



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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Misleading Our Nation

Luke 23:1-12

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October 18, 2015 – St. Luke

Providence has brought our time in history and our sermon text together this morning. In our study of Luke this morning we see Jesus dragged by the Sanhedrin before the civil magistrate—first Pontius Pilate and then Herod Antipas. The kingdom of God confronts the kingdom of Caesar. And tomorrow, election day, offers Canadian Christians an opportunity to confront our own Caesar with the kingdom of God. How we vote, what policies we support reflect our faith in Jesus and in his lordship—they give witness to whether or not our trust is placed in Jesus or in Caesar.

We begin Luke 23 this morning. At the end of Chapter 22 we saw Jesus finally arrested by the chief priest's soldiers. They spent the night mocking and beating him. Early in the morning he was taken before the Sanhedrin, the governing body of the Jews. They arrested him as a false prophet and as a blasphemer, based on the things he had been teaching in the temple. But they wanted Jesus executed and only Pilate, the Roman governor, had the authority to do that. Pilate didn't care if Jesus was a false prophet; he didn't care if Jesus was blaspheming the God of the Jews or his temple. So they questioned Jesus about his claims to be the Messiah and to be the Son of God. Jesus didn't say very much, but what he did say spoke profoundly to his being in the right and their being in the wrong. That all went over their heads. Out of it, though, they found something: Jesus was claiming to be the king. That was something they could take to Pilate. If he claimed to be the king, Jesus was claiming to be Caesar's rival. Pilate would *have* to deal with that!

Luke continue the story in 23:1-2.

Then the whole company of them arose and brought him before Pilate. And they began to accuse him, saying, "We found this man misleading our nation and forbidding us to give tribute to Caesar, and saying that he himself is Christ, a king."

To get a full sense of what's going on here we need to go back to the Old Testament book of Deuteronomy. Deuteronomy warns against two kinds of false prophets. In Chapter 18 it warns against "prophets" who proclaim prophecies that never come to pass. They are to be put to death. But Chapter 13 deals with a different kind of false prophet. Let me read verses 1-5:

If a prophet or a dreamer of dreams arises among you and gives you a sign or a wonder, and the sign or wonder that he tells you comes to pass, and if he says, 'Let us go after other gods,' which you have not known, 'and let us serve them,' you shall not listen to the words of that prophet or that dreamer of dreams. For the LORD your God is testing you, to know whether you love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul. You shall walk after the LORD your God and fear him and keep his commandments and obey his voice, and you shall serve him and hold fast to him. But that prophet or that dreamer of dreams shall be put to death, because he has taught rebellion against the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt and redeemed you out of the house of slavery, to make you leave the way in which the LORD your God commanded you to walk. So you shall purge the evil from your midst.

This was Jesus as far as the Sanhedrin were concerned. He was a dreamer of dreams who did legitimate signs and wonders, he did them, as they say to

Pilate, "misleading our nation". The Lord took this sort of thing seriously—seriously enough to demand that such false prophets be put to death, just as the Sanhedrin demands Pilate put Jesus to death. Israel was to love the Lord with all her heart and soul; she was to walk after the Lord, fearing him and keeping his commandments; she was to obey his voice; she was to serve him and hold fast to him. That was Israel's end of the covenant; that was what she was to keep. Any prophet who directed otherwise was not only a covenant-breaker, but was urging the people of Israel to break the covenant, and for that the penalty was death. So if Jesus were leading Israel astray, if he were leading her to break covenant with the Lord, if he were urging her to stop hearing and obeying his voice, he deserved death. These are the grounds on which the Sanhedrin accuses Jesus before Pilate.

But notice how they twist the charges. They accuse Jesus of leading Israel astray. What specifically has he done? They tell Pilate that Jesus has forbidden paying taxes to Caesar and they tell him that Jesus has claimed to be the Christ—that's the Greek word for Messiah. They connect the dots for Pilate to make Jesus sound as dangerous as they can: He's leading Israel astray by subverting Caesar's authority and by claiming to be a king—to be a rival of Caesar.

