does betray an underlying truth, however. We were created by God to live under Him and serve Him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness. He was King. It is in our nature to have this ordered relationship with God.

What happened when man tried to step out of that order, when the subject tried to throw off what he believed were shackles put on him by his Divine King? He threw himself and all men out of the good and gracious kingdom of God where the

King of Love used everything at His disposal, all of creation, to bless man. Adam threw our lot in with the devil who has no interest in our good. His only interest is the destruction of everything good thing which God has done. We chose to serve an evil dictator rather than a good and benevolent King.

And what has been the result for us? Misery. Death. Famine. War. Stealing. Genocide. Hatred. Poverty. Disease. Fear. Nothing good. The more man thinks that he can be his own king, the more man sets himself at odds with God to his own temporal and eternal destruction.

Whenever we refuse to submit ourselves to the Word of God, whenever we find ourselves rationalizing why it's okay for us to do other than what God has commanded, then we are taking up arms against God and challenging His authority over us. We are attempting a coup that only and always ends in eternal death for us. Imitating and seeking out the immodest and perverse images and practices that flood across our TVs, computers, and phones; imagining that it will be better for us if we sweat and toil and labor sunup to sundown chasing after the lifestyle of our dreams; getting drunk; filling our mouths with vulgar words and conversations; skipping church and family devotions; worrying ourselves sick about economic collapses and government corruption - such godlessness only fills our lives with anxiousness, emptiness, guilt, and sorrow. The imaginations of our heart are vanity at best and evil at worst. The only thing man is really good at is destroying the good that God has made.

The reality is that we need God to be King and we need to be subjects in His kingdom. We need God to be the one ruling over all things in heaven and on earth, moving all things according to His infinite and gracious wisdom for our good. We need God to supply us with our daily bread and to protect us from the raging enemies that surround us every day. We need the King of the Jews who this day hung bloodied, bruised, and pierced on His wooden throne, crowned with the thorny curse of our eternal condemnation. This is precisely how He becomes our King again.

In Gethsemane, the crowd said that they were looking for a man, Jesus of Nazareth. In their minds, this man Jesus was a blasphemer, a Samaritan, and a false prophet. He was a danger that needed to be dealt with. And the charge that the Jews would use as leverage against Pontius Pilate to pressure him to carry out their will to destroy Jesus would be that he was a threat to Pilate and to Caesar.

Pilate asked Jesus very pointedly “Are you the King of the Jews?” Jesus certainly doesn’t deny it. Why would He? That is EXACTLY who He is. He is the King of the Jews from of old. He is the Divine Monarch who drowned hard-hearted Pharaoh and his hosts in the Red Sea while Israel passed safely through the waters on dry ground, freeing Jacob’s children from bondage. He is the King who drove out the pagan nations from the Promised Land for Israel. And He is the King whom Israel then summarily deposed in favor of a king more like their pagan neighbors - a man. They would rather a man rule over them than have God as their King - until they needed help and their kings failed them.

Time and again Israel rebelled against God, building Ashera poles, sacrificing their children to Molech, bowing down to Baal, entrusting their welfare to foreign gods and foreign kings. Time and again, after God would hear their cries for deliverance, Israel would return to their wickedness and adulterate themselves with idols. Time and again, Israel’s kings would lead Israel astray from their true King.

But, in truth, God never stopped being King. He can only be deposed in the vain imaginations of man’s heart. God doesn’t stop being God because man pretends to be God. “Why do the nations rage and the peoples imagine a vain thing? The kings of the earth set themselves and the rulers take counsel together against the Lord and against His anointed saying, ‘Let us break their bonds asunder and cast away their cords from us.’” (Psalm 2:1-2)

To his own destruction, man does not like the kind of King that God is. Man wants a ruler who does his bidding, who feeds his belly, who clears the path for him to chase after every desire that he has and punish those who would stand in his way. Man wants tyrants and is impressed by tyrants because each of us is a tyrant in our

own heart. We like to exercise power over others. We like when others serve us.

That is not the King before us today. The King before us today goes with singleness of purpose and allows those who should bow down to Him, to instead bind Him and beat Him. This King allowed impudent servants, servants who daily benefit from His kindness and His mercy to spit in His face, to mock Him, to charge Him with false crimes, and finally dare to seek His murder on the charge that He claims to be exactly who His is - the I AM who spoke to Moses from the burning bush, who brought forth water from a rock, and who provided manna and quail for forty years in the wilderness.

The true King, the source of all authority, submits Himself to Pilate who used his authority for nothing more than personal gain and refused to set free a man he knew beyond a shadow of a doubt to be innocent. The true King allowed those whom He has created to mount an insurrection against His benevolent and gracious rule and then promised to conquer the tyrant who now rules over them by offering His own life to pay the only sufficient price of their ransom.

Only the true King, He who was and is and is to come, the Alpha and Omega would behave in ways that seem so foolish, so weak, and so contrary to all human reason. He alone who does not stoop to our foolishness and cease to mercifully rule over us because we don't want Him to suffers all of this for us. His nature doesn't change just because we have immeasurably corrupted our own, a nature which He created originally to be as pristine and holy as He Himself is.

Today above all days do we see the King of kings and Lord of lords in His truest character - laying down His life to save wicked servants who would rise up in revolt against Him. Pilate couldn't have been more right. It's not just that Jesus is the King of the Jews. It is Jesus hanging from the cross, despised by men, and forsaken by God that is the King of the Jews. This is His righteousness. This is His rule. This is His kingdom. This is the fullness of His power and strength in motion. The strength of our King is not the legions of angel hosts that surround Him, or His ability to cause His will to be done. Rather, it is His love for sinners and His

unyielding desire to save us from eternal destruction even though we deserve it in every way.

This is how God carries out His gracious rule over you. He dies for you. He suffers His own wrath for you. He conquers sin and death for you by clothing Himself in your sin and dying your death. He overthrows Satan by taking away every accusation that the Law has against you and laying claim to them as His own, though He committed no sin and no deceit was found in His mouth.

And in His immeasurable mercy He has called you into the kingdom which He has established by His Blood. He has washed away your rebelliousness and put upon the royal robes of His righteousness. Rather than “enemy”, He calls you “brother”. He provides for all your needs of body and soul. He sets before you the rich feast of His Body and Blood, promising to you that everything that belongs to Him belongs to you. He has called you away from the futility and destruction of your rebellion so that you might be again in His kingdom, so that He might serve you, so that you might live with Him forever.

This is your King, O Israel! Behold Him in all of His splendid majesty and bow down before Him. Love His cross for it is your salvation. Look forward with great joy to the empty tomb from whence your King has triumphantly risen. Submit in faith to the King of Jews who has died for you. Behold your King and your God!

In the Name of +Jesus.

Pastor Ulmer

(We stand.) The peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.