

Narrative Lectionary- Jesus Condemned
March 18, 2018

In the waning days of WW II, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill cautioned Joseph Stalin, the Soviet leader, to consider the views of the Vatican. Stalin was oppressing Roman Catholics in the Soviet Union at the time. The Soviet leader, who had one of the biggest military forces in the world at the time, replied, “How many divisions does the Pope of Rome have?”

In our Gospel reading today, the powerful Roman governor of Palestine, who has hundreds of soldiers at his command, stands in front of Jesus, with twelve not-so-brave followers. Last week the religious leaders had brought Jesus to Pilate to say, He’s claiming to be king of the Jews. They made that up, of course. But they said, You don’t want a would-be king threatening King Herod.

So the Roman governor had asked Jesus, Are you the king of the Jews? What kind of power do you claim to have? Jesus says, Here’s what I will claim. I came to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.

Jesus doesn’t claim to be a king here, but the way John tells the story, we see that he is a king of a different sort. Pilate places a purple robe on him, and a crown made of thorns, and the soldiers mock him and strike him and make fun of his kingship. In Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus says, The kingdom of God is like a mustard seed, or the kingdom of God is like a farmer who goes out to sow, or the kingdom of God is like a woman baking bread.

Jesus doesn’t do this in John’s Gospel. He points to his own actions and says, This is what my kingship looks like. This king is a shepherd who is willing to lay his life down for his sheep. This king doesn’t say, Pick up your sword. This king says, When I am lifted up on a cross, I will gather all the world to myself. This king says, I am willing to be in solidarity with everyone who suffers. This king is the one who sides with the victims.

So Pilate takes Jesus outside, and says, Here is the man! Maybe it is John’s way to say, This is what God’s kind of king looks like, a king who lays down his life for his people. This is God in the flesh. How do the religious leaders respond? “When the chief priests and the police saw him, they

shouted, ‘Crucify him! Crucify him!’ Pilate said to them, ‘Take him yourselves and crucify him; I find no case against him.’ The Jewish (leaders) answered him, ‘We have a law, and according to that law he ought to die because he has claimed to be the Son of God.’ Now when Pilate heard this, he was more afraid than ever.”

Pilate is afraid because he knows that the emperor will replace him if he can’t maintain order in this backwater part of the empire. His job is at stake. His reputation as a leader is in jeopardy. If he can’t get this situation under control, his career is over.

He’s afraid. It’s never a good idea to base your decisions on your fears, by the way. The artist Georgia O’Keeffe once said, “I’ve been absolutely terrified every moment of my life- and I’ve never let it keep me from doing a single thing I wanted to do.” How often do we let fear keep us from saying what needs to be said, or doing what needs to be done? I once was at a workshop for pastors, and the speaker said, you will be criticized for the things you say, and you will be criticized for the things you don’t say. You will be criticized for the things you do, and criticized for the things you don’t do. So say something, or don’t say something, do something or don’t do something, and leave the results up to God. But don’t be bound by your fears of how people will respond.

When Peter gets a chance to walk on the water with Jesus, he’s doing fine until he looks at the wind and the waves. He takes his eyes off Jesus, and he becomes afraid. And that’s when he starts to sink. Pilate was afraid of a future where he wouldn’t have the power and privilege he was used to, and he was willing to give up an innocent man to the crowds to secure his future.

Pilate leaves the crowds, and comes back into the room with Jesus. Where are you from? he asks. He’s trying to make this work. He’d like to find a reason to get this man off the hook. Where are you from? This is a deeper question than it sounds. The answer is not simply Nazareth. This question is at the heart of John’s Gospel. We know where Jesus is from. He is from God! But Pilate is so caught up in his own fears that he will not be able to see this. And Jesus doesn’t give him an answer. Jesus is in control of this interview, not Pilate. Pilate is furious. Do you refuse to speak to me? Do you not know that I have power to release you, and power to crucify you?

That would certainly make me think. But Jesus doesn't answer out of fear. Jesus says, You would have no power over me unless it had been given you from above. Do you want to talk about power, Pilate? Your power is from God. And you are misusing it. God is the One moving throughout this whole rigged trial. God is the One who can bring good out of my death. God is the One who is weaving this all together for the good of the world.

Pilate comes back out to the crowd and tries to release him, and they say, 'If you release this man, you are no friend of the emperor. Everyone who claims to be a king sets himself against the emperor.' Pilate, where do you stand, with your boss the emperor, or with this troublemaker? You'd better make the right choice.

He said to the Jews, 'Here is your King!' They cried out, 'Away with him! Away with him! Crucify him!' Pilate asked them, 'Shall I crucify your King?' The chief priests answered, 'We have no king but the emperor.' Then he handed him over to them to be crucified.

