

Lent – A Time of Renewal of Priorities  
John 18:28-19:16  
March 8, 2017

*Then the Jews led Jesus from Caiaphas to the palace of the Roman governor. By now it was early morning, and to avoid ceremonial uncleanness the Jews did not enter the palace; they wanted to be able to eat the Passover. So Pilate came out to them and asked, "What charges are you bringing against this man?" "If he were not a criminal," they replied, "we would not have handed him over to you." Pilate said, "Take him yourselves and judge him by your own law." "But we have no right to execute anyone," the Jews objected. This happened so that the words Jesus had spoken indicating the kind of death he was going to die would be fulfilled. Pilate then went back inside the palace, summoned Jesus and asked him, "Are you the king of the Jews?" "Is that your own idea," Jesus asked, "or did others talk to you about me?" "Am I a Jew?" Pilate replied. "It was your people and your chief priests who handed you over to me. What is it you have done?" Jesus said, "My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jews. But now my kingdom is from another place." "You are a king, then!" said Pilate. Jesus answered, "You are right in saying I am a king. In fact, for this reason I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me." "What is truth?" Pilate asked. With this he went out again to the Jews and said, "I find no basis for a charge against him. But it is your custom for me to release to you one prisoner at the time of the Passover. Do you want me to release 'the king of the Jews'?" They shouted back, "No, not him! Give us Barabbas!" Now Barabbas had taken part in a rebellion. Then Pilate took Jesus and had him flogged. The soldiers twisted together a crown of thorns and put it on his head. They clothed him in a purple robe and went up to him again and again, saying, "Hail, king of the Jews!" And they struck him in the face. Once more Pilate came out and said to the Jews, "Look, I am bringing him out to you to let you know that I find no basis for a charge against him." When Jesus came out wearing the crown of thorns and the purple robe, Pilate said to them, "Here is the man!" As soon as the chief priests and their officials saw him, they shouted, "Crucify! Crucify!" But Pilate answered, "You take him and crucify him. As for me, I find no basis for a charge against him." The Jews insisted, "We have a law, and according to that law he must die, because he claimed to be the Son of God." When Pilate heard this, he was even more afraid, and he went back inside the palace. "Where do you come from?" he asked Jesus, but Jesus gave him no answer. "Do you refuse to speak to me?" Pilate said. "Don't you realize I have power either to free you or to crucify you?" Jesus answered, "You would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above. Therefore the one who handed me over to you is guilty of a greater sin." From then on, Pilate tried to set Jesus free, but the Jews kept shouting, "If you let this man go, you are no friend of Caesar. Anyone who claims to be a king opposes Caesar." When Pilate heard this, he brought Jesus out and sat down on the judge's seat at a place known as the Stone Pavement (which in Aramaic is Gabbatha). It was the day of Preparation of Passover Week, about the sixth hour. "Here is your king," Pilate said to the Jews. But they shouted, "Take him away! Take him away! Crucify him!" "Shall I crucify your king?" Pilate asked. "We have no king but Caesar," the chief priests answered. Finally Pilate handed him over to them to be crucified. So the soldiers took charge of Jesus.*

Grace, mercy, and peace from the one, who has made you his top priority our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

Imagine you have made a list of all the things in your life. Further imagine you then ranked all those things according to how important you felt each one was. The result would be a priority list for your life. This list would reflect the value which you apply to the various things in your life. The higher an item is on the list the more worth you consider it to have.

Now, let's imagine you take this list out every few months, or maybe every year, and you read through it. Do you know what you'd find? You'd find that, over time, certain things on your priority list would begin to slide up and down the scale. You'd find that your priority list isn't static. In fact, you'd probably find it rather fluid. This is because as time passes, as we age and hopefully mature, our priorities change. At age fifty, I bet you still didn't or won't want the pony for your birthday that you wanted at age five.

I think it's safe to say that none of us here, except the most type "A" people, have ever sat down and written up a priority list for our lives. However, even though you may have never penned such a list, you have one. Everyone has a priority list for their life and each of us lives our life according to that list. So, tonight, we need to talk about our individual priority lists so we can be sure they are in proper order. You see, some things on that list should never move. Some things should always be on the top and other things should always be on the bottom.

In the reading we just heard, there are four examples of priorities. These examples come from the Jews, Pilot, the crowd, and Jesus. Each of these chose their priorities and their respective actions were guided by those priorities.

When this text uses the word, Jews, it's referring to the chief priests and the Pharisees. If you keep that in mind it will help you distinguish them from the "crowd." The Jews had brought Jesus to Pilot because they had an agenda. They wanted Jesus dead and needed Pilot's approval to execute someone. Why did they want Jesus dead? They wanted Jesus out of the way because he interfered with their priorities.

These leaders had life pretty good and they liked things just as they were. They were not about to tolerate change and Jesus represented change. The top priority of the Jews was to keep the status quo – at all cost. Any time the highest priority in someone's life is threatened, that person will do most anything to protect it.