Can you see just how upside-down all of this is? The Sanhedrin charges Jesus with leading Israel astray as a false prophet. That means leading Israel away from her worship of Lord, from her loyalty to him, and from her covenant with him. But who's really leading Israel astray here? The Sanhedrin had no love of Rome, but they've been so duped by the Satan, they've invested themselves so fully in evil, and they want so badly to find some charge that will stick to Jesus, that they equate loyalty to Caesar with faithfulness to the Lord and his covenant—they sell their collective soul to Caesar, to the one whose

kingdom was a pathetic rival to the true kingdom God and to the one who blasphemously claimed to be the son of a god. Israel had sold her soul over and over to pagan kings and to pagan idols down through the centuries rather than listening to the Lord and trusting in his covenant, but here it reaches a climax. The Sanhedrin, the Jewish elders and the chief priests, stand with the Lord's Messiah before them; they hear his call to repentance, his call to turn aside from corruption, his call to be a light and blessing to the nations as they had been called to be from the beginning, and rather than hear him, rather than obey him, rather than loving him with heart and soul, they sell their souls to Caesar.

But Caesar's representative, Pontius Pilate, is sceptical. Look at verses 3-4:

And Pilate asked him, "Are you the King of the Jews?" And he answered him, "You have said so." Then Pilate said to the chief priests and the crowds, "I find no guilt in this man."

Pilate saw through this a mile away. He and the Sanhedrin were perpetually at odds with each other. The Jews hated Rome and Rome hated the Jews. The Sadducees, who made up most of the Sanhedrin, compromised with the Romans because it allowed them to hold on to their power and their wealth. Pilate knew it was ludicrous that they would bring a fellow Jew before him to demand execution by the Romans. He could also see that Jesus was no king—not in the traditional sense, at any rate—and that he was no violent revolutionary. Again, Pilate couldn't have cared less if Jesus was leading Israel astray, but he can't ignore the charges that Jesus is subverting Rome. And so he asks Jesus about the charge of kingship. He pays lip service to his duty as Roman governor, but he's already made up his mind. Jesus doesn't clearly confirm or deny the charge and

Pilate doesn't pursue it further. It was obvious to him that Jesus was harmless. But, more important to him, was the opportunity to do the opposite of what the Sanhedrin asked. Again, Pilate and the Sanhedrin tolerated each other at best. He was known for routinely doing the opposite of what they asked just for the sake of making them angry and to make it clear he was in charge. And that's what he does here. In fact, the Greek puts all the emphasis on the "no" in Pilate's statement, "I find no guilt in this man." Pilate utterly and completely rejects their charges against Jesus. And Luke uses this to build his picture of Jesus. Pilate's acquittal of Jesus at this point was motivated by his cynicism, but it still highlights the innocence of Jesus as he goes to the cross: the Roman governor declared him innocent.

But that's not the end of it. The Sanhedrin won't let it drop. Again, they insist that Pilate do something because Jesus is a trouble-maker—presumably for Rome.

But they were urgent, saying, "He stirs up the people, teaching throughout all Judea, from Galilee even to this place." (Luke 23:5)

Pilate was exasperated with these men. He didn't want or need their trouble. He thought he'd made that clear when he declared Jesus innocent just to spite them. But they won't stop. The mention of Galilee gets his attention. "Is Jesus from Galilee?" he asks them in verse 6. Ha! If Jesus is from Galilee he can dump this problem on someone else—he can pass the buck and be done with the Sanhedrin. Luke goes on:

And when he learned that he belonged to Herod's jurisdiction, he sent him over to Herod, who was himself in Jerusalem at that time.

Herod Antipas was Tetrarch of Galilee and he, too, was essentially Rome's

representative, much like Pilate—a puppet king who pretended at being Jewish. Jesus was technically under his jurisdiction—technically his responsibility—and since it was Passover, Herod just happened to be in Jerusalem. Pilate wasn't on good terms with Herod either. This was an opportunity to get rid of the Sanhedrin and poke a finger in Herod's eye at the same time. Herod didn't like dealing with them any more than he did.

Herod wasn't a fan of Jesus either, for that matter. His grandfather had sent his soldiers to murder all the baby boys in Bethlehem in his attempt to end Jesus' claim to be King of the Jews before it even started. John the Baptist had confronted Herod in his preaching and Herod eventually had him beheaded. Herod was fascinated by the reports he had heard of Jesus and his miracles, but he also associated Jesus with John. In Chapter 13 the Pharisees had warned Jesus to flee, because Herod wanted to kill him. Herod was troubled by Jesus' preaching, but saw Jesus' miracles as a sort of circus act and he wanted to see them. Jesus disappoints. Look at verses 8-9:

When Herod saw Jesus, he was very glad, for he had long desired to see him, because he had heard about him, and he was hoping to see some sign done by him. So he questioned him at some length, but he made no answer.

