

HUMANITY AT ITS WORST
Sermon for the 4th Sunday in Lent, 2019
Luke 23:1-25

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen.

The text for our sermon today is Luke 23:1-25: ¹ Then the whole assembly rose and took Him to Pilate. ² They began to accuse Him: “We found that He makes our people disloyal, keeping them from paying taxes to Caesar, and saying that He is Christ, a King.”

³ Pilate asked Him, “Are You the King of the Jews?”

Jesus answered him, “Yes, it is as you say.”

⁴ Pilate told the chief priests and the crowd, “I do not find this Man guilty at all.”

⁵ However, they kept insisting, “He stirs up the people by teaching all over Judea. He began in Galilee and has come here.”

⁶ When Pilate heard that, he asked if the Man was a Galilean. ⁷ When he found out that Jesus was under Herod’s jurisdiction, he sent Him to Herod, who was also in Jerusalem at that time. ⁸ When Herod saw Jesus, he was very glad, because for a long time he had wanted to see Him. For he had been hearing about Him, and was hoping to see some miracle done by Him. ⁹ Herod asked Him many questions, but Jesus did not answer him at all. ¹⁰ The chief priests and the scribes were standing there and accusing Him vehemently. ¹¹ Herod and his soldiers treated Jesus with contempt and mocked Him. They put a splendid garment on Him and sent Him back to Pilate. ¹² On that very day Herod and Pilate became friends with each other. For before this they had been enemies of each other.

¹³ Then Pilate called the chief priests, the rulers, and the people together. ¹⁴ He told them, “You have brought this Man to me as one who is inciting the people to rebellion. Now, look! I have examined this Man before you and found Him innocent of the charges that you are making against Him. ¹⁵ No, neither has Herod. For he has sent Him back to us; and, as you can see, He has done nothing to deserve death. ¹⁶ Therefore, I shall chastise Him and release Him.”

¹⁸ The whole crowd then began to shout aloud: “Away with this Man! Release Barabbas for us!”

¹⁹ Barabbas had been thrown into prison for a revolt that had taken place in the city and for murder. ²⁰ Pilate spoke to them again, because he wanted to release Jesus. ²¹ However, they kept shouting, “Crucify him! Crucify him!”

²² Then Pilate spoke to them the third time, “No. What wrong has He done? I have found nothing in Him to make Him deserve to die. I shall therefore chastise Him and release Him.”

²³ However, they were insistent, demanding with loud voices that He should be crucified, and their voices began to prevail. ²⁴ Then Pilate decided that what they demanded should be done. ²⁵ He released the man who had been thrown into prison for insurrection and murder, for whom they were asking, and he delivered Jesus for them to do what they wanted.

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your truth, Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

As we accompany our Lord on His way to the cross, sin lifts its ugly head and smirks at us again and again. We see it in the power of darkness that lurked in the Garden of Gethsemane and accomplished His arrest. We see it in the unbelief that stood out so plainly during His trial in the chief priest’s house. We see it again today as we witness the hearing to which He was subjected before Herod and Pilate. Once more sin assumes a different form.

Sin cuts man off from God, but man *must have something for which to live*. Since God no longer figures in his life, he finds a substitute. This substitute is the world - the world takes the place of God. Finding his life in the world, soon the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life take control. In them and through them the man without God looks for satisfaction, and sinks to the lowest level. It is this aspect of sin that is revealed in our text from Luke today. There we see humanity at its worst.

Let us, first of all, take a look at Herod.

Luke begins by saying, **¹ Then the whole assembly rose and took Him to Pilate.**

The phrase “*suffered under Pontius Pilate*” has been spoken for centuries by confessing Christians, yet little is known about Pilate except what is told in the gospels and in a few references by Josephus, a first century Jewish historian. However, because Pilate is the judge who condemned Jesus to die, many writings developed claiming to chronicle his life before, during, and after the events recorded in the gospels.

What we do know is that Pilate was appointed by the Roman government as its representative and acted as the supreme judge in criminal cases. After Jesus had testified before the Jewish council early Friday morning, He was led off to Pilate where three charges were levelled against Him. ² **They began to accuse Him: “We found that He makes our people disloyal, keeping them from paying taxes to Caesar, and saying that He is Christ, a King.”**

Of these charges, Pilate seems unconcerned about the first two. Maybe he was aware that the second was a lie,¹ and knew that Jesus was hailed as a king by the crowds as He rode into Jerusalem on the previous Sunday. So he asks Jesus directly, **“Are You the King of the Jews?”** Jesus answered him, **“Yes, it is as you say.”**

The Greek here literally says “You say,” with “you” emphasised. Jesus must have answered with such a tone of voice that Pilate was convinced that the third charge was also false, so he announced to the chief priests and people present that they had no case against Jesus. **“I do not find this Man guilty at all.”** The trial should have ended at this point.