Remember in John's Gospel, this is the day of preparation for the Passover. At noon on this day is when the lambs are slaughtered in the temple. The leaders had not gone into Pilate's headquarters because they didn't want to defile themselves for the Passover by being in a Gentile's house.

Here is what is ironic- the prayer that is repeated throughout the Passover begins, Blessed are you, Lord our God, king of the universe...king of the universe. And now these Jewish leaders say, We have no king but the emperor. What? The only god you honor is an emperor who claims to be a god? That's your king? What happened to, You shall have no other gods before you? This is the worst possible preparation for the Passover. But they can't stand a threat to their version of religious truth. Jesus has to be done away with.

And Pilate finally hands him over to be crucified. Let me share with you a couple of stories of Christians who stood up for the truth against the powers of this world. Yesterday was St. Patrick's Day, celebrating the year the missionary Patrick died in Ireland in 461. Remember that Jesus told Pilate, I came to testify to the truth. It seems to me that Patrick bore witness to the truth as he shared Christ with the Irish people. You might remember that he wasn't Irish. He was born into a wealthy family in Britain, but he was

kidnapped one day by Irish slavers and taken to Ireland. He was sold there, and spent six abusive years as a slave.

When he was able to escape, he went back to Britain, and his family of course thought he would stay with them, but he felt God's call to go back to Ireland. He could have chosen to never have anything more to do with people who had mistreated him. But he went back to people who had only caused him pain.

I did not know this until I read an article about him this week, but he was a man of great insecurities. He constantly wondered if he was really cut out for the task God had given him. He didn't speak Latin very well because he had missed so much education when he was a slave as a teenager. He was embarrassed when people sneered at him for his simple schoolboy Latin. He also dealt with depression. He had times when he swam in self-pity. He could be violently angry. In other words, he was very human. He made mistakes. He didn't live up to the image of Christ that he preached about. None of us does. But he never allowed any of those issues to derail him permanently from the path Christ set out for him.

Let me share one more story about standing up for the truth. When Adolf Hitler came to power in Germany, many people saw him as an answer to prayer. Remember that after World War I, Germany went into a severe economic depression. Hitler came along and gave the Germans an economic and emotional boost. A pastor named Hermann Gruner said this, "The time is fulfilled for the German people of Hitler. It is because of Hitler that Christ, God the helper and redeemer, has become effective among us. . . . Hitler is the way of the Spirit and the will of God for the German people to enter the Church of Christ." Another pastor put it more succinctly: "Christ has come to us through Adolph Hitler."

Dietrich Bonhoeffer had a different view. He was a German Lutheran pastor who had spent time in America. He had traveled the South. He had seen the suffering of blacks living under segregation. Because of that experience, he began to see the beginnings of the persecution of the Jews under Hitler. So Bonhoeffer and some other pastors formed the Confessing Church. They would witness to the truth.

He started an underground seminary, but the Nazis found about it and closed it. So Bonhoeffer changed tactics. He joined the German secret service as a double agent. He was supposed to be travelling around Europe reporting on the places he visited, but instead he was helping Jews escape. When he was involved in a plot to assassinate Hitler, he was arrested and placed in prison for two years.

In one of his letters from prison, he wrote this: "God lets himself be pushed out of the world on to the cross. He is weak and powerless in the world, and that is precisely the way, the only way, in which he is with us and helps us. [The Bible] ... makes quite clear that Christ helps us, not by virtue of his omnipotence, but by virtue of his weakness and suffering. ... The Bible directs man to God's powerlessness and suffering; only the suffering God can help."

Bonhoeffer was hanged one month before the prison was liberated by the Allies. A doctor who saw Bonhoeffer hanged described the scene: "The prisoners ... were taken from their cells, and the verdicts of court martial read out to them. Through the half-open door in one room of the huts, I saw Pastor Bonhoeffer, before taking off his prison garb, kneeling on the floor praying fervently to his God. I was most deeply moved by the way this lovable man prayed, so devout and so certain that God heard his prayer.

At the place of execution, he again said a prayer and then climbed the steps to the gallows, brave and composed. His death ensued in a few seconds. In the almost 50 years that I have worked as a doctor, I have hardly ever seen a man die so entirely submissive to the will of God."

Because of his witness and his writings, God has used Bonhoeffer to change more lives than he ever influenced in his lifetime.

Jesus said to Pilate, I came to bear witness to the truth. Do what you need to do. But here's the irony- Jesus was going to die for Pilate, he was going to die for those Jewish authorities who wanted him killed, he was going to die for those followers who would desert him. And he was going to die for those of us who haltingly follow. And out of his death would come life for the world. Would you pray with me?

God, in a world where the truth is suspect, help us to bear witness to your truth. Help us to move beyond our fears in order to speak and to live out your truth, even when there is a cost. We pray this in the name of your Son, who showed us the power of sacrificial love. Amen.