

“True Power”
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St. Luke’s Episcopal Church – Anchorage, Kentucky
Good Friday – 19 April 2019
John 18:1 – 19:42

It was all about power, who had it and who didn’t, what type of power they wielded, how they exercised it and why, and which power would prove to be the greatest. There were three major power-players: the high priests and their associates; Pilate, the Roman governor of the province; and Jesus.

The religious elite possessed a small armed force, enough to capture Jesus without hope for escape. They also controlled the system of sacrifices in the Temple in Jerusalem. No one could exercise their faith fully without their help to perform the necessary rituals. And because people respected them, and not unjustifiably, the priests could persuade, shape how people viewed right and wrong. They were a force to be reckoned with, a group of people dangerous to provoke, and Jesus had done just that.

His message, the miraculous signs that brought him fame, posed a threat to them. He had followers, some of them very enthusiastic, and that could mean trouble. Those with power do not like sharing it, and they’re usually prepared take risks and do harm to protect it. So the religious elite arrested Jesus and took him to Pilate.

They wanted him dead. From their perspective, they needed him dead. There was only one problem. It would be best if they could evade responsibility, to avoid the ire of the Jesus fans. The answer to that problem was Pilate. Convince Pilate that Jesus was a revolutionary firebrand intent on overthrowing Rome. Their concern was partially genuine. People like Jesus had caused agitation in the past that had led to rebellions that led to horrible Roman reprisals. So

that's the charge they brought. "Look here, Pilate. We caught another one of those crazy radicals intent on bringing you down."

Now, among his many powers, Pilate could condemn or let a person live, and according to non-biblical historical sources, the man was not squeamish. He probably didn't appreciate being bothered with this. Jerusalem was bursting with pilgrims who'd come for the Passover. Nothing can incite a riot faster than religious zeal, so Pilate was preoccupied. But for that very reason, he couldn't ignore Jesus, or the priests who made very serious charges against him.

So Pilate asked, "Are you the King of the Jews?" But Jesus, being Jesus, didn't give him a straight answer. Instead, he prattled on about testifying to the truth and people listening to his voice. This baffled Pilate. "What is truth?" he sneered. The sad irony is that the truth was standing just a few feet away from him, and Pilate couldn't see it, but he also couldn't see any reason to kill Jesus. He went outside and told Jesus' accusers. "Nothing to worry about here. Case closed. He's innocent." But that didn't work.

The priests weren't satisfied, so Pilate tried to compromise. He had Jesus flogged. Maybe a little blood and suffering would be enough. Then Pilate brought Jesus outside with the crown of thorns and purple robe only to be met by a rabid crowd shouting "Crucify him!" And then the deception of the priests, "Kill him, Pilate. He's bad news for Rome." The deception of the priests came tumbling down, and the real reason came out. "[H]e has claimed to be the Son of God."

This put Pilate in a much more difficult position. Jerusalem was a tinderbox waiting for a spark, and here's a guy who might think he's the Son of God. He could set the city on fire and burn it to the ground, quite literally. But at the same time, what if he actually was the Son of God? Pilate, like most Gentiles, worshipped many gods. In his mind, it was possible that he was

dealing with a divine entity, someone much more fearful than a bunch of furious priests. So back inside he went, asking Jesus, “Where are you from?” As Southerners, we know that’s more than a geographical question. Where you’re from says a lot about you, and if Jesus came from an otherworldly realm . . .

But Jesus stayed silent, and a stressed out, fed up Pilate lashed out, “Who do you think you are? Who do you think you’re dealing with? I’m the guy who decides if you live or die.” Then Jesus answered, “You would have no power over me unless it had been given you from above.” That scary. If what Jesus said was true, killing him might bring down divine wrath.

So out he went again. “I really don’t see what the issue is here.” But those angry, envious priests and the crowd they’d summoned to support their cause just got louder, and finally Pilate handed Jesus over to be crucified. He’d done what he could, and we can almost pity him, caught in the middle of a complicated situation at the worst of all possible times. What if he’d just condemned a demigod to death? But let’s not feel too sorry for Pilate. He had the power to choose life, but felt so intimidated by the power of others that he gave Jesus up to them.

