

## Jesus before Rome: YOU are the King of the Jews? (15:2-20)

### **Jesus before Pilate**

<sup>2</sup>Pilate asked him, 'Are you the King of the Jews?' He answered him, 'You say so.'  
<sup>3</sup>Then the chief priests accused him of many things. <sup>4</sup>Pilate asked him again, 'Have you no answer? See how many charges they bring against you.'<sup>5</sup>But Jesus made no further reply, so that Pilate was amazed.

### **Pilate Hands Jesus over to Be Crucified**

<sup>6</sup>Now at the festival he used to release a prisoner for them, anyone for whom they asked. <sup>7</sup>Now a man called Barabbas was in prison with the rebels who had committed murder during the insurrection. <sup>8</sup>So the crowd came and began to ask Pilate to do for them according to his custom. <sup>9</sup>Then he answered them, 'Do you want me to release for you the King of the Jews?' <sup>10</sup>For he realized that it was out of jealousy that the chief priests had handed him over. <sup>11</sup>But the chief priests stirred up the crowd to have him release Barabbas for them instead. <sup>12</sup>Pilate spoke to them again, 'Then what do you wish me to do with the man you call the King of the Jews?' <sup>13</sup>They shouted back, 'Crucify him!' <sup>14</sup>Pilate asked them, 'Why, what evil has he done?' But they shouted all the more, 'Crucify him!' <sup>15</sup>So Pilate, wishing to satisfy the crowd, released Barabbas for them; and after flogging Jesus, he handed him over to be crucified.

### **The Soldiers Mock Jesus**

<sup>16</sup>Then the soldiers led him into the courtyard of the palace (that is, the governor's headquarters); and they called together the whole cohort. <sup>17</sup>And they clothed him in a purple cloak; and after twisting some thorns into a crown, they put it on him. <sup>18</sup>And they began saluting him, 'Hail, King of the Jews!' <sup>19</sup>They struck his head with a reed, spat upon him, and knelt down in homage to him. <sup>20</sup>After mocking him, they stripped him of the purple cloak and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him out to crucify him.

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## Commentary

### **The binding of Jesus: collusion between the Sanhedrin and Rome (15:1)**

Mark will present the crucifixion of Jesus as Rome's apparent triumph over Jesus – yet another dangerous enemy successfully defeated, humiliated and crucified in a public demonstration of imperial power. He portrays Jerusalem as indistinguishable from the city of Rome, for all that it is, at the same time, clearly one of Rome's colonies; he does so to emphasise the collusion between the temple authorities and

Rome in executing Jesus. His narrative invokes two images of the imperial city: the triumphal procession of a defeated would-be liberator king, and the gladiatorial games, in which defeated and condemned soldiers would fight for the death for the amusement of the Roman crowds.

The triumphal procession/public humiliation of Jesus that will end on Golgotha begins in the temple, in the residence of the High Priest. Jesus is bound, led away and handed over to Pilate (15:1). We must not miss Mark's symbolism here: the Council are playing the role of Rome's legions who, having defeated him on Rome's behalf, now bind him as a sign of that defeat and hand him over to their superiors, who will celebrate their imperial triumph. They are "rendering to Caesar what they owe Caesar" (Jesus) and demonstrating unequivocally where their loyalties lie.

The progress of the "procession" from the temple to Pilate's headquarters is matched by a shift in narrative geography (which we know has huge theological symbolic significance for Mark): he moves us from the temple (the apparent centre of the Holy City) to the centre of Roman imperial power in Jerusalem. His symbolic point is difficult to miss: Jerusalem is an occupied city. Jesus, as we have seen in 13:14ff, views the Roman presence in the Holy City as a "desolating sacrilege". Yet the temple, far from being the centre of resistance to Rome in the name of Yahweh, has sold out to Rome in return for power, wealth and influence. The Sanhedrin makes the journey from the temple to Pilate's residence as servants of the imperial power. The bound Jesus unmasks the powers at play here: the temple belongs to Rome, not to God!

We can push this imagery further if the connection between this incident and the dispute over the Poll Tax (what is owed to Caesar) is valid. You will recall that Jesus' response to the test is to ask the temple authorities to produce a denarius and to ask, "Whose head is on it? And whose title?" (12:16). The answer is, of course, Caesar. The actual coin was, as we have seen, hated because it was the abiding image of conquest that proclaimed, "This territory belongs to Caesar!" The image proclaimed Caesar's all-pervasive presence, despite his physical absence. Pilate, to

whom they hand Jesus over, functions similarly: he is Caesar's visible image/representative, embodying Caesar's lordship. Just as the chief priests and scribes hand over the denarius in payment for the Occupation, they now hand over Jesus, proclaiming that Caesar is lord.

