

ὁ λόγος παρακλήσεως: Good Friday (2 April 2021)

St. Thomas', Glassboro

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Collect

Almighty God, we pray you graciously to behold this your family, for whom our Lord Jesus Christ was willing to be betrayed, and given into the hands of sinners, and to suffer death upon the cross; who now lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Isaiah 52:13-53:12, Hebrews 10:16-25, John 18:1-19:42, Psalm 22

1 The King of the Jews and Antisemitism

Pilate also had an inscription written and put on the cross. It read, “Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews.” Many of the Jews read this inscription, because the place where Jesus was crucified was near the city; and it was written in Hebrew, in Latin, and in Greek. Then the chief priests of the Jews said to Pilate, “Do not write, ‘The King of the Jews,’ but, ‘This man said, I am King of the Jews.’” Pilate answered, “What I have written I have written.”¹

This was a text that spoke with ambiguity. It was written by Pilate, the governor of Judea. He dictated that it should be written in three languages, in Hebrew, in Latin, and in Greek, and he had it tacked up on the cross. Pilate wrote, “Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews.”

2 What Pilate wrote

“Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews.” Pilate wrote something that was personal, geographical, political, and finally racial.

What Pilate wrote was personal. He wasn't executing just any person. This was Jesus on the cross, a specific person with a specific message of God's love and liberation. Most rabbis weren't being killed for what they taught. Most teachers knew how to toe the line and not upset anyone too much. But Jesus refused to be shushed. **Pilate's message** was that crucifixion awaits anyone who does not defer to Pilate's will.

What Pilate wrote was geographical. Nazareth was a backwater town far off in the hills of Galilee, a region known for giving birth to rebels who railed against the invasion of their country by the Roman Empire. Nazareth was perched way up on a hill where everyone could see it, and where it could see its enemies approaching from far off and be ready to defend itself. But **Pilate's message** was that his reach and his absolute power extended even to little, far-off places. At the first sign of rebellion, there would be crosses lining the roads even to Nazareth.

¹John 19:19–22

What Pilate wrote was political. Pilate labeled Jesus as a King. Again, Pilate was the governor of Judea, representing another sovereign, the Emperor Tiberius. Any competing claims to kingship were threats to Pilate's legitimacy and tamping them down was precisely Pilate's responsibility. Pilate would not countenance insurrection. **Pilate's message** was that Rome would brook no competition for its subjects' loyalty.

Finally, **what Pilate wrote** was racial in nature: it was racist. Jesus' Jewishness, said Pilate, was a relevant factor. Part of Jesus' fault, said Pilate, was his very identity as a Jew. **Pilate's message** was that Jewishness was an identity to be treated with contempt, and that those who would act violently toward Jewish people would face no censure from the state.

That's what Pilate wrote on the sign that he hung on the cross. And he wrote it in three languages.

3 What Jesus wrote

But despite what he may have thought, Pilate didn't write that sign on his own. One of the fascinating things about John's Gospel is how there's no question, from beginning to end: Jesus is in charge. Jesus is in control. Even in the garden of Gethsemane, as Jesus struggles with what is about to happen, Jesus has agency and choice. And Jesus chooses exactly how everything plays out. John's Gospel portrays the cross as a throne. And that sign that Pilate posted up? That sign was a *royal proclamation*. That sign was written, ultimately, by Jesus. He proclaimed, "Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews."

What Jesus wrote was personal. Jesus wasn't an impersonal god in a far-off heaven. God had put on flesh, God became a man, God has a name and a gender and an ethnicity (and despite the *overwhelming* testimony of images in this particular room, Jesus was *not* a white European)! God had a name and it was Jesus. Jesus spoke three languages or more: the language of the Hebrews, the language of the Roman state, and the language of the Greek people among whom Jesus and his father found work in the building trades. Jesus was what happened when God put on flesh and lived among us, not as an ideal, but as a person. A person who sometimes got sick with viruses, sometimes had conflict with his family and his friends, sometimes was tired, and sometimes was hurt. **Jesus' message** was that God is a person, and God cares about you as an individual as well as your community.

