

## Politics of the Passion: **The King without a Country** Jn 19:13-24

Intro: I guess it is silly, really, to talk about a king without a country. Calling him the “king of Israel” when he was riding on that donkey was a stretch. But this—the king of the Jews bloody and naked and hanging on a cross—is even more of a stretch. This borders on the ridiculous and absurd. Who would ever believe that Jesus of Nazareth was really any kind of king, looking up at him hanging there by the side of the road? No wonder they made fun and jeered as they passed by.

I can see in my mind the spot where some people think they planted that stake in the ground. It is right outside the old city wall on the north side, there beside the road. Behind it there is the cliff with holes eaten into it by rain and wind. And even today it looks like a skull. They’ve turned it into the city bus yard, that area in front of the Place of the Skull. It is full of diesel buses. People still think, I suppose, that the whole idea is silly—a king crucified. So they put a bus barn in the place where some think he died.

The Dome of the Rock—now there is a place to preserve, protect, and kill over. That right there—that is the geographical center of the world.

This ridiculous picture of King Jesus hanging on a cross outside the city walls has become the centerpiece of our faith. The writer of the Book of Hebrews sums it up in this way (Heb. 13:11-14): *The high priest carries the blood of animals into the Most Holy Place as a sin offering, but the bodies are burned outside the camp. 12 And so Jesus also suffered outside the city gate to make the people holy through his own blood. 13 Let us, then, go to him outside the camp, bearing the disgrace he bore. 14 For here we do not have an enduring city, but we are looking for the city that is to come.*

So we are called to “go to him outside the camp.” The camp is the visible kingdom, the collective abode—literally a camp in the desert where they pitched their tents. Here it is compared to a city. And we, like Abraham, are “looking for a city which has foundations whose builder and maker is God” (Heb. 11:10).

Christians are people who believe in Jesus as king. We are people who believe that the crucified life is the right way to live. We believe that love trumps power. We believe that serving is living. We are willing to live outside the camp if that is how it must be. We are also willing to work for the kingdom of God within the camp if we are given opportunity. We are citizens of the shadow kingdom, the invisible kingdom of God where Jesus reigns as king. For us, the sign on the cross says it all. Everybody say “Jesus of Nazareth, the king of the Jews.”

We cannot know the full import of these words nor can we appreciate fully the emotions of these events. We view them and hear them from afar. We did not live on this planet in that fateful moment when Jesus was handed over to the soldiers. Our feet did not press that pavement. Our ears did not hear the hammer.

But let’s walk to the foot of the cross in our minds and hearts this morning and take a look at this sign that Governor Pilate crafted and insisted be nailed to the cross:

### **I. The Sign Says “Jesus”** (everybody says “Jesus”)

A. The angel told Joseph, “You are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins” (Matt. 1:21). It means “the Lord saves.” It is like your name—David or Jane.

1. Jesus is also the Greek rendition of the Hebrew “Joshua.” Joshua was the great general of the Old Testament who led the people of God to claim the Promised Land.

2. Jesus will also lead his people to claim the Promised Land, but it will be a kingdom “from another place” (John 18:36). Jesus mentions that place in John 14:2: ***I go to prepare a place for you.***

B. Paul will later write about this sign, this accusation and verdict that was tacked to the cross (Colossians 2:13-14): *He forgave us all our sins, having canceled the written code, with its regulations, that was against us and that stood opposed to us; he took it away, nailing it to the cross.* His name was Jesus, Paul affirms, because he saved his people from their sins.

### **II. The Sign Says “of Nazareth.”** Everybody say “Nazareth.” This identifies Jesus by the place of his upbringing. It would be like saying “David of New Orleans” or “Bill of LaPlace.”

A. Nazareth is a backward little town in Galilee. It is not mentioned in biblical prophecy. Nathaniel mistakenly thought that Jesus was “from Nazareth” and said, “Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?” (John 1:46). Philip’s response, “Come and see” is classic. Nathaniel will hear one phrase from Jesus, “I saw you while you were still under the fig tree,” and respond, “Rabbi, you are the Son of God; you are the King of Israel” (John 1:49). He is the first of the disciples to declare Jesus to be a king.

B. The “Nazarene sect” is an early label used to designate the followers of Jesus, a way of dismissing them, I would think. Tertullus is the lawyer who represented the high priest before Felix. Pilate’s successor as governor

of the region. Tertullus said of Paul, “We have found this man to be a troublemaker, stirring up riots among the Jews all over the world. He is a ringleader of the Nazarene sect” (Acts 24:5).

**III. The Sign Says “King.”** Everybody says “King.” This is the usual word for the monarch.

A. This has been the center of Pilate’s examination of Jesus. He wanted to know about his kingship. Jesus said himself that he was a king but that his kingdom was not of this world.

B. Pilate made sure that the word “king” was on the sign. This is the Roman explanation for why Jesus was executed. “Handed over” in v16 is the word *paradidomi* which is translated “betrayed” when referring to Judas. Jesus was betrayed by both Judas and Pilate.

C. “We have no king but Caesar” (John 19:15) is the confession of the chief priests when confronted with the kingship of Jesus. This is precisely when they “disowned the Holy and Righteous One” (Acts 3:14). In so doing they also disavowed the invisible kingdom of which Jesus is king. They did the same thing that Pilate did: they discounted the invisible kingdom (of God) in favor of the visible one, Rome.

1. “What I have written, I have written.” The Governor exercises authority over the clergy who used him to kill their heretic. Their goal was tainted by the label on the cross.

2. That will be the outcome always when we manage to use the government to achieve our spiritual work. Somehow, some way, it will be compromised.

D. Take note of this, please. Jesus came to be a king: *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* (John 18:37).

**IV. The Sign Says “Of the Jews.”** Everybody say “of the Jews.” This designates who he is king over—the extent of his monarchy.

A. “We are the children of Abraham,” the Jews bragged to Jesus one day. Jesus replied, “God is able of these stones to raise up children unto Abraham” (Matthew 3:9). What did he mean? He was breaking the genealogical link between Abraham and his children. He was pointing to the heart, as he always did. He was introducing the notion that a Jew was not simply a physical descendant of Abe.

B. The Apostle Paul would later take this to its logical conclusion in Romans 2:28-29: *a man is not a Jew if he is only one outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical. No, a man is a Jew if he is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code.*

C. To be “king of the Jews,” then, in the thinking of Jesus and his disciples, is not about GENEALOGY OR GEOGRAPHY. “Jew” is another way of saying “the people of God” or the “the covenant people.”

D. We are in that number, the Apostle Peter declares as he says of those who believe in Jesus: *But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy* (I Pet. 2:9-10). You are an *ethnos hagian*, a “holy nation.” This is the nation of which Jesus is King.

E. This interpretation fits perfectly with all that Jesus has taught about the Kingdom of God which is among us, his present and is coming, the kingdom “from another place.”

F. Jesus has no geography here, no acres or sections or continents that constitute his kingdom. He was offered such a geographical monarchy at the beginning of his ministry by the devil himself who is the “prince of the power of the air, the spirit that now works in the children of disobedience” (Ephesians 2:2). Jesus is a “king without a country” because “king of the Jews” means “king of those who believe in him.”

G. The capital city of this “holy nation” is “the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband” (Revelation 21:2). John wrote at a terrible time of persecution when the visible kingdom of Rome was seeking to exterminate all followers of Jesus who belonged to this invisible kingdom.

**Conclusion:** The chief priests wanted Pilate to change this sign to read “He claimed to be the king of the Jews.” I ask you, Would you want to write this sign as his claim or as your confession?