

Theme: God wins

Let us pray.

Most holy, Lord God, we gather on this day to remember: to remember what great love you have for us, love so great that your son willingly went to his own death for us; may we never forget such sacrificial love and may it be a sign for us of how to love each other, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

I had something of a surreal experience during the Holy Land trip I took last January. We went to a convent called Homo Ecce. The name didn't register with me at first. This was the eighth or ninth day of the trip. Jerusalem was somewhat overwhelming. And I think I was getting numb to seeing all the biblical sites we saw, which were certainly not all of them to see.

I knew that on this day we were going to walk the Via Dolorosa, the Way of the Cross. In case you don't know, *homo ecce* is Latin for "behold the man." Those were the words Pilate said when Jesus was presented to the people before his crucifixion.

This convent was built on that site – the Praetorium. We had a Eucharist there at the convent – the most moving Eucharist I attended for quite some time. Of course the theme of the Eucharist was a Good Friday theme.

We then walked downstairs. We stood on a slab of what looked like limestone. We were told that this was recently excavated. It is the Stone Pavement, Gabbatha. Here Jesus was tried in public before the crowd who call for his crucifixion. We were standing on it. We were standing on the very stone Jesus stood on. This was the first station of the cross in Jerusalem.

We were told that we were to walk the stations in silence and take no pictures. We went outside and there it was – a typical Old City Jerusalem street sign, Via Dolorosa. We went up the street, station to station, past street vendors, and eventually to an Orthodox church where stations nine and ten are. We came out the other end to the courtyard before entering the Church of the Holy Sepulcher and the final four stations – the last station being Jesus' tomb.

Inside the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, we had thirty minutes of free time between stations twelve and thirteen – Jesus’ crucifixion and the anointing of his body. It was all a moving experience. The church was also a very busy place – crowded and noisy.

That’s our story for this day, today. The whole route of the stations in Jerusalem are not all that long. The four stations in the Church of the Holy Sepulcher are close to each other. It is a short story, too. Jesus is tried, found guilty, walks to the site of his execution, and dies.

It is a sad story. What John and the other gospel writers do is make a sad story significant. The Romans crucified people by the hundreds. Why was this particular crucifixion so special? John tells us why.

John gives us a different take on the passion story. Judas fades into the background as being irrelevant. John gives more emphasis on Jesus’ trial before Pontius Pilate. Jesus’ trial is powerful. It is powerful in its telling. It is powerful because the Son of God is on trial. It is powerful because the judge, jury, and executioner represent the most powerful man in the world and the most powerful empire in the world. It is powerful because it is a contest between God and humankind, even God and the god of Rome in human flesh, the emperor.

We have another story of a contest between God and state gods. It is the contest between the God of Israel and the gods of Egypt and more specifically, Pharaoh, the living god of the Egyptians. God wins. Pharaoh loses. The people leave Egypt for the Promised Land.

Our contest for this day is different. Jesus is arrested. Jesus is tried by the religious authorities. But those who seek Jesus’ life are in a quandary. They lack the power to execute Jesus. So they bring Jesus to the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate.

When Pilate expresses a distaste for dealing with a Jewish religious dispute, he asks the religious authorities to deal with Jesus themselves. They reply that they are “not permitted to put anyone to death.” John gives us the impression that Pilate wants to do what is right. But Pilate’s view of what is right revolves exclusively around what is best for the empire. Pilate does not see Jesus as a threat to the state.

Pilate begins his questioning of Jesus with the key question that matters to him, “Are you the king of the Jews?” In other words, are you assuming a ruling authority in a province of the Roman Empire? Again Jesus typically replies the way he usually does by answering a question with a question.

In effect Jesus is asking, “Are you really concerned that I am a threat to Rome, or has someone else put you up to this?” Jesus suggests that Pilate is being manipulated into investigating a charge for which he has no evidence. John is telling us that Jesus is in control of the situation. If Jesus is to be executed it is only with his consent, even if someone else gives the order.

In John 10:17-18 Jesus says, “For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father.”

