

Sermon Good Friday 2024 03 29

We hear the story and it sounds so familiar, and yet it's not. The Gospel of John tells the story of Christ's betrayal, crucifixion and death a little differently than the other Gospels. It is helpful to spend a moment understanding what was going on in the world that Jesus lived in.

You know that Pontius Pilate was an appointed Roman Governor. He – not the Jewish people or Levites – selected a High Priest, whose task it was to run the Temple. For things to run smoothly, Pilate had to have someone running the Temple and being the nominal leader of the Judean populace who would be cooperative with Rome. And the High Priest and the people of Judea were subordinate to and reliant on the good will of the Roman Empire, and that empire varied in its treatment of the Jewish people depending on who was the Emperor.

It was a complicated and tense relationship. You hear that in the exchanges between the Roman leaders and the Judean leaders. There's a lot of back and forth. And all these events are occurring in the midst of the Feast of the Passover, when the city of Jerusalem is crowded with those who come to the Temple to celebrate a feast about the triumph of the Israelites over another oppressive regime. It's a tinderbox.

Pilate doesn't want any riots on his watch, because he wants to escape this assignment in a backwater place far from Rome. He knows

that Jesus is popular in some quarters. He also knows that the Judean leaders view him as a troublemaker who threatens their leadership. Pilate doesn't want to be put in the middle. He doesn't want to have to solve their internal political problem – namely, a popular and gifted religious reformer – by making Rome – HIM - do their dirty work.

As is often the case in such a parlous situation, Pilate thinks he's an adroit enough politician to sidestep by giving the people a chance to claim a pardon for Jesus, but it doesn't work. The crowd doesn't say "give us Jesus." They cry "give us Barabbas." The religious leaders say that Rome has to crucify Jesus because the religious holy feast means they cannot participate in his death, and because Jesus, in claiming he is a King, is defying the imperial power of Rome and the emperor.

It is a mess, and that mess is compounded by Pilate putting the inscription "King of the Jews" on the cross. The religious leaders complain because they say they never named Jesus King. They're afraid this will cause the Romans to accuse them of insurrection, and there will be greater oppression. But Pilate stands firm, because he's got to justify his actions to his political superiors.

It is no wonder that Pilate, in questioning Jesus, makes the potent rhetorical statement, "what is truth?"

We can look back over the whole arc of this horrible story, and see so many moments where if people were actually seeking the truth rather than looking to save their own skins, something different might have happened.

But because these people were human...

...confused, frightened, angry, exhausted people...

...they committed a great sin. The disciples who denied and abandoned Jesus. The religious leaders that saw him as a threat. The crowds who were easily led by people with an agenda. The Roman governor who did the easy thing – just kill him already! – rather than saying that it wasn't right. The soldiers. All of them.

Not seeing the truth standing right in front of them. The truth that is Jesus. The truth of his assassination, for that is what it was, a political monkey's paw of terrible actions and unforeseen consequences.

And yet, because God transforms anything into something for the good, even this murder of the Son of God is turned into something beyond our comprehension in three days – Jesus risen from the dead on Easter.

Equally incomprehensibly, the sins of all of us, not just those who were there on Good Friday, are redeemed fully.

It is hard to hear this story, to be present to all of the sinful actions that lead to betrayal, torture and crucifixion, isn't it?

It is the darkest of stories of our brokenness.

We don't want to hear it again, because it's so painful.

And yet we must, if we are to understand just how great God's love is for us. To willingly let his only Son die in the midst of human stupidity so that our humanity is salvaged. To see the glory that is Easter, our salvation.

May we thank the Lord every day for that love. May we live in a way that affirms God's love and may we pass it to those whom we encounter. May we surrender ourselves to the love that is beyond our understanding, now and always.

Amen.