⁵ **However, they kept insisting, “He stirs up the people by teaching all over Judea. He began in Galilee and has come here.”** Pilate lacked the courage to release the prisoner and instead looked for an easy way out. Now he had his chance. **“⁶ When Pilate heard that, he asked if the Man was a Galilean. ⁷ When he found out that Jesus was under Herod’s jurisdiction, he sent Him to Herod, who was also in Jerusalem at that time.”** Galilee belonged to Herod’s jurisdiction, who happened to be in Jerusalem at that same time, and so Pilate sent Jesus to him.

Herod was the son of Herod the Great, who had been king at the time of Jesus’ birth. He was a weak and frivolous character, who could not control himself. At one time he had wanted his brother’s wife, and so he took her. He found delight in the dancing of Salome and made a ridiculous vow; and when she came with her request for John the Baptist’s head, he was not man enough to say no.² The Son of God would now appear before this royal scoundrel.

“⁸ When Herod saw Jesus, he was very glad, because for a long time he had wanted to see Him.” When Jesus had been presented to the Lord at the temple in Jerusalem 40 days after His birth, Simeon had taken the Child in his arms and was glad when his eyes saw the salvation of the Lord.³ Philip too, was glad when he had found Him of whom Moses in the Law and the prophets also wrote.⁴ Herod’s joy was of a different nature. It had in it no lofty spiritual quality. He wasn’t glad because He had now seen the promised Saviour come into the world to save from sin. No, he was glad **“for he had been hearing about Him, and was hoping to see some miracle done by Him.”** It was the gladness of one who sought the satisfaction of idle curiosity. It was the eager anticipation of one who hoped for a new relief from boredom. Herod had a golden opportunity to decide whether God’s Son should live or die. He had the privilege of preserving the nation from the stain of the blood of this innocent Man, but such matters were foreign to Herod’s shallow mind. All that he asked of life was a good time. If Jesus would give him a moment’s diversion, good. If not, it would be just too bad for Him.

“⁹ Herod asked Him many questions, but Jesus did not answer him at all. ¹⁰ The chief priests and the scribes were standing there and accusing Him vehemently.” Jesus remained silent, a sign that He was completely in control of the situation and would willingly submit to the Father’s plan. That divine dignity should have made an impression, but the king was impervious to every higher appeal. If not in one way, then in another, he would have his fun. **“¹¹ Herod and his soldiers treated Jesus with contempt and mocked Him. They put a splendid garment on Him and sent Him back to Pilate.”**

Herod is typical of many in the world today. All he asks for is permission to enjoy himself. Many take pleasure wherever they can find it. Believing that there is only one life to live - that once you die that is it, they will make the most of life while they can, and, when it comes to religion – don’t bother. Such topics give nothing but a headache.

¹ Luke 20:20-25

² Matthew 14:1-12; Mark 6:14-29

³ Luke 2:28-32

⁴ John 1:43

Big questions like “Is there a God to whom I am accountable?” or “Where am I going after I die?” are pushed aside as nothing more than an annoying trifle. Instead of looking at the bigger picture, looking beyond this life to the life to come, so many look to petty earthly matters instead, which, whether it’s one month or one year from now, will not possess the slightest significance: “Where do we eat? What will I wear? Can I keep up with the Joneses? What should I spend all my money on?” All these things and many more loom up as tremendously important. How many people like that do you know? How many people live only for this world, and not for the one to come?

Such people appear to be quite harmless when in reality, their indifference to everything worthwhile conceals vast scorn for God. Given an opening, they will attack with bitter scorn the Saviour Himself. **Herod and his soldiers** illustrate this. We see humanity at its worst, humanity that has renounced its divine birthright and deliberately reduced itself to the level of the beast, yes, lower than the beast; for the beast is an irresponsible creature, whereas man has received as a gift from God a rational soul and with it the awful power of being able to reject God and His every offer of love.

Pilate is a further illustration of humanity at its worst.