Pilate objects to Jesus’ question by saying that he is not a Jew and that it was Jesus’ own people who turned him over to Rome. Jesus then answers Pilate’s question, “If I were the kind of king that you have in mind, my followers would be revolting in the land and trying to effect my release.” Pilate’s political antenna perks up – so he thinks himself a king! Jesus then tells Pilate that it is Pilate who says Jesus is a king.

Now, we too say Jesus is a king. What does that mean for us? I think it means that Jesus is over and above any earthly government or authority. We may claim to be citizens of the United States, but that pales in comparison to our citizenship in heaven. If our government or any government commands or compels us to do what we believe violates our faith, then the government is in the wrong and must not be obeyed.

Of course, there are consequences to this. That is why many Christians were killed for their faith and continue to die for their faith. We belong to Christ. We live in the United States. Fortunately, for us we have an amendment to the Constitution that guarantees that we may express our faith freely.

Jesus’ place in the world begins to dawn on Pilate, but events are spiraling out his control. Jesus must die. In the end, Pilate declares Jesus as king of the Jews and his execution is ordered. Pilate never grasped what we know –

Jesus is king of the universe. Jesus is king of a place where he cannot stay dead, because Sunday is a comin'.

Jesus is lifted on the cross. Only John has the scene of his mother and the beloved disciple. A new community is born in this scene. New lines of kinship are formed that no longer requires a blood relationship. This is a larger family that cares for each other. A beloved son dies and a new community is formed. We who sit at the foot of the cross are members of this new community.

Only in John do we hear of a sour wine (meaning vinegar) soaked sponge being offered to Jesus after he says he is thirsty. The sponge is placed on a hyssop stick. In Exodus, Moses instructs the elders to slaughter the Passover lambs, dip hyssop in the blood, and spread the blood on the doorposts. This is the sign that the angel of death will pass over the homes of the Israelites. There is a connection with Jesus, the paschal lamb, and the paschal lambs of the Passover.

We heard last night from John's gospel that Jesus loved his disciples; he loved them to the end. It is now the end. Jesus has fulfilled his mission. Christ the King hangs from his throne, his cross. Sacrificial love triumphs over human will. It appears that Caesar wins. Jesus is dead. But the emperor loses. God wins. We become reconciled with God once and for all time.

This is a brutal story. The world throws all it can at Jesus. But Jesus remains unfazed and triumphant. Jesus gives us a glimpse of what it means for us in how we are capable of being transformed by the Holy Spirit. We can be more present to the horrors of the world – to the suffering of the world – to the inhumanity of the world. With God's help we can confront the evils of the world and not be defeated.

We now pray: Gracious God and giver of all good gifts, thank you for your gift of forgiving our sins once and for all time, for the whole world, for all of us; may we live lives of forgiveness, forgiving others, though Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Text: **John 18:1–19:42** (NRSV)

18 After Jesus had spoken these words, he went out with his disciples across the Kidron valley to a place where there was a garden, which he and his disciples entered. ² Now

Judas, who betrayed him, also knew the place, because Jesus often met there with his disciples. ³ So Judas brought a detachment of soldiers together with police from the chief priests and the Pharisees, and they came there with lanterns and torches and weapons. ⁴ Then Jesus, knowing all that was to happen to him, came forward and asked them, “Whom are you looking for?” ⁵ They answered, “Jesus of Nazareth.”^a Jesus replied, “I am he.”^b Judas, who betrayed him, was standing with them. ⁶ When Jesus^c said to them, “I am he,”^d they stepped back and fell to the ground. ⁷ Again he asked them, “Whom are you looking for?” And they said, “Jesus of Nazareth.”^e ⁸ Jesus answered, “I told you that I am he.^f So if you are looking for me, let these men go.” ⁹ This was to fulfill the word that he had spoken, “I did not lose a single one of those whom you gave me.” ¹⁰ Then Simon Peter, who had a sword, drew it, struck the high priest’s slave, and cut off his right ear. The slave’s name was Malchus. ¹¹ Jesus said to Peter, “Put your sword back into its sheath. Am I not to drink the cup that the Father has given me?”

