Behold Your King
John 19:1-16

How would you describe what a good person looks like? - I mean in their character. You see, ancient philosophers, like Plato, described four cardinal virtues that were seen as *the* foundational characteristics of such a person. And they were *Prudence/wisdom* - the ability to make wise decisions; *Justice* - giving God and others what's their due; *Fortitude* - the inner strength to do what's right even in the face of difficulty and fear; and *Temperance* - the right moderation of desires and emotions that helps you resist harmful impulses.

And what's striking about that list is that, as we look at today's passage, and Jesus' trial, each one of those virtues is needed, and each one is on display… or not.

Pilate needs Wisdom - but does he show it? He also needs Justice - to administer it - but does he deliver it? The soldiers and religious leaders need Temperance - to control their wrong impulses is - but do they exercise it?

But it's the issue of Fortitude - that inner strength to do what's right even in the face of difficulty and fear that stands out so clearly here, doesn't it? Because both Pilate and Jesus need it - but only one of them shows it.

But of course, this is of more than historical or philosophical interest, isn't it? Because we all need an inner strength to draw on at times, don't we? At least if we want to be truly good people. I mean, you need an inner strength to do what's right when you're afraid of the consequences of doing what's right, don't you? You need an inner strength to the *right* thing when doing the *wrong* thing seems way more attractive than the right. And sometimes you need an inner strength just to keep going, and keeping doing the right when life is hard.

So we all need fortitude. We all need a reservoir of inner strength to draw on.

So that's what we're going to look at this morning: firstly, at the inner strength of Jesus. Secondly, at the moral weakness of Pilate, and thirdly, how we can grow in the first and not the second.

The Inner Strength of Jesus
Look at v1: 'Then Pilate took Jesus and flogged him.' Now Pilate knows that Jesus is innocent - he keeps stating the fact - so why flog him? I mean he's an educated Roman, he's read the philosophers, so where's the justice in an unjust flogging?

Well, we're going to look at Pilate in a minute, but this is one of the first indications of his moral weakness, isn't it. He knows Jesus is innocent but rather than face the consequences of doing the right thing, and releasing him, he tries to take an easier path: flog him, satisfy their blood lust, and then say 'look I've punished him - and now I'm going to let him go.'

But the flogging is just the beginning, isn't it? And not just of Pilate's moral weakness. Verses 2-3: 'And the soldiers twisted together a crown of thorns and put it on his head and arrayed him in a purple robe. They came up to him, saying, "Hail, King of the Jews!" And struck him with their hands.'

Now, in our own day we've seen some of the cruelty that humanity and armed forces are capable of, and it's that cruelty that's now heaped on Jesus. But look at his response - to the flogging and the

mocking. Because if you or I are treated unjustly, or criticised unfairly, or humiliated by a teacher, a coach, or a supervisor, how might we respond?

There are typically two ways, aren't there? One is anger, and we go on the attack, and give as good as we get. The second is, we retreat inside ourselves and curl up in shame.

But look at Jesus' response, because he neither lashes out nor curls up. He endures this with dignity. Verses 4-5, 'Pilate went out again and said to them, "See I am bringing him out to you that you may know that I find no guilt in him." So Jesus came out, wearing the crown of thorns and the purple robe.'

But think for a moment who John has been telling us - throughout his gospel - that Jesus is: that he's the *logos*, the eternal word of God, through whom all things were made; that's he's the Messiah - the king, not just of Israel but the world; that he's the one who can say, 'before Abraham was, I Am' and take to himself the covenant name of God. The One who can make the lame walk, and the blind see and who with a word can call the dead from their graves.

And yet here he is being beaten and mocked. And as you watch him come out wearing this crown and the robe, the soldiers' attempt at a humiliation fancy dress outfit, the most stunning thing of all is that he allows them to do it.