In many respects, the Roman is a much nobler character than the Jew. He wants to do the right thing. **“I have found nothing in Him to make Him deserve to die. I shall therefore chastise Him and release Him.”**

²³ However, they were insistent, demanding with loud voices that He should be crucified, and their voices began to prevail. ²⁴ Then Pilate decided that what they demanded should be done. ²⁵ He released the man who had been thrown into prison for insurrection and murder, for whom they were asking, and he delivered Jesus for them to do what they wanted.

Three times Pilate tried to release Jesus. Three times he failed. After the third time of trying to release Jesus, Pilate proposed to punish Jesus and then release Him. The punishment he had in mind was scourging with a whip containing pieces of metal. Such punishment was clearly unjust in the case of an innocent man, but Pilate hoped to appease the people. However, it was all to no avail.

What is the trouble? Pilate is governor and has the Roman army ready to back him up. He is a man with a lot of authority. Why not do what his sense of justice demands? Why not use his power and authority to disperse the crowd and release Jesus?

Pilate is not a free man. Instead, He is a slave of sin. He is bound hand and foot. Religiously he is a sceptic. He has no faith in the gods of Rome, nor does he believe in any other higher power. In his Gospel, John records that Pilate makes the remark “*What is truth!*”⁵ when he scornfully concludes one of his interviews with Him who is *the Way, the Truth, and the Life*.⁶ Scepticism has not liberated him, and he is the servant of his passions. To satisfy them, he has been guilty of oppression and extortion. He knows the Jews are anxious to get rid of him and will welcome any opportunity to make charges against him before the emperor. Pilate does not dare to give them an opening. In preference to that, a Man acknowledged to be innocent must die.

For a ruler, Pilate was weak. He professed to know nothing of truth, and his whole life became a lie. He said, **“I have found nothing in Him to make Him deserve to die,”** and still he does not release Jesus. Even though Pilate had admitted that Jesus was innocent and therefore should have been set free, yet he **“released the man who had been thrown into prison for insurrection and murder, for whom they were asking, and he delivered Jesus for them to do what they wanted.”**

Jesus is led away to be crucified. Pilate tells himself: “You are not to blame. The Jews are responsible. You have tried your best to let Him go. Let them answer for it.” All this is lies and shabby excuses, and the height of self-deception is reached when he calls for water and washes his hands to prove that they are unstained by blood,⁷ yet in that same moment, he dirties them forever by decreeing the death of Jesus.

The Pilate type, too, is a familiar one. The intentions of these people are good, their instincts are often correct, but there are chains which keep them from following their instincts, from carrying out their intentions. Sin has rendered them helpless. In every crisis their weakness is plain. Truth is scorned as unknown and unknowable, and their whole life becomes a network of lies. Every attempt to do right ends in failure, which attaches them more firmly to sin.

⁵ John 18:38

⁶ John 14:6

⁷ Matthew 27:24

Trying to whitewash themselves, they find all kinds of extenuating circumstances. They blame everyone but themselves. They can wash their hands so impressively, but it is self-deception. What is the final result? The case of Pilate makes that plain: the end is a complete rejection of Jesus Christ. Barabbas is released, while the Son of God is crucified.

One more illustration of humanity at its worst is offered by Luke, and that is by the rulers of the people and the people themselves.

While Pilate hesitated and squirmed, the crowd of people including the chief priests and rulers, had no scruples. They knew what they wanted. Jesus must die, and by hook or crook, they would accomplish their purpose. All their accusations were false, and they knew it. Jesus had not made their people disloyal, nor kept them from paying taxes to Caesar. He had not aspired to an earthly crown. Yet these were the charges they zealously pressed. There was no pity in their heart. The torn, mangled, and bleeding figure of the Saviour was set before them. He had been unmercifully manhandled. Even Pilate's heart was touched. But all they could shout was **“Crucify Him! Crucify Him!”**

Why did they have that pitiless persistence to accomplish His destruction? Ambition, the lust for power, and prerogatives drove them. Jesus had threatened their authority over Israel. He had dared to attack them who were the Jewish leaders, and they feared that He would alienate the people from them. At an earlier time, after Jesus had raised Lazarus from the dead, some chief priests and the Pharisees called a meeting of the council and asked, *“What are we accomplishing? For this Man is performing many miraculous signs. ⁴⁸ If we let Him go on like this, everyone will believe in Him, and the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation,”* (John 11:47-48). It was this fear for their own power that inflamed them and urged them on to demand His death.