This is all the more ironic: the inscription proclaimed that the Emperor was the "august and divine son". The Council, which has just refused to recognize Jesus' sonship, regarding it as blasphemy deserving of death, effectively proclaims that Caesar is the son of god in handing Jesus over to Pilate. That this is not reading too much into Mark's narrative is strengthened by the Barabbas incident: his name means "son of the father". So we have Jesus, revealed a few verses ago as the true Son of God, pitted immediately against two false claimants for that title: Caesar (represented by Pilate) and Barabbas. And Mark makes it absolutely clear: the temple authorities side with Rome.

### **The binding of Jesus: the Sanhedrin, Rome and Satan**

The deliberations of the Council (15:1) echo and conclude the narrative of the Pharisee-led conspiracy to kill Jesus that began after the healing of the man with the withered hand (3:6). He now goes on to unmask *all* the powers that conspire to bring about Jesus' death: the Jewish religious leaders, Rome, and Satan.

To date, Mark has told us that the original conspiracy has expanded to include the various Jewish religious and political parties: the Pharisees, the Herodians, the Sadducees and the Sanhedrin. The double trial narrative adds Rome to the conspiracy. But what of Satan? Mark evokes Satan's active presence in the binding of Jesus.

The conspiracy to kill Jesus began in Capernaum (3:6). Only 14 verses later, Mark recounts the Be'elzebul controversy, in which Jesus is accused by the scribes from Jerusalem of being possessed by "the ruler of demons" (Satan). His response is the parable of the Strong Man: "No one can enter a strong man's house and plunder his property without first binding the strong man; only then can his house be

plundered!” (3:27)

Mark presents Jesus’ exorcisms as the “binding of the Strong Man” (Satan) and the ransacking of his house. The exorcism of the Gerasene demoniac (5:1-20) connects the occupying demons (named “Legion”) with the Roman Occupation. When Jesus casts the demons into the pigs, they “charge down the hill in military formation” and are drowned. Jesus, as we have seen, did not distinguish between occupying demons and occupying legions: they were both demonic manifestations of a world that had sold out to the powers that are ranged against God’s Kingdom.

“Binding” plays a prominent part in Mark’s narrative of the Gerasene demoniac. He tells us that the people were unable to bind him (ie restrain/subdue/defeat “Legion”); the man would shatter even the shackles and leg-irons that they used (5:3-4). These were the same shackles and leg-irons in which defeated prisoners would be bound for triumphal processions through Rome. Jesus will similarly be bound by Rome for his own procession through the “Holy”/imperial city of Jerusalem – not with chains, but by his cross.

Mark presents the bound Jesus as the apparently defeated enemy of the Strong Man. It is Jesus who is bound by the Council and Rome, not the Strong Man.

Mark’s trial narrative evokes one more connection with the demons in the crowds baying for his crucifixion (15:13-14). Jesus, in his exorcisms, has demonstrated his authority over the demons not only by casting them out but also by silencing them. The demons shout (cf 1:24) and Jesus silences them and commands them to come out (1:25). In his trial, it is Jesus who is silent and the “possessed” crowds who howl for his death, unimpeded.

Mark’s narrative of Jesus’ trial before Pilate is a world away from Hanson’s “attempt to exonerate Rome”. Using skillfully chosen imagery, Mark has transformed the occupied Holy City into world of Empire – the imperial city itself. Pilate has taken up residence in the palace of Rome’s client king, Herod. Jesus the prisoner is brought to

him, bound, by Rome's client priesthood. Mark has unmasked the powers that conspire against Jesus and the Kingdom. The demonic world of Empire that has been threatened by Jesus and is ranged against the Kingdom of God is now poised for its apparent final victory and triumph.

### **The charge against Jesus: "Are you the King of the Jews?" (15:2)**

Where does Pilate's question come from? The Sanhedrin had brought him on a charge of blasphemy, so why does Pilate frame his question (ie the charge against Jesus) in these terms?

