

Pastor Joe Polzin
Mark 15:1-20
“Eyes on Jesus – *Worldly Eyes*”
Year A – Midweek Lent 5
April 1, 2020

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. **Amen.**

Today’s theme in our Lenten series is “Worldly Eyes,” and you often hear the term “worldly” in two different ways. One means “having a lot of practical experience and knowledge about life and the world,” and the other means “to be somewhat out of touch or removed from religious or spiritual matters.” And in our Passion Reading today, we see both those senses of the term “worldly,” as Pontius Pilate, the Jewish religious leaders, 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. As a governor, everything boils down to convincing the emperor in Rome of your ongoing value in your position. So above all, you have to look out for number one, not necessarily 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, he undoubtedly considered the large population of highly religious Jews as a thorn in his side. Pilate pursued a systematic policy of persecution and provocation of the Jews.

Given all that, however, it is a bit surprising to see Pilate basically cooperating with the Jewish leaders in the trial of Jesus. It’s true that he thought Jesus was innocent, at least not guilty, based on his own investigation, and also on the warning from his wife’s mysterious dream. But Pilate’s worldliness still won out in the end. His religious skepticism is on full display when he asks Jesus, “What is truth?” essentially rejecting the incarnate Truth standing right there in front of him. And his pragmatism toward worldly affairs is evidenced by granting to the mob the execution of Jesus, while the murderer and insurrectionist, Barabbas, went free. Better to pacify the crowd, thought Pilate, rather than place his position of power in jeopardy if they started a rebellion over this insignificant man some called a king.

But it wasn’t just Pilate who was worldly. 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 Jewish leaders stirred up the crowds to demand the crucifixion of Jesus so they could eliminate the threat.

And it was the Roman soldiers who had worldly eyes, as well. They thought they would know a king when they saw one, and Jesus was the opposite of their view of royalty. Many had likely seen Caesar himself; others had seen kings of the East during military campaigns; still others could envision with their mind’s eye glorious kings with all their pomp and circumstance. But this Jewish carpenter, beaten and bloodied and wearing a crown of thorns? The purple cloak, the crown, the saluting, the kneeling down... it was all to mock him. “Hail, King of the Jews!” they said as they struck him and spit on him.

Ironically, though, 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 that truth: Jesus was and is a king, but not as the world thinks about kings. He is the heavenly, divine King, God the Son in the flesh! And while the way of the world is to look for earthly power and glory in rulers, the true God chose to glory in suffering and the cross, and he manifests his power to save the world by a cross, and by a resurrection.

“Crucify him!” cried the crowds. “Crucify him!” cried the Father from his throne. “Crucify me!” cried the obedient Son. The Apostle John says in his first epistle, “Whoever does the will of God abides forever” (1 John 2:17), and this first and foremost refers to Jesus. 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 our trespasses against us (2 Cor 5:19).

Was his death for you? Well, you should ask, are you in the world? Then the answer is yes! Jesus is “the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” (John 1:29), and if your worldly sins were on him at 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 do 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. They are no longer even in the world—because that is the truth of the Gospel: that in Christ you have been set free from sin, death, and hell, and you look forward to eternal righteousness, everlasting life, and the resurrection on the day when Jesus returns!

And as Jesus says, his kingdom is not of this world, therefore we are called not to a worldly mind-set but to a heavenly one. The Apostle 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). Our mindset as we live in this world is completely transformed, because we have Christ, who sets our minds on things above.

Jesus prayed to his Father for you on the night when he was betrayed. He said, “[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 adopt the worldly, postmodern view expressed by Pilate: “What is truth?” That you can’t know anything that is absolutely true. This religious skepticism may lead some to despair, or it may lead others to extreme worldliness: “Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow you shall die.” But that’s not how it is for Christians. We know the truth about the world. John also 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 for you: to embrace the truth of the cross of Christ, by which the world has been crucified to you, and you to the world (Galatians 6:14), that you may abide forever. This is God’s saving way, no matter what may be happening around you in this fallen creation. Many difficult and fearful and sorrowful things occur in this life. Remember, this world even put to death the Son of God. But the Son came to overcome the world. He came to save us.

So that we would find our hope and our confidence not in this world, which is fleeting and failing, but in him, who is eternal. And he will one day restore this world to perfection, and with him we will live for eternity in the new heavens and the new earth.

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).

What the cross of Christ shows us is that it is truly foolish to judge that which we see and value according to worldly eyes. Instead, God uses these so-called foolish, weak, low, and despised things, like his Son nailed to a tree, to show us what is truly wise, and powerful, and good in God’s eyes. And that allows us to begin to see things as God sees them, fixing our eyes on Jesus Christ, and seeing in faith all that he has done for us, is continuing to do, and will do in our life everlasting. In Jesus’ name. **Amen.**

And now may the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. **Amen.**

(Sermon adapted from the series, *Eyes on Jesus*, copyrighted by Concordia Publishing House [St. Louis], 2019.)