These leaders took two radical steps to protect their top priority. First, they were more than willing to kill an innocent man. They didn't consider an innocent life as important as their social, religious, and economic status. When priorities aren't thoroughly thought through, they can lead to disastrous results.

The second thing the Jews did was to replace God in their lives. Look at their statement at the end of the reading. "We have no king but Caesar." The Lord was supposed to be the King of the Jews. The Jewish people, like Christians today, live in a theocracy. Their King is to be their God and their God is to be their King. In a desperate effort to keep things from changing, these Jews turned their back on their true King to accept the

convenience of an earthly king. The priorities of the Jews led them to murder and idolatry.

Pilot was a different story. Pilot actually had things right when Jesus was first brought to him. It didn't take Pilot long to see that Jesus wasn't guilty of anything – let alone something severe enough to lead to execution. Pilot made several attempts to dissuade the people from their bloodlust. Pilot even had Jesus beaten in hopes the crowd would take pity on him.

Yes, at first, Pilot appeared to have his priorities in proper order. Pilot was willing to stand for justice over popular opinion. But then came the fatal attack on Pilot's priorities. The Jews said something that revealed Pilot's true priorities. They said, "If you let this man go, you are no friend of Caesar." That statement made all the difference in the world. Pontius Pilot wasn't in all that good with the powers to be in Rome. History tells us he had his problems. When the Jews basically said, "We're gonna tell Caesar," Pilot buckled. The priority of his position as governor and his possible future promotions became to him, like with the Jews, more important than an innocent life.

The crowd was certainly a fickle lot. These people had a serious problem with shifting priorities. Undoubtedly, many of the people in the crowd in tonight's reading were the same people, who just five days earlier, had welcomed Jesus into Jerusalem with praise. What happened? How could popular opinion sway so far and so fast?

This crowd, probably on both Palm Sunday and on Good Friday, was affected by herd instinct, mob mentality. Their priorities were whatever agreed with the priorities of the ones they thought were calling the shots. They followed along like a bunch of dumb sheep. They didn't care to think for themselves. They preferred to have someone else do their thinking for them. Political correctness was the order of the day.

These people listened to the priests and Pharisees, and look at the stupid choices that led them to make. When given the choice, this crowd actually chose a criminal, a murderer, over the man they just welcomed as the Son of God. However, these people did make one choice on their own. They chose to listen to men rather than listen to God.

Our last look at priorities is a look at the priorities of Christ. Jesus entered this world with one priority. Jesus came here to do the will of his Father and to pay the price for the sin of all mankind. That's not first and second priority. That's all one job. And, of course, we know that Jesus accomplished his primary priority. But we need to look at what it took for Jesus to keep his priorities straight.

Nothing swayed Jesus from his mission. When the crowds didn't believe what he said, Jesus stayed true to what he taught. When the disciples did and said stupid things, Jesus remained loyal and patient with them. When the Pharisees refused to believe who he was, even with miraculous evidence staring them in the face, Jesus just continued to perform miracles and help the people he loved so dearly. When the soldiers arrested him, when the soldiers abused him, when the chief priest mocked him, when pilot sentenced him to death, Jesus humbly submitted – refusing to call the twelve

legions of angels, who were at his disposal.

When Jesus hung dying on the cross, racked with pain, parched from thirst, gasping for every breath, Jesus didn't cut and run. Jesus didn't change his priorities. Jesus knew his mission and he stayed the course.

Now, of course, we have reached the point in this sermon where we have to take the lessons we've learned and apply them to our lives. We need to take a good look at our priorities. We need to see what they are and how fixed they are.

Do you have the priorities of the Jews? Are the most important things in your life the things in your life? We must always be careful not to put too much weight on the things of this life that don't matter. The Jews wanted to keep everything just as it was. They liked their comfortable life. They were willing to shuffle not only their priorities, but also right and wrong, to keep things from changing. They called themselves religious, they claimed to be following God, but in reality their primary priority was themselves.

Do you have Pilot's priorities? Are you willing to hold out for what is good and right as long as the price doesn't get too high? Remember, the most important thing in your life is your god. When you find the one thing you absolutely refuse to live without, bow down and worship it. If that one thing is Jesus Christ, you're good to go. If that one thing is anything else, you've have serious priority problems. You have eternal priority problems.

Do you have the priorities of the crowd? Are you perfectly willing to let someone else decide what is important to you? Most of us like to think we left that kind of thinking behind in our teenage years. But don't be so sure. The influence of other people can be a most powerful force. We must always be on guard not to let newspapers, television, movies, political groups, or special interest groups decide what our priorities are.

Do you have the priorities of Jesus? The priorities of Jesus are easily to list but hard to live. Jesus ordered his priorities just like he told us to order our priorities. "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength. And love your neighbor as yourself." This was truly the order of our Savior's life. His simple priority list was the Father on top, us next, and himself last.

This Lenten season, stop and examine the priorities you have set for your life. Take some time to ponder the fact that the way we value things dictates everything else in our life. Then try spending time in prayer with the one who made you his first priority. Open your life to Jesus and he'll set your priorities straight.