The first thing to note is that it is a *charge* – an accusation of a crime against Caesar. It is repeated no less than 5 times in chapter 15 on Roman lips: 14:2, 9, 12, 18 and finally in 15:26 – "The inscription of the charge against him read, 'The King of the Jews'". The word "inscription" (*epigraphē*) is the same word that Jesus uses when he asks about the denarius: "Whose image is it? What does the inscription say?" In both cases, it represents Rome's official proclamation about the two men (Caesar and Jesus): "This is Rome's verdict. This is what everyone is to think and believe, because Rome rules!"

The second thing to note is that it is a *term of derision*. Herod was appointed as king by Rome, but as a client king with drastically reduced powers. This was in response to past national revolts against the Occupation. It was a drastic curtailment of sovereignty. Former kings carried the title, "King of Israel"; his demotion to a mere regional king was signified by the Roman use of "the King of the Jews". Pilate's use of the term carries the sense of, "And just who appointed you as the king of these subject people? Rome certainly didn't – and Rome rules!"

The third thing to notice is that it is a *charge of sedition*. James Tabor notes that it is "a highly charged political act of sedition"; a crime of *lèse-majesté* - a "violation of majesty"; an offence against the ruling sovereign. Tacitus tells us in his *Annals* (4.70; 6.7) that had become a capital crime against the Emperor as Rome evolved from a republic into an empire. Only the Emperor could appoint a king; if Jesus is claiming

kingship without Rome's permission, he is guilty of a capital offence. Pilate is clear from the trial that Jesus is not a self-appointed king – ie, he is not guilty of the crime of *lèse-majesté*, and conveys this to the crowd in 15:14.

Why, then, is Pilate prepared to crucify Jesus on the charge of being “The King of the Jews”? The explanation that he is weak and vacillating, prepared blatantly to submit to the wishes of the manipulative power of the Sanhedrin and execute a man he knows to be innocent, is just not credible. Contemporary historical records show that Pilate was as brutal as he was powerful. More importantly, Mark's story doesn't square with that reading of the events he narrates: he portrays Jesus' execution as a Roman triumph over a defeated enemy, not as Rome's capitulation to a more powerful group of its own subjects!

Within Judea, the title “The King of the Jews” implied a more serious threat of sedition to Rome than *lèse-majesté* – that of armed insurrection. And it connects directly with the charge under which Jesus was handed over to Pilate by the Council – the accusation of claiming to be the Messiah.

Mark takes great pains to show the connections between the two trials. His account of each is laden with the same irony: Jesus is, in fact, “guilty” of the charges against him (messiahship and kingship) – but not in the ways that both these terms are understood by his accusers!

Jesus accepts the charges, but disputes their content. His response to the Sanhedrin was, “I am the Messiah – but not the liberator-Davidic king who will lead an armed insurrection against Rome. My messianic mission is to suffer and die and to be vindicated by God, not by you!” In front of Pilate, he is asked, “Are you the King of the Jews?” and his reply is, “You say so” – meaning, “That is your way of putting it!” The question is therefore, what did Pilate understand by the term, “The King of the Jews” in this particular context?

Pilate would have understood “The King of the Jews” in terms identical to how the

Council understood “Messiah”: a would-be leader of an armed revolt to secure Israel’s independence, who claimed to be the royal Son of David. The Jews had lived under occupation ever since the Babylonian exile in 587 BCE; the promise of completely restored sovereignty under a Davidic king had never materialized. They believed that the restoration would happen when God sent the royal King-Messiah to liberate them from the Roman Occupation. Mark puts this hope for a Davidic royal Messiah explicitly upon the lips of the Council members at the foot of the cross: “Let the Messiah, the King of Israel, come down from the cross now, so that we may see and believe!” (15:32)

Mark is at pains to show the collusion between the Sanhedrin and Rome in crucifying Jesus, and the convergence of their interests in the charges against Jesus. They bring Jesus to Pilate, accusing him of claiming to be the Messiah. It is a charge of insurrection, which Pilate understands precisely because of the royal connection. In the context of occupied Judea, at the feast of the Passover, which has brought tensions to boiling point, Jesus is condemned and crucified for threatening to lead an uprising against Rome. The charge of being “The king of the Jews” is a charge of terrorism.

**Jesus’ response and Pilate’s amazement: “That is your way of putting it!” (15:2)**

Jesus effectively says to Pilate, “You’re accusing me of sedition. That is true. It is God’s kingdom that will be established over the whole world, and not Rome. Rome’s fate will be that of Egypt and Babylon, because God’s Kingdom is coming. You are justified in executing me as a revolutionary against Rome. But you think that I am coming as a Jewish warrior-king; you have no idea! But it is precisely through my death at your hands that the Kingdom will come, because the road to the Kingdom is the Way of the Cross!”