The crowd too blindly followed these blind leaders and just as lustily shouted, **“Crucify Him!”** What had caused that sudden shift? Only a few days before, a crowd had hailed the entering Christ with the jubilant cry, *“Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is He who is coming in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heavens!”* (Matthew 21:9), but now they, too, demanded His death. Why? Perhaps the solution is found in the false Messianic hopes entertained by the Jews. They had wanted a Messiah who would minister to their pride, who would exalt the Jewish nation and, driving out the Romans, make Israel supreme in the world. They were possessed by an almost insane pride of race. All others were scum. *“Abraham is our father!”* they had asserted; and when John replied that *“God can raise up children for Abraham from these stones,”* (Matthew 3:9), when the dream of an earthly kingdom vanished, their fury against the One of whom they had wrongfully hoped for so much knew no bounds, and without much persuasion they joined their rulers in the persistent demand for this man's destruction.

Today, pride remains such a fatal factor in the relationship between God, who wishes to save sinners, and sinners who will not let themselves be saved. The self-satisfied claim *“Abraham is our father!”* has been translated into *“We are good and righteous in ourselves. We have no need for a Saviour.”* Jesus does not make them rich, nor gratify their ambitions. In fact, He threatens prerogatives and privileges, and demands self-denial and sacrifice. He insists upon unselfishness and surrender to God, and they cry: **“Away with this Man!”** They are willing to accept a Lord of glory provided they may reign with Him in glory here and now. But this humble Nazarene despised and rejected of men, who asks them to share in His humiliation, to put a corner of the cross on their shoulders - no, we do not want Him; **“Away with this Man!” “Crucify Him!”**

So, in the presence of this holy Christ, the ugliest aspects of sin were revealed and are still being revealed. Not always do we perceive humanity at its worst as we see here in Pilate and Herod, in the rulers and the crowd; but where man is alienated from God and seeks his hearts' delight in some substitute, where the world or any phase of the world has begun to dominate him, there the germ of that crime that was perpetrated against Jesus is found.

Have we any confession to make today? Are we free from that devil-may-care spirit which sees in our few earthly years just so many opportunities for having a good time, with no interest in anything higher, nobler, or spiritual? That was Herod. Are we free from every entangling alliance with sin, which so cripples us in our better endeavours that over and over again we are defeated? That was Pilate. Are we free from a more or less secret satisfaction with ourselves and a reluctance to admit our need of a Saviour, free from a purely materialistic conception of the kingdom of God? That was the priesthood and the crowd. If to such things we must plead guilty, then let us remember: We, too, have shared in these scenes where we see humanity at its worst.

All is not lost. Here is our comfort: Jesus was crucified to cleanse us from all sin. Even on His way out to Golgotha,

He called for repentance, and so He still calls to us. Repenting of our sin, we may be sure that gladly He gives us His pardon. That is why He permitted humanity at its worst so to treat Him. Isaiah once prophesied, “³ *He was despised and rejected by men, a Man of sorrows and familiar with suffering. Like one from whom people hide their faces, He was despised, and we thought of Him as nothing.*” ⁴ *Surely He has taken on Himself our sufferings and carried our sorrows. Yet we considered Him to be wounded, struck down by God and afflicted.* ⁵ *However, He was pierced for our rebellious acts. He was bruised for our wrongdoings. The chastisement that brought us peace was on Him, and through His wounds, we have been healed,”* (53:3-5).

Here is revealed the very essence of God’s plan of redemption, more plainly than anywhere else in the Old Testament. The entire New Testament Gospel of the righteousness of faith, as St. Paul, in particular, expounded it, rests upon these few verses. These words are all of the New Testament Gospel in a nutshell. There is no other God who loves and forgives like your God (Micah 7:18). He is the Suffering Servant King who has died and risen for you, that you may live eternally like a king with Him. To Him be all praise and glory! Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

PRAYER FOR THE FOURTH SUNDAY IN LENT

Lord, We praise You for all Your loving kindness. We rejoice that You have rescued us from darkness and eternal death, and blessed us with Your love, light, and life. We thank You that You have not punished us as we deserve, or repaid us for our sins. In Your love You have given Your only Son to carry our sins and to suffer for our transgressions, that we may not perish, but have eternal life. We thank You that through Him we can approach Your throne, confident that there we shall find mercy and help in every need. Give us daily joy in Your free forgiveness for all our sins, and in all the endless blessings of the Gospel.

O Lord, You are mindful of the needs of all people. You give daily bread to both the godly and the ungodly alike. We praise and thank you for supplying all our bodily needs. Enable us to use the lives You give and sustain to show forth Your love and care. Grant us the continuing gift of health, that we may serve You with joy through Him who is the bread of life, even Jesus Christ.

