

**Sermon preached at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church, Kingstowne, Virginia,  
by Pastor David Fischler, on Sunday, March 29, 2015  
Palm Sunday**

**CHEERS AND JEERS**

**Mark 15:1-47**

The week started out very well. On Sunday morning Jesus rode into Jerusalem in triumph. In acts that fulfilled the Old Testament prophecies the Messiah of Israel entered the Holy City to the cheers of the crowd that gathered as if in expectation of a royal coronation. They shouted “Hosanna!” which indicates jubilation that help from heaven had arrived. They shouted “Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord!” acknowledging the Nazarene’s religious significance. They called out “Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David!” which signified the nature of the hope they placed in Him. They cried out “Hosanna in the highest heaven!” begging for God to grant them freedom. They laid palm branches at His feet in celebration at His coming and they spread their cloaks on the ground before Him to offer their loyalty. It seemed that the sky was the limit for the Man from Galilee, for the Teacher, the Miracle-worker, the Prophet, and, they prayed, the King. Soon, however, those cheers turned to jeers. As the week wore on and the controversy between Jesus and the various Jewish leaders grew more intense and the desired rebellion to overthrow the Roman occupation didn’t materialize, the mood grew ugly in Jerusalem. The chief priests, religious lawyers, Pharisees, Sadducees, perhaps others, schemed against Jesus and finally decide, since they feared what might happen if they took violent action against Him themselves, to turn Him over to the Romans on charges of sedition and treason. On Thursday, after He had celebrated the Passover or Seder with His inner circle of disciples, they sent temple guards to arrest Jesus and after holding Him overnight they brought Him before the Roman governor, a man named Pontius Pilate.

In the first part of Chapter 15 of the Gospel of Mark we see what happened next. Chapter 15 begins by telling us that very early in the morning the chief priests, the teachers of the law, the whole Sanhedrin, the leadership of Judaism in Israel reached a decision. They had held Jesus overnight. They had arrested Him Thursday evening, and early in the morning they came to a decision about what to do and that’s when they took Him to Pilate. And Pilate posed a question to Him. In verse 2, Pilate asks, “Are You the King of the Jews?” That’s what He had been accused of saying by the leaders of Judaism. They didn’t accuse Him of blasphemy. They didn’t accuse Him of threats against the Temple. They certainly didn’t accuse Him of trying to overthrow their religious laws or system. If they tried to do that, Pilate’s response would have been, “You have got to be kidding me! You are wasting my time with your intra-religious disputes. Am I Jew? What do I know about such things? Better question, why do I care?” And they would have had no answer to that. Pilate wasn’t a Jew and he didn’t care, he genuinely didn’t care how they arranged their religious affairs, what they taught, any of that. It didn’t matter. As long as they paid their taxes and kept quiet, that was the important thing. But what the leaders suggested to him was that this man, Jesus, was

going to disturb the peace, and He was going to disturb the peace in a big way. They said that He claimed to be King of the Jews and that was a problem.

Pilate was a politician. In modern times, who knows, he might have run for Congress if he had the right constituency. And as a politician, he thought strictly in terms of political power. He knew that he had some and he knew why he had some. He had some because he was a loyal employee of Caesar in Rome. He did at least an adequate enough job so that he could keep his job, keep his position, keep his power and would continue to do so as long as the tax money flowed and things remained quiet. But there was a problem. The problem was that he presided over one of the most fractious and disagreeable provinces of the Roman Empire. Some of us know the old joke that when you get three Jews together there are four opinions. Well, what happens when you get 3,000 Jews together with 4,000 opinions-and weapons? Unfortunately, Pilate had had to deal with any number of instances of at least small scale rebellion. Barabbas, the man mentioned later on in this passage, is an example of one of those who committed the crime of insurrection. They weren't simply bandits. They were looking to overthrow the established order. That didn't mean that they were trying to destroy the Roman Empire or anything like that. All they wanted was to kick the Romans out of Israel so that the Jewish people could rule themselves. And why is that a problem? Well, it's a problem for Pilate because of obvious reasons. It makes him pointless and dispensable. It also makes difficult the collection of taxes by Rome. And while Judea was not by any means a rich province, it did contribute its share to the Roman treasury. But most importantly, it was because Rome bestrode the world based on its own unassailable power. As long as Roman legions were undefeated in battle, and as long as none of the areas that they ruled successfully rebelled, Rome would continue as an unchallenged power throughout the Mediterranean world. So keeping the peace was important, and to have this man Jesus, according to His own religious leaders, claim that He was actually King of the Jews, not that puppet Herod, that joke of a man who held the throne simply to amuse the masses, threatened that peace. Not to mention being a conduit for further Roman control. No, this Man claimed to be King of the Jews and that He was going to be the One who was going to overthrow Rome's rule.

