

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from The Man, Jesus
Christ our Lord and our King, amen.

This is the time of the Church year when you can't afford to miss a week. It's like one of those TV shows that leave you with a cliff hanger at the end of each episode. They leave you wondering what is going to happen next and how on earth can the hero get out of the death trap set by the evil villain. The story of the trial and condemnation of Jesus in the Gospel of John should really be read in its entirety, from John 18:28 through John 19:16. We heard the first half last week and the second half today. The cliff hanger... What is Pilate going to do about Jesus and these Jewish religious leaders? If you look at the way this story was composed you can easily see that it's in the form of a Chiasm. A Chiasm is a certain way the ancient Greeks wrote stories where the first half of the story is basically repeated in opposite order in the second half. It's called a Chiasm because the verses of the story form an "X" or the Greek letter Chi. So, in part one of the trial before Pilate, he and Jesus have a discussion about truth. In the parallel portion of the Chiasm for today they discuss power and authority. That's how Chiasms work. You can gain quite a lot of insight into what the author is wanting us to understand once you recognize the parallels in the Chiastic nature of the story. Another feature of many Chiasms is the very center of the chiasm. In many Chiasms there's one verse or group of verses that sits dead center at the pinnacle of

the story with no parallel on either side. Once you find that section of verses you know exactly what the author thinks is the most important point he or she wants to make. In the full story of the trial and condemnation of Jesus before Pilate the climactic scene is actually the first three verses of our text for today. Pilate has Jesus flogged and the soldiers weave him a crown of thorns and place a royal purple robe on him. They call him the “King of the Jews.”

Such a strange set of details for John to elevate to such an important part in his story of Jesus. What in the world is John trying to tell us? I remember the teaching of Jesus earlier when He said if someone strikes you on the cheek, turn and offer them the other one as well. When the soldiers struck Jesus on the face he simply stood there and took the worst of their beating, and torture. He never raised a hand to stop them or even to defend himself against their hatred. After the beating John doesn't say they had to drag Jesus back outside in front of the Chief Priests and the Jewish Police. John says, “Jesus came out, wearing the crown of thorns and the purple robe.” Jesus walked back out under his own power and authority. His head held up knowing He would not back down from the truth of who He was and what God had sent him to do. John makes this the pinnacle of the trial because this is Jesus the King...

Our text says when the Chief Priests and the Police accused Jesus of claiming to be the Son of God this made Pilate very afraid. As it turns out, there

was good reason for Pilate to be afraid. In Roman society the Son of God was the official title for Tiberius Caesar the Roman Emperor and none other. Anyone claiming otherwise was a traitor and an insurrectionist. We know from history that Pontius Pilate had a sponsor or as the scholars call them a “Patron.” A patron is a very rich close friend who vouches for you and even pays for your advancement in the government. The Roman system of government was so corrupt in order to advance you had to pay the emperor a large fee for the privilege of serving as, for example the Governor of Israel... Pilate’s Patron was a man by the name of Lucius Aelius Sejanus. Among the rich and powerful in Roman Society, certain powerful people were known as the “Friends of Caesar.” Lucius Aelius Sejanus was the chief administrator of the Roman Empire for the emperor Tiberius. To have such a powerful man as your sponsor made Pilate a powerful man as well. Sejanus was implicated in a plot to overthrow the emperor and was executed in 31 ad. The timing of Jesus’ passion is estimated to be around 33 ad. So, just two short years after Pilate’s patron was killed for treason against the emperor, these Jewish leaders are accusing Pilate of not being a “Friend of Caesar.” I’d be a bit frightened too...

This trial is filled with irony and hypocrisy. The Jewish leaders claim to have no power, yet they force Pilate, who tried not once, but twice to release Jesus to instead condemn Him to Crucifixion. Make no mistake, Pilate wasn’t trying to

release Jesus because he believed in him, but in order to mock and humiliate these Jewish leaders. He had nothing but disdain for them and the notion they would one day welcome their Messiah... Now, these are the leaders who are supposed to know the Jewish Law and the ones entrusted to enforce any infractions, no matter how small. In the end they show their true colors. When Pilate mockingly asks them, "Shall I crucify your King?" The chief priests answered, "We have no king but the emperor." Wait... What? ... They have no King except the emperor! What about the Lord their God, YHWH? Pilate had inadvertently caused them to finally tell the truth. Now the truth is out. They aren't serving God, but man...

The trial begins with a narrator's note that the accusers of Jesus could not go inside Pilate's headquarters because they were meticulously obeying Jewish Law which stated if they went inside the home of a Gentile they would become ritually unclean for one month. They stayed outside and that's why this trial keeps going from inside the headquarters to outside, yet by the end of the trial these Jewish leaders denounce their allegiance to God and claim to only belong to Caesar.

If the first three verses of today's Gospel reading are the apex of John's story, then let's take a closer look at what's happening here... As I read through the Gospel stories of the trial of Jesus I noticed that the telling of the beating and the dressing of Jesus in royal attire that John tells us happened right smack in the middle of the trial is actually quite different in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. The

synoptic Gospels all place this part of the story after the verdict and sentencing of Jesus and just before the actual crucifixion. This is not so in John's version of the story. Also, I noticed John says the flogging of Jesus took place inside the headquarters, where the Jews could not have witnessed the events. Therefore, this scene could not have been for the benefit of the Jewish leaders or the crowd, but for those of us who later read the Gospel. Also, in the synoptic Gospels tell us the soldiers mock and humiliate Jesus. Again, this doesn't happen in John's version. Why does the story seem so different? What is John trying to tell us by the way he orders the events? It seems to me John wants us to know that Jesus is King of Kings and Lord of Lords and in these three verses that I've already said are the high point of the story John is telling, are in fact the coronation of King Jesus. In the synoptic Gospel accounts the soldiers remove the royal costume before taking Jesus back out in front of the Jewish leaders. Not so in John's version of the events. Jesus is brought back outside with the royal robe and the crown of thorns and displayed as the King of the Jews for all the world to see... For John, this is the hour for which Jesus came into the world. This is the time of his victory. His triumph over sin, death, and the devil cannot happen unless he is raised up on the cross. This is the reason Jesus came into the world and He is now crowned for his glory...

As the middle of the trial scene, Jesus has now been coronated as the King He came to be. From this point forward the Kingship of Jesus becomes visible and tangible. When Pilate presents Jesus to the Jews outside his headquarters, he presents him in the garb of a King, setting the stage for his exaltation on the cross. The drama is set to be played out where Jesus will give his life, the life of the Good Shepherd for his own. In their zeal to reject Jesus as their Lord and King, the Chief Priests have rejected the very God whom they claim to serve...

It would be easy for me to ask how many ways we still reject Jesus even though we claim to follow his example. Today, I think I'll just let the words of the Chief Priests sink in... We have no other King than the emperor... May our thoughts, words, and actions this day and every day show that Jesus is our only King and our only master. May God give us the grace to forgive ourselves for all those times when we rejected Jesus in favor of other gods. May Jesus lead us to the cross where we see Him as the King of all Kings and Lord of all. Amen.