We need also to recognize that Jesus’ ambiguous response to the charge signals his rejection of the Davidic kingship role, which the Jerusalem crowd (as well as his disciples!) has been trying to foist on him since his approach to the city (11:9). He has already challenged and repudiated it the Messiah-King connection explicitly in

the temple (12:35-37). Mark's own "inscription" (1:1) includes "Messiah", but omits "King of the Jews".

This is significant. Jesus, for Mark, is the final verdict on the ambiguous biblical saga of kingship in Israel. When the people of Israel demand "Give us a king to govern us, like the other nations" (1 Samuel 8:5), Samuel warns them against it. He tells them that a king will govern them as ruthlessly and destructively as any other king; they will become slaves in their own land (1 Samuel 8:11-18). The story of kingship reflects the tension in the royal institution: however good the king is (and David is held up as the king most favoured by Yahweh), there is only one true king of Israel whose rule will bring peace, blessing and flourishing: Yahweh. Only God can be trusted with power over the world. Every human king will assume the role and trappings of empire. Monarchy is part of the problem, not God's solution. It is part of the system that needs to die, if God's Kingdom is to be born in the world. So Mark makes it absolutely explicit: the Messiah is *not* the Son of David, but the Son of God.

Jesus then retreats into silence, despite the accusations that are now piled on top of the original charge. As before, it signals Jesus' refusal to recognize Pilate's (and therefore Caesar's) authority. Pilate's own response to Jesus' silence is amazement (15:5). What provokes his astonishment is Jesus' absence of fear. Empire's ultimate weapon is the power of life and death. Faced with the threat of capital punishment, Jesus is silent. Because Jesus is willing to walk the Way of the Cross, he is immune to the coercion and fear that is, in Pilate's experience, so effective against even the toughest of Rome's enemies.

### **Jesus and Barabbas: who is the true revolutionary?**

The very next scene underscores Mark's intention that we understand the charge against Jesus as terrorism: the choice between Jesus and Barabbas.

Barabbas represents precisely the threat that Pilate thinks he discerns in Jesus. He is a member of the Sicarii – the "dagger men", who specialized in political assassination. They carried a concealed dagger (*sicarius*) about them, and would

stab or cut the throats of Roman officials or supposed Jewish sell-outs on the city streets in broad daylight. They were feared greatly by the Romans, and regarded by them as terrorists who were equally as dangerous as revolutionary armies.

Jesus and Barabbas represent two competing revolutionary responses to the Occupation. Both intend to replace Rome with the Kingdom of God. Barabbas' name means "son of the father". Like Jesus, Barabbas has "taken up his cross" – he has revolted against Rome in the face of almost certain arrest and crucifixion. In presenting us with the choice between Jesus and Barabbas, Mark brings into sharp focus the question of what "taking up the cross and following Jesus" really means.

This is, of course, the very situation that Mark's own church is facing. Is God behind the Great Revolt? Is this the Final Battle – the messianic war to end Rome's rule and establish the Kingdom of God? Is armed revolt the means by which God will bring about the Kingdom?

Jesus' life and teaching proclaim that it is not. The Kingdom will come like a harvest of planted crops, not from military victory. The seed is planted and dies; the resultant crop is the result of God's actions (4:26-27). Against all expectations, God will bring about the Kingdom as a result of Jesus' impending crucifixion. Jesus himself is its seed.

For Mark, this is a far more radical solution to the quest for the Kingdom than armed insurrection. No armed struggle will succeed in bringing it about, because that is not God's way. Violence will always beget violence; another oppressor will soon replace the one who is overthrown. Violence carries the seeds of destruction for any utopia that the revolution is intended to establish. Jesus will not participate in the violent overthrow of Rome; instead, he will take on himself and absorb the violence of the imperial system. His death will plant the seed of the New World; his resurrection will bring about the harvest.

**Jesus and Barabbas: the Roman games (15:8-15)**

Mark uses this incident as part of his “Jerusalem = Rome” presentation by evoking the image of the Roman gladiatorial games. The norm was for Rome to crucify its enemies; on occasion, the defeated prisoners would be given the option to elect to fight one another to the death in the arena. Like triumphal processions, the games were a key feature of Roman public life, known throughout the empire.