So Pilate asks Him this question: "Are You, as they accuse You of saying, the King of the Jews?" Jesus' answer, in the second part of verse 2, is one that Pilate finds baffling. "Yes, it is as you say." That is how the New International Version translates it. The literal expression that is used there is: "You say." It's only two words: "You say." And that could be translated the way that the NIV does or it could mean: "You say so." Or – and I really like this one – it could be translated: "Whatever you say." Anybody here ever use that expression? It tends to be dismissive. It tends to indicate that you don't think the person who is saying whatever it is they are saying knows what they're talking about but you're willing to be agreeable so you just go along with it. You'll humor them. In a sense that's what Jesus is doing here. And Pilate, I suspect, thought to himself: "What does that mean? 'Whatever you say.' What does that mean? Isn't He taking the charge against Him seriously? Doesn't He know that I hold the power of life and death over Him? I hold His life in the palm of my hand and His answer is: 'Whatever?'" How

did we suddenly get transported to 21<sup>st</sup> century southern California? “Hey, man, whatever.”

After He says that, the chief priests who are still there and still listening start throwing other accusations at Him and no doubt those other accusations were also political. The other gospels record some of them. For instance, one that was mentioned was that He threatened to destroy the Temple, which obviously was an act that Pilate as governor was not going to stand by and take less than seriously. Not that he cared about the Temple in particular, but you can't go around destroying property willfully. And so in verse 4, after the charges in verse 3, Pilate asks Him: “Aren't You going to answer? See how many things they are accusing You of.” We have the original accusation, that He said He was King of the Jews. Now they're piling on. “Aren't you going to defend Yourself?” That's what a normal person does, right? When they are wrongly accused they defend themselves, they explain why it is that the accuser is wrong, why they've misunderstood or why they haven't presented evidence that needs to be presented. They don't just stand there, mute. And Pilate now is genuinely flummoxed. He doesn't understand what's going on. He can't comprehend a man who won't defend himself against false and defamatory and, in this particular instance, potentially fatal accusations.

Jesus' silence might baffle us, too. Why didn't He set him straight? You could tell a bit later in the story and by what Pilate does before the crowd that he has real doubts about Jesus' actual guilt regarding the stuff He's been charged with. Pilate is not a hero by any means in this story. He's a coward who basically gives the crowd what it wants and allows an innocent Man to die. Basically it's to keep them happy. But he does know, I think, deep down he knows this is nonsense. Jesus hasn't done what He's accused of. He's not a threat to Rome. In fact, this is all a matter of the chief priests trying to get rid of someone for whatever reason they find inconvenient.

Pilate doesn't understand, but in fact Jesus' silence serves two purposes. One, it fulfills prophecy. You'll remember this passage from Isaiah 53:7: “He was oppressed and afflicted yet He did not open His mouth. He was led like a lamb to the slaughter but like a sheep before its shearers is silent, so He did not open His mouth.” Jesus no doubt knew that passage and knew that at the moment when He was faced with a decision and the decision was to defend Himself and to short-circuit this wholly unjust process, that He had a choice. He could defend Himself, which is what any of us would have done, or He could remain silent in order that His mission might be fulfilled.