Earlier this week I read a review of Dwayne 'The Rock' Johnson's new film, *The Smashing Machine.* And the reviewer wrote, 'every time [Johnson's] on the big screen, it… feels appropriate to call him The Rock. That's how sturdy he seems to be. It's not just that his heroic characters can shrug off punishment that would pulverise the rest of us, it's also that [he] grins pearly white grins while doing so. Johnson's Hollywood career is built on the impression he gives of being indestructible.'

But here is the One who's truly indestructible, who could shrug off any punishment, or any enemy, and pulverise *them*. And the soldiers strike him with their hands - but those are hands he formed inside their mothers' wombs.

And so like a movie superhero pushed to the point of snapping, we might expect him to grin a pearly white grin, throw off his enemies, and stand triumphant over them. Instead, he comes out wearing a crown of thorns and a mocking robe. And when all around him are spitting violence and hostility, he's the opposite.

A couple of weeks back we saw how, at his arrest, it was what Jesus *did* that displayed his courage. Here, it's what he *doesn't do* that displays his strength.

And not just what he doesn't *do*, what he doesn't *say*. Because when Pilate brings him back in to question him, John tells us, v9 'Jesus gave him no answer.' A lesser men would talk and defend himself and plead. But Jesus… is silent.

So consider the inner strength with which he carries himself: his self-control, his restraint, his mercy to those who are doing it, his dignity in enduring it all. As Pilate says in v5, "*Behold* the man!" And ask yourself, where does such strength come from? Proverbs 19:11 says, 'Good sense makes one slow to anger, *and it is his glory to overlook an offence*.' And bloodied and bruised and

spat upon and wearing this crown and robe, Jesus would have looked anything but glorious. And yet, there is something of glory about him.

Last Sunday evening at the pub preaching, Alistair took us through some of the reasons why we might doubt. And if you're not yet a Christian, somewhere on the list might be, why does a good God allow innocent suffering? But as you watch Jesus being beaten, mocked, and scorned it tells you that right at the heart of Christianity - the glory of it even - is that God himself suffered. And he endured it, not with a pearly white grin and superhuman powers, but with the inner strength of the only One who is truly good.

Sadly, Pilate cuts a rather different figure.

The Moral Weakness of Pilate

Imagine you have a job in Rome's Department of Foreign Affairs and you're responsible for writing the job description for regional governors, like Pilate. What would you put in it? Probably something like - you're being sent to a politically and religiously volatile province. And your job is to maintain order and defend the honour of Rome and the emperor, and to oversee the collection of taxes, and to act as judge in capital cases, and you're to do it all without enflaming local tensions and, where possible, by following local customs and laws.

Sadly, what contemporary historians like Josephus and Philo tell us is that Pilate was not up to the job. That he was harsh, and inflexible, and insensitive. But most tellingly of all, he lived in fear of his superiors.

All of which surfaces here. Jesus goes out to the crowd, and Pilate says, v5-6, '"Behold the man!" When the chief priests and the officers saw him, they cried out, "Crucify him, crucify him!" Pilate said to them, "Take him yourselves and crucify him, for I find no guilt in him."'

Now, have you ever been involved in some discussion, or negotiation, and you want a certain outcome, but things are not going your way? Do you ever find yourself getting more testy or irritable? You see, if Jesus carries himself with dignity and self-control, when Pilate feels like he is losing control he's the opposite, isn't he? Because he answers these leaders with disdain

You see, he's paraded Jesus before them as his way of saying 'look at him - behold him - the man you think is such a threat. In a king's fancy dress costume. He's pathetic, and I've punished him, so now leave me alone.'

But in doing so, it's not just Jesus he's mocking, it's the leaders. But in response they demand Jesus' crucifixion and Pilate cannot hide his disgust: '*you* take him, and *you* crucify him, because I, I find no guilt in him.' In other words, you want him dead? Then do it yourselves. But you can't, can you. Because I'm the judge, and you asked for my judgement, and I've given it.'

And Pilate is more interested in putting these ignorant red necks in their place than in upholding justice.