It would have been impossible for Jesus’ and Mark’s contemporaries to have missed the clear allusion to the dynamic of the games: two defeated enemies, standing before Caesar or his representative, to fight one another for the amusement of the crowds, who are granted the right to decide whether the victor lives or dies. This is how Mark frames his narrative.

Recognising this is important for two reasons: firstly, as Richard Horsley notes, the games were the key means by which Rome exercised control over its populace. Poverty and lack of resources within the city bred discontent and disaffection among the citizens. The games were a means of distraction and amusement to gain the goodwill of the people and ensure their submission and co-operation. They were the drug of choice for people who needed desperately to escape the hellish lives they led, albeit temporarily.

Secondly, the move to let the people decide the outcome of the battles was a cunning strategy to give them the appearance of choice, rather than the reality: the games – including the crowds – were a carefully-devised tool of imperial rule, not of “people power”. They understood clearly that this was a privilege given them by their ruler’s magnanimity, not by right. We need to read Pilate in this light: he is not a weak and fearful crowd-pleaser, but a cunning strategist, using a tried and tested method of potentially hostile crowd control.

The crowd delivers its verdict: the “victor”, Barabbas, shall live; the “loser”, Jesus, must die.

**Jesus and Barabbas: the chief priests and the crowd (15:8-15)**

The inversion of the dynamic between the chief priests and the crowds is dramatic, and Mark gives it due attention. The same crowds that had hailed Jesus with hosannas, and whose avid support for him had terrified and paralysed the religious authorities, are the ones who demand the release of Barabbas and secure Pilate's death sentence on Jesus. How plausible is this volte-face?

Mark paints a compelling picture: Pilate, with the bound Jesus to his right and the shackled Barabbas to his left, giving the people their choice. Pilate is well aware of the Council's motives (15:9) and would presumably prefer to release Jesus than the murderous Barabbas. The point is that, by giving the final say to the crowd, Pilate can defuse any potential spontaneous protest and uprising by avoiding making either a Jewish revolutionary martyr. He is able to live with whichever choice they make.

But what of the crowd? How could they have swapped allegiances so suddenly and so murderously? We need to recognize how effective the Sanhedrin's strategy in handing Jesus over to Pilate has been. It has taken them out of the frame as Jesus' opponents. All the time that they have been the group visibly persecuting Jesus and trying publicly to discredit him, Jesus has bested them, and delighted the crowd in doing so. Jesus has been David to the Sanhedrin's Goliath, and championing the "little people". For a while, it looks as though Jesus might actually change their world, and they love and applaud him for it.

But now they see Jesus as Rome's prisoner (not the Sanhedrin's). He is bound, silent, apparently cowed and helpless.

We know only too well that helplessness can trigger cruelty as easily as it can inspire compassion. That is as true of crowds as it is of individuals. That dynamic that was at the heart of the conception of the Roman games, as it has been behind public hangings and executions before cheering crowds. "Bloodlust" is a reality. The response of the crowds to the apparently defeated Jesus is not champion him, but to crucify him.

That reaction is all the more believable when we recall the hope that they had invested in Jesus. The bound Jesus is a demonstration that he cannot deliver on those hopes. Their disappointed rage further fires their bloodlust.

It also makes sense of the influence of the chief priests, whom Mark holds responsible for whipping up the crowds to release Barabbas. They are no longer the visible “bad guys” for the crowd because they are no longer the power brokers. They are literally part of the crowd. With Rome running the show, the old solidarity between the crowd and the temple authorities is restored. With Jesus clearly defeated, they become once again part of the fabric of Jewish life in occupied Jerusalem.

That is why they are so easily able to whip up the crowd: this leadership role is, after all, the one they regularly perform in Jewish public life. Faced with a crucial decision, the crowd instinctively looks to the chief priests for guidance, as they always have.

The disintegration of Jesus’ support from the crowd in Mark’s narrative is as plausible as it is compelling and tragic. By evoking the shouts of the demons in the howls of the crowd, Mark underscores the appalling blindness and capacity for self-destruction that is always and only a heartbeat away from breaking out and wreaking havoc. We hear it in the repeated chants of the crowd before Pilate: “Crucify him!”

### **Humiliation and torture (15: 16-20)**

Jesus is stripped and dressed at the whim of the soldiers. He is dressed after his humiliation in his own clothes; when he reaches Golgotha, he will be stripped naked again, and the soldiers will gamble for his clothes.

