

No King but Caesar!

John 19:1-16a

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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Today, we are returning to our Lenten theme of “Dwelling in Dissonance” and specifically the last days of Jesus’ life as told in John’s gospel.

Perhaps you feel like it’s been tough to track with this theme during Lent. Part of this is simply due to scheduling.

We’ve dropped in and out of this theme to accommodate other things going on in the life of our church. Four weeks ago, we had our church retreat, so we pushed pause on the theme. And then, last Sunday we hosted the Mennonite Church Alberta delegate sessions, so we had a different worship theme on Sunday morning.

So, it’s kind of been a stop-start journey through Lent. And now, we are only a week away from Palm Sunday and two weeks away from Easter!

Perhaps you’ve also found it tough to track with this theme because the word “dissonance” isn’t one that most of us use much and we might not even feel like we understand it very well.

A reminder: “dissonance” comes to us from the world of music and has to do with when two notes sound discordant, like they don’t belong together, don’t fit, where we’re longing for harmony, for resolution, for the way things are supposed to sound.

So, we’ve kind of deliberately been sitting with stories and themes that seem unresolved, unfinished.

Stories of Jesus encountering people in power where we wish Jesus would say something, but he remains silent.

Stories where we long for a display of God's power and might, but we get Jesus responding in riddles, changing the subject, submitting to false charges and bad intentions.

Stories where we would love to see his followers act in faith and courage and hope, but instead they run and hide or pretend they don't even know him.

Stories that aren't obviously very triumphant or inspiring. *Dissonance*.

There's a third reason why you might be finding it tough to track with this theme.

The story of Jesus' last week is just a difficult story to tell and to hear.

I've been struck in a new way this Lenten season about how as Christians we are part of a story that has some really hard parts to it.

I should pause to note once again how significant it is that the gospel is at its heart a story. Our theme at the delegate sessions last week storytelling as a bridge to healing and hope and we noted how often Jesus used stories, and how our brains seem to be wired for narrative.

The gospel is a story.

It's not a philosophical or theological system, even though it contains truths that have kept philosophers and theologians busy for millennia.

It's not a spiritual path to enlightenment, even though Jesus obviously was spiritually in tune like no one else.

It's not a moral code or an ethical program, even though it contains moral instruction.

It's not a political system, even though it has political implications.

It's not a salvation checklist, even though it is all about salvation.

It is a story. A story about God and what God has done in history.

And a story that holds some ugly realities before us and insists that we don't look away.

Christianity, at its best, speaks beautiful truths about love and compassion and mercy and forgiveness, about selflessness and boundary crossing and all kinds of other things.

But at the heart of our story is a farcical trial, unfair accusations, and a brutal, public execution of an innocent man. A story of the abuse of power, of the ugliness of a mob, of deception and betrayal and cowardice and manipulation.

Last weekend when we hosted guests from across the province, many people commented to me on what a beautiful display we have in our sanctuary. And it is. It is creative and evocative in all kinds of ways.

But as I heard these comments, I couldn't help but ponder that at the center of this beautiful display is a symbol of torture. This should make us squirm more than it does.

It is a dissonant image.

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I couldn't help but observe some of this dissonance last weekend.

Our theme song for the weekend was a song called Mercy, Mercy Lord. It's a song that we are coming to know well in our church. We sang it at least four times over the course of the weekend.

As we sang the song, I could sense a lot more enthusiasm for verse two than for verse one. Verse two:

Lord, You have taught us, love one another
As You have loved us so we must love
Always forbearing, always forgiving
Showing to others the mercy we've known

This is familiar terrain for Mennonites. Yes, we are supposed to follow Jesus' example. Obviously. Love, forgiveness, mercy. Just as Jesus taught us.

We sang with gusto.

Verse one was a bit squirmier:

You have been patient with our offences
You have forgiven all of our sins
We were deserving only Your judgement
But Your great mercy triumphed again

When we sang this verse, I thought I could detect some shuffling of feet, a bit of staring down at the hymnal, a bit less gusto.

Perhaps we don't like the image of a God who judges. We certainly don't like thinking about our guilt or our offenses. We're pretty decent people, for the most part, right? Not perfect, obviously, but deserving *only* of judgment? That's a bit harsh, surely.

We'd rather sing verse two than verse one because verse two portrays us in a more flattering light. Capable of loving, forgiving, showing mercy. Kind of like Jesus. Not as offenders deserving of judgment.

And yet both are true. And the gospel insists that we don't tell one part of the story without the other.

In a workshop that I led last Saturday, I quoted an article by Tony Robinson who is former senior minister at Plymouth Congregational Church in Seattle. He talked about two kinds of churches in a way that I found helpful.

I recently had a conversation with a couple who are my age and generation, a.k.a. Boomers. They were struggling with their adult son's embrace of a Christianity and church that were far more conservative than their own.

On one hand, they were grateful that their son's faith had helped him overcome, or be set free from, alcohol abuse and the kinds of problems that go with that. But they were disturbed by his version of Christianity and his lack of respect for their own faith and church.

For the sake of discussion, I suggested, let's say there are two kinds of churches: one we will call "Golden Rule" churches, and the others are "Jesus Saves" churches...

“Golden Rule Churches,” which describes many mainline or liberal churches, put their emphasis on being kind and loving toward all we meet and accepting those who are different in some, or many ways...

Favorite biblical passages, besides the Golden Rule (Mt 7:12), are Matthew 25:31 and following where Jesus says, “Inasmuch as you did it to the least of these, you did it to me.” Or Micah 6:8, “What does the Lord require of you, but to do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with your God.”

(Sounds pretty Mennonite, doesn't it?)

“Jesus Saves Churches” probably fits most evangelical churches. Far and away the favorite biblical passage would be John 3:16, “For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in him shall not die but have eternal life...”