And up until now, the religious leaders have played the political card - Jesus claims to be a king, he's a threat to Rome. But Pilate's not buying it - so they play the religious card: v7, "We have a

law [a law, remember, it was Pilate's job to uphold whenever possible], and according to that law he ought to die because he has made himself the Son of God."

And with that we see something else surface. Verse 8, 'When Pilate heard this statement, he was even more afraid.' Why's a Roman governor, a man with all the power of Rome behind him, suddenly afraid? But that's the point, isn't it? There's no *sudden* about it. When John tells us he was *even more afraid* he's telling us Pilate's behaviour is driven, at least in part, by fear.

So has Jesus's character and conduct got under Pilate's skin, and he's beginning to think he really could be some kind of a son of the gods, some kind of god-man? Maybe. Or more likely, Pilate's just like any other Roman of his day: he's superstitious. Because if you believe in a bunch of capricious gods, or a capricious God, whose favour you have to buy, whose good side you have to stay on; or if you believe in a blind and merciless fate, you can never be sure you're on the right side of it or them, can you? In fact, you can never be sure of anything. Which means you can never have the inner confidence - the kind of inner strength and dignity - that Jesus displays, and that we all need.

Instead, like Pilate, you'll be unstable, always on edge, always anxious, or irritable, or fearful - about how you're doing, and what fate, or the gods, or God, or others, think about what you're doing.

So, v9, 'He entered his headquarters again and said to Jesus, "Where are you from?" But Jesus gave him no answer.' It's almost as if he doesn't want to save himself, isn't it. Verse 10, 'So Pilate said to him, "You will not speak to me? Do you not know that I have authority to release you and authority to crucify you?"' And he means that as a threat, to make Jesus talk. Which he does - just not the way Pilate expects.

Verse 11, 'Jesus answered him, "You would have no authority over me at all unless it had been given you from above."' You see, Pilate thinks he's the one with the power of life and death. And Jesus tells him, the only power you, or any other leader has, is what's been entrusted to you by God - and you're a steward, and will be held accountable, for that authority.

Except, it's deeper than that, because in Greek, the word for *authority* is feminine, while the verb for *given you* is neuter. Which means Jesus must be talking about something more than just *authority* being given to Pilate. So as yourself, what has been given him? What has been placed in his lap?

It's this whole situation that's in front of him, isn't it. And Jesus is saying to him, 'Pilate, you would have no authority to exercise in this drama, if God had not put this whole drama in your lap. Pilate, you think you have the power of life and death, but you're just a bit player in the greatest of dramas unfolding before you.'

And it's that that tells you why Jesus can carry himself with such poise and display such inner strength when evil appears to be winning. Because he knows it's not winning. Because he knows that behind all that is happening, God is working out his purposes. And those purposes are for good.

But Pilate has no such assurance, so it's not confidence that grips him, it's fear.

Verse 12, ‘From then on Pilate sought to release him, but the Jews cried out, “If you release this man, you are not Caesar’s friend. Everyone who makes himself a king opposes Caesar.”’ And when Pilate hears that, it’s like a switch trips inside him, and he brings Jesus out to pass judgment on him.

What’s triggered him? You see, by the time John wrote this gospel ‘Friend of Caesar’ was an almost official, technical title, like Special Advisor to the President. But in Pilate’s day, while there was nothing yet official about the title, it was getting there. Because back in Rome there was a man called Aelius Sejanus, prefect of the Praetorian guard. And Sejanus was described as the most feared man in Rome, second only to Caesar himself. And Tacitus, the Roman historian, wrote of him, ‘the closer a man is with Sejanus, the stronger his claim *to the emperor’s friendship*.’

And Pilate was a favoured acquaintance, a protege of Sejanus. And in all likelihood he had worked his way up the ladder and gained this status of a friend of Caesar - one of the favoured few - through his links with Sejanus. Sometimes it pays to have contacts in high places, doesn’t it?

Except when those contacts fall. Because around this time, Sejanus attempted some kind of coup, and Caesar had him and his supporters arrested and executed. So far from being something you would put on your resume, now, being one of Sejanus’ groupies had become a potentially deadly liability.