There's a second reason, I think, why Jesus is silent here and it has to do with His mission. If He had explained to Pilate what He was actually here for, Pilate would have understood that no more than if Jesus had explained quantum physics to him. He would not have gotten it. Jesus and Pilate were speaking two different languages. Pilate was speaking the language of politics, the language of power, the language of law and bureaucracy. Jesus was speaking the language of the Kingdom and His mission was about the Kingdom, the Kingdom of God. As such, it didn't have to do with law. It didn't have to do with power. Not earthly power, anyway. It didn't have to do with authority, except for the divine authority over sin and death. It didn't have to do with

politics. Jesus never said a word against the Roman government. Does that mean that He thought the Roman government was just in its administration? I suspect not. But His job, His mission in the world was not to overthrow Rome. His mission in the world was to change creation, a much more significant undertaking. His mission was to come and to defeat death and sin and the powers of darkness and, quite frankly, compared to them Rome was small potatoes. So there wasn't any point in discussing this with Pilate. He wasn't going to defend Himself. He was going to let events take their course. And in a way it was the injustice of the whole thing that presented the strongest witness for the truth of what He was doing.

As we move on to verse 6, we see the King rejected by His subjects. It says in verse 6 that there was a custom at the feast to release a prisoner whom the people requested. That was a practice everywhere, in other Roman provinces. For instance, in Egypt, very specific instances are recorded where a Roman administrator would be asked by a crowd of the local population to release a prisoner for them on some special occasion. There's no specific record whether in the Jewish historian Josephus or anyone else who wrote about the history of 1<sup>st</sup> century Israel, there's no specific record of this being applied in Israel, but as it was done elsewhere there's no particular reason why we should think that it wasn't. And it's attested to in each of the three synoptic gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke. And so the crowd comes to Pilate because apparently in his case the custom is to release a prisoner at Passover, one of the holiest times of the Jewish year. That may have been one of the reasons that Pilate was in town. He didn't normally reside in Jerusalem. He resided in an oceanfront palace. Even in those days oceanfront property was valuable. He normally lived on the Mediterranean, but in this instance he was in Jerusalem no doubt to keep order during a time when the city's population more than doubled and he made this gesture. The crowd came to him and asked him to do that and we're told in verse 9 that upon receiving the request he asked them: "Do you want me to release to you the King of the Jews?" If Pilate thought that there was any substance behind the accusations that had been made against Jesus, I really have a hard time imagining him doing that. The fact of the matter is that Barabbas was himself a small-timer. A murderer, yes. An insurrectionist, yes. But he was a small-timer. Jesus, claiming to be King of the Jews could upset the entire balance if, in fact, His goal was what the chief priests portrayed it as being.

So I suspect Pilate knew – this is in fact the first piece of evidence that he didn't really believe this – he knew that the charges were trumped up. So he asked them: "Do you want me to release the Guy whom you cheered last Sunday?" Whether Pilate had been in the city the previous weekend or not, he would undoubtedly have heard about the reception that Jesus received when He came down from the Mount of Olives and went through the Golden Gate to what we call the Old City, the walled city of Jerusalem. He would have heard about the strewing of the palms and the cries of "Hosanna!" and "Blessed be Him who comes in the name of the Lord!" and "Blessed be the coming King of Israel and Son of David!" He would have heard about all of that. He would have known that the crowd gave Him this adoration and I'm sure that knowing that, when he asked them: "Do you want me to release to you the King of the Jews?" He certainly expected them to say: "Yes, of course we do. We love this Guy! This Guy is the One

we've been waiting for. You may not understand it, Pilate, but we've been waiting for this Guy for centuries. This is the Man. You can do what you want with Barabbas. Give us Jesus." But the chief priests apparently expected something like this, because they went among the crowd and they stirred them up and told them: "Tell Pilate you want Barabbas instead." And of course the crowd, having showered all this adulation on Jesus the previous Sunday told the chief priests: "Why would we do that? That's a crazy thing to do. No, of course we're going to tell him to release Jesus." That's what any of us would have done. Isn't it?