¹² So the soldiers, their officer, and the Jewish police arrested Jesus and bound him. ¹³ First they took him to Annas, who was the father-in-law of Caiaphas, the high priest that year. ¹⁴ Caiaphas was the one who had advised the Jews that it was better to have one person die for the people.

¹⁵ Simon Peter and another disciple followed Jesus. Since that disciple was known to the high priest, he went with Jesus into the courtyard of the high priest, ¹⁶ but Peter was standing outside at the gate. So the other disciple, who was known to the high priest, went out, spoke to the woman who guarded the gate, and brought Peter in. ¹⁷ The woman said to Peter, “You are not also one of this man’s disciples, are you?” He said, “I am not.” ¹⁸ Now the slaves and the police had made a charcoal fire because it was cold, and they were standing around it and warming themselves. Peter also was standing with them and warming himself.

¹⁹ Then the high priest questioned Jesus about his disciples and about his teaching. ²⁰ Jesus answered, “I have spoken openly to the world; I have always taught in synagogues and in the temple, where all the Jews come together. I have said nothing in secret. ²¹ Why do you ask me? Ask those who heard what I said to them; they know what I said.” ²² When he had said this, one of the police standing nearby struck Jesus on the face, saying, “Is that how you answer the high priest?” ²³ Jesus answered, “If I have spoken wrongly, testify to the wrong. But if I have spoken rightly, why do you strike me?” ²⁴ Then Annas sent him bound to Caiaphas the high priest.

²⁵ Now Simon Peter was standing and warming himself. They asked him, “You are not also one of his disciples, are you?” He denied it and said, “I am not.” ²⁶ One of the slaves of the high priest, a relative of the man whose ear Peter had cut off, asked, “Did I not see you in the garden with him?” ²⁷ Again Peter denied it, and at that moment the cock crowed.

^a Gk *the Nazorean*

^b Gk *I am*

^c Gk *he*

^d Gk *I am*

^e Gk *the Nazorean*

^f Gk *I am*

²⁸ Then they took Jesus from Caiaphas to Pilate's headquarters.^g It was early in the morning. They themselves did not enter the headquarters,^h so as to avoid ritual defilement and to be able to eat the Passover. ²⁹ So Pilate went out to them and said, "What accusation do you bring against this man?" ³⁰ They answered, "If this man were not a criminal, we would not have handed him over to you." ³¹ Pilate said to them, "Take him yourselves and judge him according to your law." The Jews replied, "We are not permitted to put anyone to death." ³² (This was to fulfill what Jesus had said when he indicated the kind of death he was to die.)

³³ Then Pilate entered the headquartersⁱ again, summoned Jesus, and asked him, "Are you the King of the Jews?" ³⁴ Jesus answered, "Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?" ³⁵ Pilate replied, "I am not a Jew, am I? Your own nation and the chief priests have handed you over to me. What have you done?" ³⁶ Jesus answered, "My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here." ³⁷ Pilate asked him, "So you are a king?" Jesus answered, "You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice." ³⁸ Pilate asked him, "What is truth?"

After he had said this, he went out to the Jews again and told them, "I find no case against him. ³⁹ But you have a custom that I release someone for you at the Passover. Do you want me to release for you the King of the Jews?" ⁴⁰ They shouted in reply, "Not this man, but Barabbas!" Now Barabbas was a bandit.

19 Then Pilate took Jesus and had him flogged. ² And the soldiers wove a crown of thorns and put it on his head, and they dressed him in a purple robe. ³ They kept coming up to him, saying, "Hail, King of the Jews!" and striking him on the face. ⁴ Pilate went out again and said to them, "Look, I am bringing him out to you to let you know that I find no case against him." ⁵ So Jesus came out, wearing the crown of thorns and the purple robe. Pilate said to them, "Here is the man!" ⁶ 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." ⁷ The Jews 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."