And the politically savvy Jewish high priests would have known that: ‘Because if you don’t do what we tell you - if you let this so called king live - we will let *your king* know what kind of a friend you are.’

Imagine Pilate has before him a set of scales, the scales of justice. And on one side is truth, and justice, and integrity, and the life of this man, and on the other is career, and reputation, and personal ambition, and the religious leaders have just dumped his very survival in there. What does that do to the scales? There’s no longer any debate is there? Because there’s no way he wants to be accused of unfriending Caesar. So Pilate gives way before evil.

But ask yourself, would we be any better? I mean, are there times when you’re tempted or even willing to sacrifice what you shouldn’t, to be in with the right people, or to get what you want, or push ahead with your career? Are there times when the friendship or love of someone else matters more to you than the friendship and love of God? Or if you’re not yet a Christian are you being held back from becoming one because what others think of you matters too much to you?

You see, there are times when we all need a deep inner strength. To become more like Christ and less like Pilate.

But before we look at how we can do that, look at the religious leaders, because they tell you why you *want* to do it and why you *don’t want* to go down the path of moral compromise.

Pilate brings Jesus out to them and says, v14-15, ‘“Behold your King!” They cried out, “Away with him, away with him, crucify him!” Pilate said to them, “Shall I crucify your King?” The chief priests answered, “We have no king but Caesar.”’

And if Pilate can be accused of moral weakness, even cowardice, the religious leaders demonstrate moral collapse. Because who was Israel’s king? It’s God. And who did they say they were waiting

for? The Messiah, Christ, *the* king. So when they say we have no king but Caesar, they're saying Caesar's our God, he's our messiah. While their true God and messiah was standing right in front of them, rejected by all.

Now did they really mean this? That they're Rome's loyal subjects, and better friends to Caesar than Caesar's representative? No! It's worse than that. This is them saying whatever's necessary, and sacrificing whatever stands in the way, to get what they want.

So if Jesus' inner strength stirs something in you, doesn't their response chill you? So ask yourself, is there any area, any personal desire, any political preference, any cultural idol, which you are in danger of choosing over Christ or pledging allegiance to above Christ? Because if that thing takes on controlling, ruling, king-like proportions in your life, moral compromise is not far away.

And before it, Pilate gives in. Verse 16, 'So he delivered him over to them to be crucified.'

So if we see the inner strength of Jesus and want to grow more like him, how do we do it?

How to Grow in One and not the Other

And you need three things Pilate doesn't have. You need an example that inspires you. You need a sense of worth that mocking can't take from you; and you need a sense of security and purpose that threats can never undermine.

Firstly, you need an example to inspire you. And Christ is that example. In v14 Pilate changes "Behold the man" to "Behold your King!" And he means it sarcastically - 'this is the only king you will ever have!' But he's also the only king you ever need. The king who was beaten that you might be healed. The king who refused to save himself so he can save you.

And as you behold him taking your place, suffering for your sin, it humbles you, and it turns your heart towards him in love and gratitude and admiration. And you want to grow more like him. The desire's planted.

Secondly, you need a sense of worth that mocking can't take from you. So see heaven's king, rejected by men, so that you might be accepted by God. See the One of greatest honour take the place of no honour, the place of shame, so that you might receive his honour. See the innocent condemned so that you, the guilty, can go free. See the price he was willing to pay for you, and you'll know your worth.

Because if that's how much he loves you, it begins to put what anyone else might say about you into perspective. And that will make you strong to do the right thing, regardless of what anyone else is saying.

But thirdly, you need a sense of security and purpose that difficulties, and threats, and even death, cannot take from you. And that's what Christ can give you - because as he says to Pilate, there is no authority - there are no circumstances - that can come into your life, and be placed in our lap, that are not under the sovereign control of your loving heavenly Father. And he is working them all for your good. And when you know that, your strength will grow.

So behold your king and you'll grow more like him.