Give us opportunities to proclaim the Gospel of Christ to others who do not know it. Keep Your Church in Jesus Christ in the one true faith. Continue to bless the work of the AELC, that through the Gospel and the right administration of the Sacraments, all may find in You the treasures of life and truth.

Give wisdom, integrity, and Your direction to all who wield authority, that we may worship and serve You without hindrance, and live in peace and righteousness. Protect us from the influence of wicked people, and preserve us in all dangers.

Give Your strength to all who suffer sickness, pain, disease, or any other trouble of body, mind, or spirit. Enable them to bear their cross with faith in Him who taught us to pray: “Your will be done”. In His glorious name, and for His kingdom’s sake, we pray these things. Amen.

FOURTH SUNDAY IN LENT

Isaiah 12:1-6

¹ On that day you will say: “I shall praise You, O LORD. Although You have been angry with me, Your anger is turning away, and You are comforting me.” ² Look! God is my Salvation. I shall be confident and not be startled. Indeed, the LORD, the LORD, is my Protection and Might, and He has become my Salvation.”

³ You will joyfully draw water from the wells of salvation. ⁴ On that day you people will say: “Praise the LORD! Call on His name! Make His deeds known among the peoples! Proclaim that His name is exalted! ⁵ Sing to the LORD! For He has done sublime things. Let this be known in all the earth! ⁶ Rejoice and shout

for joy, O inhabitants of Zion! For the Holy One of Israel, who is among you, is great.”

2 Corinthians 5:16-21

¹⁶ Therefore from now on we do not regard anyone from a human point of view. Although we once regarded Christ from a human point of view, yet now we no longer regard Him in this way. ¹⁷ Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old things have passed away. Look! They have become new!

¹⁸ However, all things are from God, who has reconciled us to Himself through Christ, and has given to us the ministry of reconciliation, ¹⁹ that God was in Christ, reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and He has committed to

us the message of reconciliation. ²⁰ Therefore we are ambassadors on Christ's behalf, since God as it were is making His appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: "Be reconciled to God!" ²¹ God made Him who did not know sin to be sin for us, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God.

Luke 15:1-3, 11-32

¹ All the tax-collectors and other sinners were coming to Jesus to hear Him. ² However, the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled and said, "This Man welcomes sinners and eats with them."

³ So He told them this parable: ...

¹¹ Jesus said: "A certain man had two sons. ¹² The younger one of them asked his father, 'Father, give me my share of the property!' So he divided his property between them. ¹³ Not many days later the younger son got together all he had, and left home for a distant country, and there he wasted his possessions in wild living. ¹⁴ When he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. ¹⁵ He went and attached himself to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. ¹⁶ He longed to fill up on the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one would give him anything. ¹⁷ When he came to himself, he said, 'How many of my father's hired men have plenty of bread, and here I am starving to death. ¹⁸ I shall get up and go to my father and tell him, "Father, I have sinned against Heaven and against you. ¹⁹ I do not deserve to be called your son any more. Make me one of your hired men!"'

²⁰ "So he got up and went to his father. While he was still far away, his father saw him and was filled with compassion. He ran, fell on his neck, and kissed him.

²¹ The son told him, 'Father, I have sinned against Heaven and against you. I do not deserve to be called

your son any more.'

²² "The father told his slaves, 'Quickly, bring out a robe, the best one, and put it on him! Put a ring on his hand and sandals on his feet! ²³ Bring the fattened calf, kill it, and let us eat and begin to celebrate! ²⁴ For this son of mine was dead, and has come to life again. He was lost and has been found.' So they began to celebrate.

²⁵ "His elder son was in the field. As he was coming in and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. ²⁶ So he called one of the servants, and asked what this meant.

²⁷ "The servant answered, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has received him back safe and sound.'

²⁸ "However, the elder brother became angry and would not go in. So his father came out and pleaded with him.

²⁹ "However, he answered his father, 'Look! All these years I have been working like a slave for you and have never disobeyed a command of yours, and yet you have never given me a little goat to celebrate with my friends. ³⁰ However, as soon as this son of yours has come back, who has squandered your property with prostitutes, you have killed the fattened calf for him.'

³¹ "The father told him, 'Son, you are always with me, and everything that I have is yours; ³² but we had to celebrate and be glad. For this brother of yours was dead, and has come to life. He was lost, and has been found.'