Their son pretty much dismissed their “Golden Rule” church as “not really Christian.” Meanwhile, his parents were put off both by the high degree of certainty of their son’s faith...

In my ideal church, “Golden Rule” and “Jesus Saves” would both have a place and really be held together. Both are biblical. Both have a legitimate part of the Christian faith...

You could make a good argument that each of these types of church are really in desperate need of the core doctrine of the other.

(We need verse one and verse two of the song!)

Jesus Saves reminds the Golden Rule folks that despite our best intentions, we too fail and need grace; while the Golden Rule speaks to the Jesus Saves people of a Jesus who is unfailingly generous and regards no person as beyond the pale...

Relentlessly drilling down on one part of the faith, we risk missing Jesus who so often lingers in that which discomforts and disturbs us.¹

¹ <https://mbird.com/religion/church/two-kinds-of-churches/>

I couldn't say it much better (which is why I didn't try 😊).

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Well, speaking of a Jesus who lingers in that which discomforts and disturbs us. Our passage today is an uncomfortable and disturbing one.

In our Lenten series so far, we have followed Jesus from an interrogation by the Jewish high priest to his appointment with the Roman governor Pilate.

We have witnessed the betrayal of Peter, the hypocrisy of the religious leaders, the cynicism of the governor.

And today, we have a scene of callous brutality and even more hypocrisy.

We witness the soldiers beating and mocking Jesus, thrusting an ironic, insulting and painful crown of thorns upon his head. "Hail, King of the Jews!"

We see Pilate trying to find an off-ramp to all this madness but cravenly giving into a mob who is baying for blood.

Crucify him! they scream.

"Deal with him yourselves," Pilate says, not for the first time (we saw him try to pass the buck a few weeks ago). But he knows he's not going to be rid of this problem so easily. They've already told him that their law doesn't permit them to execute him and that this decision will fall to him.

Pilate is nervous and agitated and he seeks to reason with Jesus one more time. *Don't you know that I have the power of life and death over you?*

Jesus, who has been silent thus far, responds with his only words in this passage: "You would have no power over me unless it had been given you from above."

Pilate tries to release him, but the mob won't have it. The hypocrisy reaches new heights with the religious leaders. They appeal to the authority of their oppressors to get Pilate to do their will.

“If you release this man, you are no friend of Caesar. Everyone who claims to be a king sets himself against Caesar.”

Pilate hauls Jesus out before the mob one last time. “Here is your king? Shall I crucify your king?”

And in one of the most chilling lines in all of Scripture, the chief priests respond: “We have no king but Caesar.”

The ones who should have said, “We have no king but God” here show their true colours. They expose themselves as idolaters; their allegiance is not to the maker of heaven and earth, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, but to raw power and political maneuvering.

They have no interest in the kingdom Jesus is bringing. They prefer the old one where they know the rules. And they’ll even profess allegiance to the Roman Emperor rather than let Jesus off the hook.

Each year at Christmas time we sing “Joy to the world, *let earth receive her king.*”

This is how earth ultimately received her king. By screaming, “We have no king but Caesar.” And engineering the execution of God in human flesh.

Our text today ends with Pilate handing Jesus over to a mob.

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Over the last few weeks, I’ve referred a few times to the idea that Scripture is both a map and a mirror.

I want to end with two map-like points and one mirror-like point.

First, the map. How is this hard story a map? How does it point us in a direction? How does it show us where to go or what to avoid?

First, I think it offers a cautionary tale to how easy it is to get caught up in a mob mentality.

Jesus died at the hands of the Romans, officially. They were the ones that drove in the nails and brandished the spear. But on the most human level, Jesus was surrendered to the will of the people.

The mob saw that there would be no show—no rebellion against Rome, no great moment of triumph, no reclaiming of any thrones. And who wants a king like that? Who wants a king who won't even defend himself? Who wants a king who allows himself to be mocked for the amusement of the powerful?

Mobs can be powerful things. Then and now.

Mobs are always on the hunt for a scapegoat, then and now.

Mobs are united by a common enemy, then and now.

Mobs see things in black and white, never grey, then and now.

Mobs are irrational and violent and self-righteous, then and now.

Mobs exist on the right and on the left, in the political and ideological tribes that we so easily self-sort ourselves into. They exist wherever a group of people is exceedingly convinced of the righteousness of their own cause, blind to their own faults and weaknesses, and desperate to find someone to blame for what's wrong.

We, whose Saviour was delivered up to an angry crowd ought to always be very suspicious of mobs. Especially when they are baying for blood (literal or metaphorical)

Second, this text ought to teach us about allegiance, about kingdoms. Do we seek first Jesus and his kingdom? Or do we, in our own ways, say things like “We have no king but Caesar?”

Do we look to who *really* holds the power for our solutions?

Do we turn away from Jesus when he doesn't do our bidding, when his way doesn't seem to be delivering the practical results we had in mind?

Finally, the mirror. What does this passage show us about ourselves?

Well, it's connected to the map. The mirror shows us who we are, if we will look in it honestly. And the season of Lent is about nothing if not looking at ourselves honestly.

We must admit that we are the kinds of people who find it easy to join the mob. We are the kinds of people who are easily seduced by idolatry.

We are the kinds of people who often prefer Caesar's kingdom to the one Jesus brings.

This is who we are. We must never shrink away from acknowledging this.

Much as we seek to be Golden Rule people, much as might imagine we already are Golden Rule people, we remain sinners in need of a Saviour.

We remain in need of the one who, while hanging on the cross that Pilate condemns him to, "Forgive them, they don't know what they are doing.

Mercy, mercy Lord.

Your mercy is how we restored.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.