Jesus refuses to perform miracles at the command of Herod, the corrupt pretender king. He doesn't even answer his questions. Jesus ben Sira had written, "There is a reproof that is not timely; and there is a man who keeps silent but is wise." This is the course Jesus steers. He's been arrested and paraded around like a criminal, but even his actions—his response—proves that he's innocent. We see Jesus as the true Lord here as he takes the abuse of the Sanhedrin and now the abuse of Herod without

yelling and blustering, without angrily asserting his innocence, but instead responding with gentleness and trusting in the sovereignty of God for his vindication. This is the man who would pray for his enemies even as they nailed him to a cross. Brothers and Sisters, *this* is how the kingdom of God confronts the kingdom of Caesar.

Luke gives the definite impression that Herod's questioning and Jesus' refusal to answer go on for a long time with the Sanhedrin egging Herod on. In verse 10 Luke writes:

The chief priests and the scribes stood by, vehemently accusing him.

Still Jesus refuses to answer. He's innocent of their trumped up charges and there's nothing more he can possibly say. Herod was thrilled to see Jesus at first, but he only becomes angrier and angrier as he doesn't get the response he wants from him. Eventually his questions turn into mocking and more abuse:

And Herod with his soldiers treated him with contempt and mocked him. Then, arraying him in splendid clothing, he sent him back to Pilate. (Luke 23:11)

Herod, the one who actually bore the title of "King of the Jews" but was a pretender and Roman puppet arrays Jesus for the first time in the garments of a king. The portrait we have of Herod in the Gospels is of an unstable and fickle man. First he sought to have Jesus killed, then he's thrilled to see him, now he's angry because Jesus wouldn't satisfy his desire for a circus show. Herod might have had Jesus executed at this point, but just like Pilate, Herod despised the Sanhedrin. They wanted Jesus dead and because that's what they want, Herod refuses to condemn him. He takes out his anger on Jesus as he and his court mock and abuse him, but ultimately he makes the choice that will most upset

his political rivals and sends them away with Jesus, back to Pilate.

Then in verse 12 Luke gives us a strange parting statement:

And Herod and Pilate became friends with each other that very day, for before this they had been at enmity with each other.

It's not clear what Luke's point is in telling us this. We know that Pilate and Herod didn't like each other and were political rivals, but we see them teaming up in the book of Acts to persecute the fledgling Church in Jerusalem. This may be Luke's setup for that. But the Early Church also saw here a fulfilling of Psalm 2:

**Why do the nations rage
and the peoples plot in vain?
The kings of the earth set themselves,
and the rulers take counsel together,
against the LORD and
against his Anointed.** (Psalm 2:1-2)

Here Pilate and Herod—the kings of the earth, or at least their local representatives—along with the Sanhedrin take counsel together in this conspiracy against Jesus. Either could have stopped his death. Both sent him away having found nothing to the charges against him, but neither of them stopped it. Both, in fact, took part in the conspiracy against him, fulfilling the prophecy. But there's also a tradition going back at least to Cyril of Jerusalem, that this is evidence of the reconciliation Jesus brought at the cross breaking out, even in the most unlikely of places. Jesus reached out to bring people together—to reconcile them: Jews and gentiles, the righteous and sinners, and now even as these evil men conspire against him, the cross brings them together. Pilate and Herod being reconciled can't compare to the reconciliation that Jesus brings between himself and sinners, but Luke

sees everywhere signs that in Jesus sin and enmity are being dealt with and God's creation is being transformed and made new—a new kingdom is breaking into the world and it's totally unlike any kingdom that has existed before.

And that brings us back to the point I made when we started. As it turned out, the Sanhedrin, Herod, Pilate, Caesar—they all had reason to be afraid when Jesus—and later when his apostles—stood before them. Jesus *did* subvert the earthly kingdom built up by the faithless and corrupt rulers of Israel. His apostles subverted the kingdom of Caesar. Think of Jesus, there before the Sanhedrin, before Pilate, before Herod—the true King mocked and beaten by pretenders. Isaiah wrote:

**He was oppressed, and he was afflicted,
yet he opened not his mouth;
like a lamb that is led to the slaughter,
and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent,
so he opened not his mouth.**
(Isaiah 53:7)