I'm not sure about that, and I ask you at this point in the story to put yourself in it. Put yourself in the story. Make yourself in your mind a member of that crowd. The chief priests and their minions are filtering through the crowd and they're telling people: "You know, this guy Jesus is trouble. He's going to annoy the Romans and the legions are going to be out and it's going to be bad for business. It's going to be bad for families. Homes are going to get destroyed. People are going to get killed over this Guy." And as they appealed to peoples' self-interest, any residual triumphalism from Sunday evaporated because they were hearing that embracing Jesus might result in the crumbling of their world. It might result in bad things happening. It might result in loss of shelter, loss of income, loss of livelihood, loss of freedom. Embracing Jesus might have some negative consequences. The crowd, because of course they all were former economic majors at Jerusalem University, did a quick cost-benefit analysis and realized that it wasn't such a good idea. Which is to say, they responded exactly the same way that 21<sup>st</sup> century people would. Having what they hold dear threatened if they continue to embrace this so-called King of the Jews was dangerous. And so the crowd asked for Barabbas' release instead, in verse 11.

In verse 12 Pilate asks: "What shall I do with Jesus?" At this point, any convictions that he's got are probably already slipping and he wants to know how far he needs to go to placate these people. So in verse 13 we get an entire culture turned against the One who had come to save it, and they shouted: "Crucify Him!" Kill Him, they were saying, as a traitor, as a seditionist, as a rebel. Blasphemers didn't get crucified. Challengers of religious authority didn't get crucified. Traitors got crucified. And Pilate, probably at his wit's end at this point, says: "Why? What crime has He committed?" But he's lost control of the situation. At this point it doesn't matter what crime He's committed. The crowd has become a mob and it's as a mob that they shout, again, "Crucify Him! That's what you should do to the One who threatens our homes and our livelihoods and our neighborhoods and our freedom and our lives. That's what you should do. You should crucify Him!"

And we all know how that story ended. He did give them Barabbas, who was otherwise unknown to history. He went back to doing whatever he did. For all I know he took the first ship out and moved to Spain. We don't know. Jesus, on the other hand, Pilate had flogged. It was a typical Roman practice because crucifixion wasn't barbaric enough. Instead they would beat you to within an inch of your life first and then they handed Him over to be crucified.

I ask you to put yourself in the crowd because it is easy for us, 21<sup>st</sup> century Christians with all of that experience behind us and, of course, the gospels and with the Epistles, with the Word of God before us, it's easy for us to stand in judgment over that crowd and say: "We would have never done that." But the truth of the matter is that there are a lot of Christians in the world who are doing that now as we speak. There are lots of Christians in the world who are listening to the siren song of the culture, a culture that tells them: "You're not with it. You're not cool. Your ethics are not what they should be. You don't treat people properly. And certainly what you believe is nonsense." They're listening to that from the culture and they're saying: "You know what? You're right. We need to jettison all that primitive, superstitious nonsense that the church used to believe and we need to become modern and progressive and forward-looking and we need to get with the times. We need to enthrone the *zeitgeist*, what the Germans call the temper of the age. We're in no position to judge this crowd because if we're honest with ourselves we know that in the days prior to the resurrection especially we might well have been among them.

That being the case, I'd ask you to see the crowd this morning not just as something that you're a part of but as something representative of the world that we live in. People who have rejected Christ for their own reasons but who don't know Him. They think He's something that He's not, just as this crowd thought that He was the One who was coming to relieve their oppression by Rome. They think He's something He's not. They think He's an uptight moralist. They think He's a Puritan. They think He's a kook. They think He's a myth. So like this crowd, which no doubt is composed of at least some of the people who seven weeks later heard Peter's first sermon on Pentecost, these are people who are in their own lives asking the question: "What must I do to be saved?" And guess what? We have an answer for them and we celebrate that answer this week and next Sunday and for the rest of time.