We need to note only two things about this incident. The first is that it is an entirely realistic portrayal of what happens to condemned political prisoners in police cells. This is particularly true of prisoners who have been viewed as a personal

threat, whether by personal encounter in battle or more generally as a significant threat to the way of life under “The System”. Political prisoners in Apartheid jails have testified in large numbers that gratuitous torture (as opposed to torture to extract information) almost invariably followed *after* the courts convicted them. Jesus shares that experience.

The first is Mark’s irony: everything that is done to Jesus in mockery – including the homage – is actually a proclamation of the truth about Jesus. Jesus alone may rightfully be called a king in the same sense that Yahweh is a king. This is to emphasise his radical difference from all human royal institutions, not any similarity: his is a kingship of suffering servanthood and sacrifice. The world in which he is king – the Kingdom – is shaped by his laws of compassion, love and self-giving, for the very least first. He will endure whatever resistance, violence, humiliation, abuse and betrayal is needed to allow the seed of the New World to be planted and produce its harvest.

### **Going deeper into the text (Mark 15: 2-20)**

Mark's Pilate is a sketch of pragmatism at work. In a shrewd public relations ploy aimed at playing the unruly crowd's patriotism off against itself, he grants amnesty to a convicted terrorist (Barabbas) in order to keep Jesus (15:6-11). Pilate would strike such a deal only if he understood Jesus to be the greater political threat. It is also historically inconceivable that Jews would ever have called for the Roman crucifixion of one of their own (15:12f). Mark is satirising the Roman Coliseum tradition, in which the crowd was given the choice as to whether a wounded gladiator (usually a war prisoner or condemned criminal) should live or die. The “sheep without a shepherd” (6:34) are caught between the conflicting revolutionary claims of the violent urban guerrilla Barabbas and the Nonviolent Galilean. The fickle masses are central characters in the farce and important to Mark's political message. In a matter of days, the crowd has gone from “hearing gladly” Jesus’ criticisms of the

priestly elite (see 11:38) to being manipulated by them to lobby for his demise (15:10f). In the Colosseum parody, the tragedy is that the masses again succumb to the will of their political and class opponents.

The writer Dostoyevsky created a scene in his novel *The Brothers Karamazov* that has haunted the church ever since. In this scene, Jesus returns to earth at the time of the Great Inquisition in Spain, a time when thousands of heretics are being burned at the stake by the Grand Inquisitor, the most powerful ruler of the church. Christ returns quietly, humbly, but is immediately recognized by the people for who he is. In his interrogation of Jesus, the Inquisitor says: "I do not know who you are and I don't care to know whether it is You or only a semblance of him, but tomorrow I will condemn you and burn you at the stake as the worst of heretics. And the very people who today kissed your feet, tomorrow at the faintest sign from me will rush to heap up the embers of your fire." The Inquisitor explains to his prisoner that his teachings are unrealistic; that he expects too much from humankind. The church has a more realistic view of humankind, as sheep to be managed. Christ's return is unwelcome—dangerous, in fact—because it threatens to upset the established social order which the church controls.

In the gospel there are only two ways of being in the world: discipleship or denial. Let us reflect here on denial.

We know that a nation can be in denial about its past, opting for a grandiose story of progress, prosperity, and righteous conquest while denying its own complicity in evil. A people can be in denial as well about its future, as, for example, when it continues to lay waste the environment. Each time we resort to such denial our humanity as individuals is distorted and our character as a nation is eroded. Denial can so disconnect us from reality that we call death life and life death. Here we cannot escape the disturbing irony of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem: The same people of Jerusalem who welcomed him as the Messiah with Hosannas a short time later were demanding that he be crucified. The story of denial asks disciples to face up to the ways in which we have denied the suffering Christ who is present in the world.

Where have I seen the Christ and pretended that I did not know him?

When have I broken faith with the Human One to save face, to stay safe, to guard my own life?

Where have we as a nation denied the Way of our King?

## All age worship ideas (Mark 15: 2-20)

One of the keys to good all age worship is to keep it simple and relatively short.

Ideally aim for a service of 45-50 minutes. That's not to say a service can't be longer but if you are thinking of 1hr30+ think carefully about your use of space and above all else be creative, take risks and have fun – partying is integral to the kingdom but we'll leave that for a year on Luke...