Jesus was invested in seeing the kingdom of God come—in giving his life to put an end to sin and death, to bring forgiveness of sins and a means of reconciliation with God, to undo the corruption unleashed on Creation by human rebellion and sin—ultimately giving his life to make all things new. Down through history men and women have sought to bring some kind of order to the world. Some by exploiting others for their own gain. Some have been more altruistic, trying to make a better world for others. But all of them have been rooted in violence, which begot violence in return, which itself begot even more violence. It's the ongoing spiral of human sin. Friends, Jesus broke the cycle. Rather than return sin with sin and violence with violence, Jesus absorbed it and gave back life and

reconciliation in return. As Peter writes:

When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed. (1 Peter 2:23-24)

Jesus' disciples followed in his footsteps. All but one of the apostles were martyred for Jesus. And yet think of Paul, there in Rome awaiting a death sentence, but preaching the good news that Jesus is Lord right under Caesar's nose. In faith they and the first Christians followed Jesus, not reviling, not threatening, but entrusting themselves to him who judges justly. They prayed for their enemies. They did good to those who persecuted them. And through their witness they brought the Roman Empire to Jesus.

As the new Israel, they lived out the covenant God had established with Abraham. They were a light to the world. They had seen the risen Christ. They had been there on the day of Pentecost when the Spirit came and transformed their hearts. They lived *in faith* for the sake of Jesus, for the sake of each other, and for the sake of the world. Some of them had been Pharisees, who had previously committed their lives to proving they were holier than others; they now lived to make others holier. Some had been Sadducees, who had compromised their faith and invested themselves in the political status quo to preserve their prestige and their wealth; they now lived invested in Jesus, giving up worldly prestige and sharing their wealth with others to make him known. Some of them had been Zealots, committed to the liberation of Israel and whatever violent means it might take to make it happen; they now lived for the Prince

of Peace, ready to witness his kingdom even if it meant martyrdom without a fight—leaving vengeance to the Lord. Again, they had been made new by Jesus and were invested in only one thing: his kingdom and making it known by giving of themselves and living the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

As Jesus' people today, we need to seriously consider who and what we're invested in. In what do we put our faith? Is our hope in the Prime Minister or in Jesus? Is our hope in Ottawa or in the New Jerusalem? Israel was called to live by faith and trust in the Lord, but she was duped by kings and their false prophets into trusting in horses and chariots, in pagan idols and pagan kings. And it's just as easy for us to be duped by shouting and fear-mongering pundits and politicians, it's easy to be duped by their false prophets. Maybe you've seen the videos going around the Internet: Christians giving "prophecies" that Canada is at a tipping point and that God will bless us if we will only vote for the right candidates and will curse us if we don't. Brothers and Sisters, our government has been engaged in evil for a long, long time. We've been murdering 100,000 unborn children a year for almost half a century—and even our best political options refuse to end the holocaust. We're long past the tipping point. We've been deserving of judgement for a very long time. These false prophets are modern-day Sadducees—urging Jesus' people to compromise and to invest in the lesser of two evils. At the same time, thinking that our hope lies in the ballot box and that using the force—the violence—of government to impose our will on the people around us is to fall into the trap ancient Israel did as she put her trust in horses and chariots. It's easy to be duped by the mud-slinging into thinking that one candidate is evil incarnate and another

is our messiah. Some are without a doubt better options than others, but all are fallen and sinful and most (if not all) of them are invested in Caesar far more than Jesus. Brothers and Sisters, Jesus is our only Messiah and our only hope. We have choices to make, but we need to remember that preaching that he is Lord and making his kingdom known is our duty. His kingdom will not come by force, whether violent or democratic, it can never come by choosing the lesser of two evils, and we undermine our witness if we think and act as if it will.

Brothers and Sisters, as Christians we may certainly take part in the democratic process, but as we do let us always have in mind the fact that only Jesus is Lord and that only Jesus is our hope. Whatever part we take in the political process must exhibit not the works of the flesh—enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy—the natural fruit of Caesar's kingdom and Caesar's politics—but instead, we must exhibit the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.

Let us pray: Heavenly Father, remind us of your sovereignty and your goodness. Remind us that your Son went to the cross for our sake, to reconcile us to you by returning violence with peace and death with life. Remind us that our calling is to follow his example. We're surrounded by anger and enmity and hatred. Voices shout us to be angry to hate and to demand our rights. It's easy for us to be swayed by them and to forget that Jesus is our hope. Strengthen our faith as we remember our Lord and remember his kingdom and remember our calling to be light in the midst of darkness. Through him we pray. Amen.