

Worldly Eyes

Text: Mark 15:1–20

Other Lessons: Psalm 2; Isaiah 13:9–11; 1 John 2:15–17; John 18:33–38a

Sermon Goal: That hearers would repent of their worldly sins and find forgiveness, life, and salvation in Christ’s heavenly kingdom, which is “not of this world.”

Sermon Outline

Main Sermon Theme: Pilate can view matters only in a worldly, pragmatic way, wishing to placate the Jewish leaders and crowd, so he consents to handing Jesus over for crucifixion. The soldiers see the opposite of a worldly king, but their ironic hailing of Jesus as “King of the Jews” proclaims who He really is. The world looks for power and glory; God’s way is suffering and the cross.

I. Pilate, the Jewish leaders, and the Roman soldiers had worldly eyes, focused on power and influence.

II. Jesus was truly a powerful King of the Jews, but not in the way anyone expected. He is the King by way of the Gospel.

III. We are called to a heavenly mind-set, followers of King Jesus, in the way of the cross.

Sermon

I

We use the adjective “worldly” in two different but related senses. Merriam-Webster identifies these as (1) “having a lot of practical experience and knowledge about life and the world,” and (2) “of or relating to the human world and ordinary life rather than to religious or spiritual matters.” In our Passion Reading today/tonight, we see both senses of the term at work as Pontius Pilate, the Jewish chief priests and crowd, and the Roman soldiers look at Jesus through worldly eyes.

In the Roman Empire, you didn’t rise to the level of power that Pilate enjoyed without being worldly-wise. As a governor, everything boils down to convincing the emperor of your ongoing worth. So above all, you have to look out for number one, not for other people. Pilate was a man with worldly desires and ambitions. Pilate also was worldly in the sense of not personally caring about religious matters. As governor of Judea, the large population of highly religious Jews was a thorn in his side. Pilate and his peers pursued a systematic policy of persecution and provocation of the Jews.

Given all that, it is a bit surprising to see Pilate basically cooperating with the Jewish leaders in the trial of Jesus. It is true that he thought Jesus was innocent, based on his own investigation and on the warning from his wife’s mysterious dream, but Pilate’s worldliness won out in the end. His religious skepticism is on full display when he asks Jesus, “What is truth?” thus rejecting the beaten and bloodied Truth standing right there in front of him. And his pragmatism toward worldly affairs is evidenced by granting to the vociferous Jews the execution of Jesus, while wicked Barabbas went free. Better to pacify the Jews rather than place his position of

power in jeopardy if they decided to foment rebellion over this insignificant Jew called the King of the Jews!”

The leaders of the Jews had worldly eyes as well. The Sadducees saw the popularity of Jesus as a threat to the power they enjoyed through compromises with the Romans; the Pharisees saw Jesus as a competitor to their own religious influence and as an opponent of their legalistic theology. So the worldly Jewish leaders stirred up the crowds to demand the crucifixion of Jesus.

Finally, the Roman soldiers had worldly eyes as well. They knew a king when they saw one, and Jesus was the opposite of their view of royalty. Many had seen Caesar himself; others had seen kings of the East during military campaigns; still others could envision with the mind’s eye glorious kings with all their pomp and circumstance. But this Jewish carpenter, beaten and bloodied and wearing a crown of thorns? Ha! What a joke. Their bowing down and praising Jesus was all mockery: “Hail, King of the Jews!”

II.

Ironically, Pilate and the soldiers got it right. Regardless of what was in their hearts, they correctly called Jesus King of the Jews, that is, the eternal Messiah promised to Adam and Eve, to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, David, and all of His chosen people in Israel. But as Jesus told Pilate, “My kingdom is not of this world” (John 18:36). Rather, He came into this world from heaven “to bear witness to the truth” (John 18:37). And here is the truth: Jesus was and is a king, but not a worldly one, but the heavenly, divine King, God the Son in the flesh! And while the way of the world is to look for power and glory in rulers, the true God glories in suffering and the cross, and He manifests His power to save in the Gospel of Jesus Christ crucified and risen.

“Crucify Him!” cried the crowds. “Crucify Him!” cried the Father from His sapphire throne. “Crucify Me!” cried the obedient Son. St. John said in our Epistle, “Whoever does the will of God abides forever” (1 John 2:17), and this first and foremost refers to Jesus Himself. He came from heaven to do His Father’s will, to draw all men to Himself on the cross, bearing the sins of the masses, dying for the life of the world. “For God so loved the world, that He gave His only Son” (John 3:16) to reconcile the whole world to Himself, not counting men’s trespasses against them (2 Cor 5:19).

Was His death for you? Well, are you in the world? Then yes! He is “the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” (John 1:29), and if your worldly sins were on Him on the cross, then they are no longer on you. If your sins are placed on Him through Baptism, Absolution, and the Lord’s Supper, then they most certainly must not continue to weigh you down in guilt and shame, but you should consider them to be as far from you as east is from west, drowned in the depths of the sea, actually, as if they no longer are even in the world—because that is the truth of the Gospel: in Christ you have been set free from sin, death, and hell, and all you have to look forward to is eternal righteousness, everlasting life, and resurrection in God’s heavenly kingdom!

III.

And as Jesus says, His kingdom is not of this world, so you are called not to a worldly mind-set but to a heavenly one. St. Paul writes to those baptized into Christ’s death and resurrection: “If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with Him in glory” (Colossians 3:1–4). Jesus prayed to His Father for you on the night when He was betrayed: “[Father,] I have given them Your word, and the world has hated them because they are not of the world, just as I am not of

the world. I do not ask that You take them out of the world, but that You keep them from the evil one” (John 17:14–15).

Satan, the evil one, would lead you to share the worldly, postmodern viewpoint expressed by Pilate: “What is truth?” This religious skepticism leads people to despair, which leads to either the desire to get out of this apparently godforsaken world through suicide or to extreme worldliness: “Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow you shall die.” But not you. You know the truth about the world: St. John writes, “All that is in the world—the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride of life—is not from the Father but is from the world. And the world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever” (1 John 2:16–17).

And this is God’s will: to embrace the truth of the cross, by which the world has been crucified to you, and you to the world (Galatians 6:14). This is God’s saving way, no matter what your worldly status is in this fallen creation. St. Paul writes: “For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. And because of Him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption, so that, as it is written, ‘Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord’ ” (1 Corinthians 1:26–31). Amen.