⁸ Now when Pilate heard this, he was more afraid than ever. ⁹ He entered his headquarters^a again and asked Jesus, "Where are you from?" But Jesus gave him no answer. ¹⁰ Pilate therefore said to him, "Do you refuse to speak to me? Do you not know that I have power to release you, and power to crucify you?" ¹¹ Jesus answered him, "You would have no power over me unless it had been given you from above; therefore the one who handed me over to you is guilty of a greater sin." ¹² From then on Pilate tried to release him, but the Jews cried out, "If you release this man, you are no friend of the emperor. Everyone who claims to be a king sets himself against the emperor."

^g Gk *the praetorium*

^h Gk *the praetorium*

ⁱ Gk *the praetorium*

^a Gk *the praetorium*

¹³ When Pilate heard these words, he brought Jesus outside and sat^b on the judge's bench at a place called The Stone Pavement, or in Hebrew^c Gabbatha. ¹⁴ Now it was the day of Preparation for the Passover; and it was about noon. He said to the Jews, "Here is your King!" ¹⁵ 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." ¹⁶ Then he handed him over to them to be crucified.

So they took Jesus; ¹⁷ and carrying the cross by himself, he went out to what is called The Place of the Skull, which in Hebrew^d is called Golgotha. ¹⁸ There they crucified him, and with him two others, one on either side, with Jesus between them. ¹⁹ Pilate also had an inscription written and put on the cross. It read, "Jesus of Nazareth,^e the King of the Jews." ²⁰ Many of the Jews read this inscription, because the place where Jesus was crucified was near the city; and it was written in Hebrew,^f in Latin, and in Greek. ²¹ 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.'" ²² Pilate answered, "What I have written I have written." ²³ When the soldiers had crucified Jesus, they took his clothes and divided them into four parts, one for each soldier. They also took his tunic; now the tunic was seamless, woven in one piece from the top. ²⁴ So they said to one another, "Let us not tear it, but cast lots for it to see who will get it." This was to fulfill what the scripture says, "They divided my clothes among themselves, and for my clothing they cast lots."

²⁵ And that is what the soldiers did.

Meanwhile, standing near the cross of Jesus were his mother, and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. ²⁶ When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother, "Woman, here is your son." ²⁷ Then he said to the disciple, "Here is your mother." And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home.

²⁸ After this, when Jesus knew that all was now finished, he said (in order to fulfill the scripture), "I am thirsty." ²⁹ A jar full of sour wine was standing there. So they put a sponge full of the wine on a branch of hyssop and held it to his mouth. ³⁰ When Jesus had received the wine, he said, "It is finished." Then he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.

³¹ Since it was the day of Preparation, the Jews did not want the bodies left on the cross during the sabbath, especially because that sabbath was a day of great solemnity. So they asked Pilate to have the legs of the crucified men broken and the bodies removed. ³² Then the soldiers came and broke the legs of the first and of the other who had been crucified with him. ³³ But when they came to Jesus and saw that he was already dead, they did not break his legs. ³⁴ Instead, one of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, and at once blood and water came out. ³⁵ (He who saw this has testified so that you also may believe. His testimony is true, and he knows^g that he tells the truth.) ³⁶ These things

^b Or *seated him*

^c That is, *Aramaic*

^d That is, *Aramaic*

^e Gk *the Nazorean*

^f That is, *Aramaic*

^g Or *there is one who knows*

occurred so that the scripture might be fulfilled, “None of his bones shall be broken.”³⁷ And again another passage of scripture says, “They will look on the one whom they have pierced.”

³⁸ After these things, Joseph of Arimathea, who was a disciple of Jesus, though a secret one because of his fear of the Jews, asked Pilate to let him take away the body of Jesus. Pilate gave him permission; so he came and removed his body. ³⁹ Nicodemus, who had at first come to Jesus by night, also came, bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, weighing about a hundred pounds. ⁴⁰ They took the body of Jesus and wrapped it with the spices in linen cloths, according to the burial custom of the Jews. ⁴¹ Now there was a garden in the place where he was crucified, and in the garden there was a new tomb in which no one had ever been laid. ⁴² And so, because it was the Jewish day of Preparation, and the tomb was nearby, they laid Jesus there. ¹

¹ *The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*. 1989 (Jn 18:1–19:42). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.