And then there was Jesus, who throughout seems so powerless, or at least refuses to use his power. When the soldiers and police came, he went quietly, even fussed at Peter for resorting to violence in an effort to save him. Under interrogation, he stayed mostly silent. He could have pled his case, raised objections, denied the charges, but he didn’t. We want Jesus to fight, to really let them have it, to warn and threaten, really put the fear of God into them, and in his own way, he did.

Jesus claimed a power much greater than anyone else’s. Unlike those whose power came from law and violence, Jesus derived his power from a much higher source. “My kingdom is not from this world.” His power worked differently. “If my kingdom were from this world, my

followers would be fighting to keep me . . . But as it is, my kingdom is not from here.” As he told Pilate, “You would have no power over me unless it had been given you from above.”

And he claimed to be the truth. Not the person who knew the truth, but the person who was the truth, and despite disheartening evidence to the contrary in our world, where deceit is pervasive, nothing is more powerful than the truth, because eventually, it shines through, disperses the darkness of falsehood, and wins the day.

In three days’ time, the truth would stand victorious over Pilate’s power to kill. In three days’, the truth would prove wrong the priests and their pretenses to power. It would overcome the three lies that Peter told to keep himself safe.

The truth that died on the cross prompted Joseph of Arimathea, a secret follower of Jesus, to break through his fear of what others might think of him or do. He asked Pilate for Jesus’s body, to give him a proper burial. Normally, the crucified were just tossed in a ditch. The truth of the cross gave Nicodemus strength he needed to come out from under the cover of darkness and provide the spices to anoint the corpse of God’s Anointed One. The truth won, because it was inevitable. When you go up against the truth, you might win some battles, but the outcome of the war’s been decided long before it began. That is the power of Jesus.

His was a power that relented, that allowed himself to be handed over, from Judas to the guards, from the guards to the priests, from the priests to Pilate, from Pilate to the cross. It takes great power to exercise such restraint, such discipline, and we desperately need to accept and practice that type of power in a world where one of the biggest lies is that power means not having to exercise restraint, not having to exercise discipline.

The power of Jesus was to go through what he was meant to do, knowing how painful and humiliating it would be. The power of Jesus was to keep faith in his Father by knowing who

he was and where he came from, and what that meant. The power of Jesus was to see that what others perceived to be the end was merely the prelude to something infinitely greater, the emergence of an incomparable power that conquered even the grave.

That is real power, an incontestable power, truth embodied in Jesus. And we have a choice, just like everybody else, to accept that truth or deny it, to submit to that truth or resist it. But first we have to see it, and that means looking really hard.

The priests didn't see the truth. They saw a problem and eagerly lied to solve it. Pilate didn't see the truth literally staring him in the face, so he just passed Jesus along to get it over with. The priests thought they had power. Pilate thought he had power. All of them were proud of their power. And to some extent, they did have power. But it was meaningless, because their type of power and how they used it blinded them to the truth, the only power that matters.

What sort of power do we claim? "I'm my own person." No, you're not. You belong to Jesus. That's who we are and where we come from. That's the sole source of a meaningful life, a life of peace. "I'm going to get my own way." No, you won't. Without the grace of Jesus who is the way and the truth and the life, we can't punch our way out of a wet paper bag. "I'm in control of my life." Why on Earth would you want to be, when Jesus humbly sacrificed so we'd be relieved of that burden, a burden that only leads to the hardship caused by sin?

Like Jesus, we need to surrender, to accept being handed over. Unlike Jesus, we need not be handed over to the power of lies and violence, but to Jesus and him alone. Being handed over to Jesus, allowing him to grasp us in his loving embrace, what a grace that is to be freed to see the truth and live by it and share it with others. What grace to take the cross, symbol of shame, and be transformed by it, so that we too might rise again renewed to celebrate with joy and praise? What grace. What great amazing grace. Amen.