**Reflection** – There is a bittersweet irony to this encounter with Pilate and the Roman guards. We know it will not end well but what is exposed is the small-mindedness of those who have handed Jesus over along with the Roman Governor himself.

Jesus is presented to Pilate with several accusations the most serious being treason. Jerusalem has a king in the Roman puppet Herod but Pilate is in charge. Pilate asks if Jesus is indeed King of the Jews and he gives neither confirmation nor denial. What is a governor to do? The truth is that Jesus is not the King of the Jews but the rightful King of Israel and ultimately of the world.

The spiritual 'offence' of Jesus is that he seeks to restore the relationship of God and Israel through their repentance. The political offence is that he does not stand against Herod but against the Emperor himself. They cannot see this. To them he is a Nazarene who purports to be a messiah and seeks to retake Jerusalem.

Nevertheless the accusations are enough to count as treasonous and Jesus, the one

called Christ, is condemned while another Jesus, the one called Barabbas, is released. Pilate's resolve is shown to be weak. Although he represents a mighty and at times oppressive empire he seeks a referendum on the course of action he should take. It seems he cannot take the decision himself to sentence Jesus even though his accusers are adamant he is guilty.

The soldiers take Jesus and mock him with a robe and crown of thorns. Matthew describes the robe as a military cloak inferring that it would be red. However Mark with his purple robe it seems is keen to paint this grotesque image as reflective of the emperor. On the one hand is the confident, arrogant, Caesar bedecked in purple robes and laurel, represented by the Roman force while on the other is this little insignificant man who dares to suggest he might be a king. The irony is that their mockery fails to grasp this Jesus is with them because of his willingness to submit to an authority far in excess of the emperor they worship. They sneer at the powerlessness of this man and what they think he represents but there is a sense in which they mock themselves and those who accuse as well as those who have abandoned Jesus. He may seem nothing now but he will have the last laugh.

**Ideas** – Stages on the Way from Wildgoose resources has a dramatic piece called The Trials (p.132ff) that may be appropriate to use

Have a table with a robe (purple or red) and if possible a crown of thorns and a clown's hat or silly hat. Invite people to focus on them and to think of how they understand Jesus as King. Is he king over us as individuals, over our church? Do we think of Jesus as King over our town, or nation or even the world? If so, what might that mean for the way we live and the way we pray for and serve God in our town, our nation, the world?

Jesus had a much bigger vision than his accusers gave him credit for. This mission of Jesus that would be taken on by disciples was 'foolishness to the wise' Paul said but the wisdom of God nevertheless. Are we willing to give ourselves over to God's 'foolish' plan even if it puts us up against those who will mock and disrespect us?

**Prayer** – Speaking of Jesus as a King can have negative implications for many people – perhaps in your prayers think of sovereignty and how we might reflect on what God’s sovereignty could mean in terms of governments, leadership, world systems, economies and finance. The kingdom or reign of God we are often told is ‘upside down’. How can we pray for those who challenge the systems and injustices of the world and seek to invite those in power to consider a new perspective under God’s sovereignty. What if the poor, the marginalized, the refugee, the persecuted, the suffering, the starving, the rejected, the discriminated against became the priority of our policies and agendas?

Attached is a link to a map that might seem upside down but in truth is simply the world seen from a different perspective other than our own traditional one. Allow people to reflect on this and perhaps leave silence for prayers.

<https://www.mapsinternational.co.uk/upside-down-world-wall-map-political-without-flags.html>

## **Liturgies and hymns (Mark 15: 2-20)**

This is where you can find hymn suggestions and liturgies for use with this week's text.

### **A Naked Death**

Yours was a naked death, Jesus:

Not for you the fine linen of a rich bed  
surrounded by wealth accumulated over a comfortable lifetime.

Not for you a well prepared service of farewell  
with time for proper grieving and departures.

Not for you a carefully chosen shroud,

or a tenderly nurtured grave.  
When you kept your rendezvous with death  
All was stripped away except your determined love  
and the life that lay dormant for a moment  
waiting for the morning  
When your naked glory would break free again.  
Amen.

Copyright © 2006 John van de Laar. (South Africa) Posted on his  
excellent **Sacredise** website <http://www.sacredise.com/>

### **Pastoral Prayer**

God of life, God of beginnings and endings,  
today we pause to remember the power of death.  
Today we tell the story of what happens  
when someone angers those in power.  
Today we tell a story of betrayal by a friend,  
trial by empire,  
execution as a way of silencing the one who names injustice.  
Today we tell a story that happened long ago in a land far away.  
Today we tell a story that continues to happen today in places close at hand.