What Jesus wrote was geographical. Jesus was from Nazareth, an actual town in the real world. Jesus wasn't a member of a political elite, born to power. When Jesus spoke, when he told stories and drew illustrations, they came from his life in a small town, from that city on a hill, where he was raised. Jesus' message was *not* aimed primarily at theologians and deep thinkers. **Jesus' message** was of a God who was to be found not in ivory palaces or ivory towers, but in your vegetable garden and around your dinner table. God was to be found among tax collectors and sinners, and finally hanging between two thieves on a cross.

What Jesus wrote was political. Jesus is King. Jesus is indeed a threat to Pilate's reign whatever form Pilate may take in our world today. Jesus is the King who is the source and the sustainer of "all things in heaven and on earth [that] were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers."² From the cross Jesus supports his people in a struggle "not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places."³ **Jesus' message** was that, on the cross, he had "disarmed the rulers and authorities and

²Col 1.16 NRSV

³Eph 6.12 NRSV

made a public example of them, *triumphing* over them.”⁴

Finally, what Jesus wrote concerned race. Jesus was the King of the Jews. He was the King of an oppressed people, a conquered people, a minority people. Jesus was intentional and unfaltering in choosing to identify himself with those who were regularly brutalized by the authorities, those who were tortured and murdered by being hung on crosses lining the roads in an intentional program of intimidation and an assertion of Roman supremacy. **Jesus’ message** to every person who has been misused, mistreated, cheated, betrayed, spit upon, beaten, stolen from or otherwise hurt was a clear, “I’m with you. I’m on your side. Even if you experience hardship for a little while, there is a Kingdom coming where you belong.” A word of comfort to the Jews, and to any other person or group who is treated poorly. A word of warning to those who would trouble them.

4 How do you read the sign?

Today as we celebrate Good Friday, the question I want to ask is this: how do you read the sign? It was written in three languages. We’ve considered the views of two of its major interpreters.

If you are experiencing crucifixion in your own life – if you are in agony and suffering with some burden that threatens to overwhelm and sink you, there’s a sign on the cross that Jesus put there for you. Pilate intended the sign to say he’ll do the same thing to you that he did to Jesus if you don’t follow his rules. And Pilate may yet try. But Jesus put that sign up there to let you know that he suffers in solidarity with you. It is Jesus on the cross who turns to the thief beside him and says, “today you will be with me in paradise.”

If you are not experiencing crucifixion in your own life: praise God for God’s many mercies. And beware! Pilate has posted a sign claiming your continued safety and well-being are totally in his hands. If he is your king, then that’s so. But Pilate is neither so reliable in his power nor so constant in his affections as our Lord Jesus. On the other hand, Jesus has posted a sign on the cross pointing to where you mind find him. You will find him not in a comfortable palace, a perfect job, or a fancy car. Instead, you’re going to find him among the oppressed, the poor, anyone whom others define by their race, whoever is treated with contempt. You will find Jesus where there is someone suffering, someone in pain, someone who’s struggling. Including when that someone, someday, is you.

I think this is why we celebrate Good Friday. There’s no Eucharist, no foot-washing, no celebratory music. There’s just a cross, a lynching tree. Good Friday keeps the cross in our midst, keeps our focus on it. Good Friday reminds us that the cross is the defining symbol of our faith. The cross is the interpretive lens through which we are invited to see the world, to read the signs, to live our lives. The cross is the signpost, with a hand-written sign tacked up on it. Pilate meant that sign to reinforce the evil in the world’s systems and his own vested interests. But Jesus posted that sign in order to offer hope, to offer solidarity, and to offer the sure promise that after the cross, through the cross, despite the cross, because of the cross – there then comes Resurrection.

If you want to find Jesus, look for the cross.

Amen.

⁴Col 2.15 NRSV