

John 19:16b-27

Before we take a look at this text, we need to look at last week's lesson to give us the context or framework from which to read our text for this week. Last week, we were introduced to Pilate. We saw how Pilate believed Jesus to be innocent, proclaimed him the King of the Jews, and tried to set him free. (And, in doing all of this, Pilate compares favorably to Peter who denied Christ when given the chance to proclaim him to the servant girl and guards huddled around the charcoal fire.)

This week, we will see how the King of the Jews rules as king. We will also see the genesis of the Christian church.

19:16b-17

In the synoptic gospels, Jesus has help carrying his cross (thanks to Simon of Cyrene). John says that Jesus carried his own cross. Which one is right? Well, they both are. While it's impossible to recreate exactly what happened, it is likely that Jesus carried his cross part of the way and had help for part of the way. The synoptic gospels draw our attention to the help Jesus received to make the point that THIS IS OUR CROSS; John draws our attention to that time when Jesus alone carried the cross to make the point that HE ALONE BORE THE CROSS.

John spends some serious time explaining where the crucifixion took place: Place of the Skull, Golgotha. Why does John want us to know this? Why is it important to him? Perhaps the note in the Lutheran Study Bible is helpful (quoting Chrysostom): "Some say that Adam died there, and there lies; and that Jesus is in this place where death had reigned, there also set up the trophy. For He went forth bearing the Cross as a trophy over the tyranny of death."

19:18

We have not learned who these other men are. In fact, John does not tell us anything else about these men (other than that their legs were broken so they would die before the Sabbath started). What is clear is that Jesus, the King of the Jews, is treated no different from other men under sentence of death. He is one of them. The Word became flesh.

19:19

In the previous passage, Pilate has proclaimed the name of Jesus several times:

- “I find no guilt in him” (18:38).
- “Do you want me to release to you the King of the Jews?” (18:39)
- “Take him yourselves and crucify him, for I find no guilt in him” (19:6).
- From then on Pilate sought to release him (19:12).
- “Behold your King!” (19:14)
- “Shall I crucify your King?” (19:15)

Now, he does it one more time, placing a sign above Jesus which read: “Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews.” It is common to assume that Pilate is being sarcastic. But there’s nothing in the text to indicate this is the case. Rather, people say that Pilate is being sarcastic to try to explain why he did what he did. And while this is a decent attempt, what is more important is the image this scene projects. Here you have Jesus, flogged and bloody, hanging on a cross. THIS is the King of the Jews, a king unlike no other, a king whose glory is in his suffering, who reigns lifted-up on the cross. Pilate’s motives do not matter; the statement he makes about Jesus is true.

19:20

Why would Pilate write: “Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews” in three different languages if it was meant sarcastically, or as an insult to the Jews in Jerusalem? Pilate has (knowingly or unknowingly) gone from testifying about Jesus to the Jews to bearing witness to the world.

19:21-22

The chief priests do not like the witness Pilate has given because they know exactly what he’s saying! They want him to water-down what he’s saying to make it more palatable, less controversial. What they chief priests ask for is not unreasonable. And, in fact, they are giving Pilate the opportunity to take back a controversial (and unpopular) position on Jesus to one that simply explains why he is being killed. Pilate will not have it. Jesus is who he is, and no amount of pressure to deny it will alter that fact.

19:23

Notice how almost nonchalantly the narrator refers to the actual crucifixion. Back in 19:18 the actual crucifixion took place. But there the narrator spent more time explaining who was crucified with him and where Jesus was crucified than on the actual event of his being crucified. The same thing happens here, where the narrator spends more time focusing on Jesus’ clothes than Jesus’ body, which hung “lifted up” on the cross.

19:24

The discussion of Jesus' clothing by the guards is mentioned so that the narrator can make the convincing case that this event fulfilled an Old Testament prophecy concerning the messiah. This prophecy comes from the 22nd Psalm.

19:25

On the one hand, we have chief priests protesting the sign above Jesus' body and Roman soldiers gambling for Jesus' clothing. (This is not a pretty picture, to be sure.) But on the other hand, we have 3 or 4 women. (The Greek leaves open the possibility that the second woman is either just "his mother's sister" or "his mother's sister, that is, Mary the wife of Clopas.")

Interestingly, the last time we heard about Jesus' mom was back in chapter 2, when she asked him to act at the wedding feast (his first sign). We do not know if Mary Magdalene or Mary the wife of Clopas is the sister of Martha. All we know is that we have 3-4 women close to Jesus. (And for all we know the other women are there to support Jesus' mother as she watches her son die; they may have no connection to Jesus whatsoever.)

19:26

The only person described up to this point as the one whom Jesus loved is Lazarus. It is common for people to assume that this one is actually John. Notice that the Lutheran Study Bible makes his assumption in its study notes, without even acknowledging that John is never mentioned by name in this Gospel, but that Lazarus was repeatedly referred to as the one whom the Lord Jesus loved. Amazing.

And so what you have is the one who, in a sense, gave life to Jesus being taken in by the one to whom Jesus gave life.

19:27

What Jesus is doing here is creating the church. He is creating a family. You are part of that family; so am I.