As we remember the story today help us to see its truth.  
As we tell of Jesus' trial and execution,  
remind us of those who are found legally guilty  
for doing and saying the right things.  
As we tell of the friends who are conspicuously absent from the cross,  
remind us how easily we slip away  
when the struggle for justice becomes dangerous or challenging.  
As we look at the cross,  
remind us of the power of empire in any age,  
and remind us of our duty as people of faith to proclaim a different empire,

a different kingdom, a new way of living together.

God of endings, today we hear the agonized words "It is finished".

Today we think of all those things that are stopped before they come to fruition,  
of hopes crushed beneath reality's heavy foot,  
of promises left unfulfilled,  
of possibilities that leave us wondering....

God of life and death, beginnings and endings,

today we pause to remember the power of those in charge to run the world.

Today we remember the many people near and far who are broken by that power:

those who live in places where peace is just a word,

not a reality, not even a dream;

those who are pushed to the margins

because of their race, their gender, their bank balance,

their marital status, their orientation,

or any of the countless other ways we find to set people apart;

those who live with nothing so that others may live with abundance

those who choose to challenge the injustices in their world

and are crushed beneath the feet of those in charge

*...time of silent prayer...*

But even as we remember that power,

we remember that day follows night,

hope replaces despair,

and life will conquer death.

And now, as we prepare to leave this gathering,

may we do so ready to challenge the empires of our world,

even if such a challenge leads us to a cross outside the city gates.

Help us remember that every ending is a new beginning,

even if in the depths of The End  
we have no way of seeing what that new beginning might be.  
We pray in the name of the one who showed us  
the depth of his passion for Your Kingdom,  
who taught us to live in love and justice,  
in whose life, death and resurrection we can find the path to Kingdom living,  
and who taught his friends to pray by saying:  
**Our Father, who art in heaven...**

Posted by Rev Gord on his blog, **Worship Offerings** <http://worshipofferings.blogspot.ca/>

#### **DELIVER US AND GIVE US PEACE**

Lord Jesus,  
by your cross and resurrection  
**deliver us**  
by your witness to the truth  
**deliver us**  
by your passion and death  
**deliver us**  
by your victory over the grave  
**deliver us**  
from the lust of power  
**deliver us**  
from the conspiracy of silence  
**deliver us**  
from the worship of weapons  
**deliver us**  
from the slaughter of innocents  
**deliver us**

from the nightmare of hunger

**deliver us**

from the peace that is no peace

**deliver us**

from security that is no security

**deliver us**

from the politics of terror

**deliver us**

from the plundering of the earth's resources

**deliver us**

from the dispossession of the poor

**deliver us**

from the despair of this age

**deliver us**

by the light of the gospel

**give us peace**

by the good news for the poor

**give us peace**

by your healing of our wounds

**give us peace**

by faith in your word

**give us peace**

by hunger and thirst for justice

**give us peace**

by the coming of your kingdom

**give us peace**

Amen.

(John Davies, England)

From *Let Justice Roll Down: A Worship Resource for Lent, Holy Week and*

*Easter*, edited by Geoffrey Duncan; published by Pilgrim Press (August 2004). Posted

on the [Education for Justice](#) website.

### **Hymn suggestion**

What kind of victory is this –  
of Christ the crucified?

What kind of winners are we –  
amazed but terrified?

What kind of gospel is this,  
if marked by thorns and nails?

What kind of resurrection –  
redeeming Love that ‘fails’?

What kind of faith supposes  
that victory is the end?

For, surely, resurrection  
makes Hope our restless friend;  
it doubts what seems so certain,  
subverts the Empire’s force:  
Christ, rising in defiance,  
cross-questions history’s course:

The good news of this victory  
is not success or height  
or outcomes to be measured  
or prowess in a fight,  
but gambles on earth’s ‘losers’  
and those cast out, unclean –  
the beings barely human  
in whom God’s truth is seen:

For resurrection glory  
shakes how we think and see;  
it questions what is failure;

it calls out what may be:  
its victory is sedition  
in face of powers-above!  
One like a human being  
prevails by wounded love. / redeems through wasted / wasteful love.

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Suggested tune: Aurelia (The Church's one foundation)