

April 1, 2020 – 1 John 2:15-17 & Mark 15:1-20

If you look up the word “worldly” in the dictionary, you'll find two very different definitions. The first is rather innocent. To be worldly is to have an extensive knowledge of the world. To have gone places and seen things and know how things work in a practical way. To be worldly is the opposite of being naive. And, in that sense, it's generally seen as a good thing.

Most Christians, however, are well-aware of the second definition of worldly. One that isn't innocent at all. It's the definition we get in our Epistle Lesson today.

To be worldly from a Christian perspective is to love the world and the things of the world. It is to love the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and have pride in our possessions. Or, as our Old Testament Lesson says, it is the pomp of the arrogant and the pompous pride of the ruthless. Worldliness in this sense is very much a bad thing.

The same word, but two very different definitions. And yet, they're at least a little bit related. Because we see these very different types of worldliness happening side by side in three different groups of people in our Passion Reading this evening.

And we begin with Pontius Pilate himself. Pilate was the Roman Governor of Judea. The position of governor was a fairly high office in the Roman Empire. But being the Governor of Judea was not really a position that many men wanted. Because, simply put, the Jewish residents were a pain.

They were constantly revolting against Roman rule. Constantly bickering amongst themselves. They absolutely refused to participate in the worship of the Roman Emperor, something that was required in every Roman territory. And they simply made life for the governor a constant headache.

The problem was that Rome needed the territory of Judea. Just take a look at a map. Egypt was the breadbasket of the Roman Empire. But transporting goods by ship around the Mediterranean Sea was treacherous at best. Which means if you want to carry anything by land out of Egypt, you have to go through Palestine. You have to go through Judea.

And so Pilate had one job: keep the Jews in line. Keep Judea peaceful. Do that, and you'll probably be promoted somewhere better. Fail? And you might just find yourself falling on your own sword. History's record of Pilate's performance in this regard is unclear. Some of the things he did were brutal, cruel, even antagonistic. He clearly had no respect for Jewish religion or customs.

On the other hand, the account of Jesus before Pilate reveals a surprisingly fair hearing. The chief priest held a kangaroo court for Jesus, with the evidence fabricated and the verdict predetermined. But Pilate listens to Jesus, reviews the evidence, and ultimately concludes that Jesus has done nothing wrong. He is innocent of the charges placed against him.

Yet, Pilate is a worldly man. Worldly in both senses. As a politician, he is worldly enough to know that the Jewish Council will never settle for anything less than Jesus' death. And as a sinful human being, he is selfish enough to sacrifice Jesus' life to save his own skin. In the end, he delivers Jesus to crucifixion simply to satisfy an angry crowd, threatening to revolt.

Why were they threatening to revolt? Well, because the chief priests stirred up the crowd against Jesus. Which was a risky thing to do. They were counting on Pilate backing down. Had he actually grown a spine, he could have sent out soldiers to put down the mob and a lot of people would have died.

But they didn't care. They hated Jesus. And, more importantly, they wanted everyone else to hate Jesus. Pilate, the worldly politician, sees straight through their lies and accusations. He knows what's going on here. *“He perceived that it was out of envy that the chief priests had delivered [Jesus] up.”*

Envy. They were the chief priests of Israel. The men charged with the spiritual care and welfare of God's people. The ones meant to stand as mediators between God and men as they performed the Temple sacrifices.

But, in the end, they're driven by a sinful impulse that even a Roman governor can recognize and identify with. They don't like how popular Jesus is. They don't like how powerful Jesus is. They don't like what Jesus says about them. He is a political opponent. And they want him gone.

Even if it means stirring up a risky riot. Even if it means letting a murderer like Barabbas go free. Even if it means betraying everything they believe in. They don't care how much danger they put the people in. They are thinking only of themselves. Only of their own careers. They are utterly worldly in every sense of the word.

Of course, those soldiers that Pilate could have sent after them weren't any better. They too were engaged in their own forms of worldliness. Because all they knew about Jesus was that he was being called the "King of the Jews."

But, to them, he was a laughable version of a king. Pilate himself probably looked more kingly and he was only a minor governor. But Jesus? Jesus was weak. Helpless. Broken.

He had no armies under his command. His own disciples had abandoned him. He had no royal robes or golden crowns. He was the son of a poor laborer, who gained no earthly wealth.

And in their utter scorn for Jesus' version of power, they let their cruelest, most violent urges take over. They mocked him. They spit on him. They ridiculed him. And they shoved a crown of thorns on his head. For really no other reason than their own perverse pleasure.

Three groups of very worldly people. Worldly in their minds. Worldly in their souls. And three groups of people who have more in common with us than I think we want to admit.

They may seem completely different from us at first glance. What similarities do I have with a Roman governor or a murderous Jewish leader or a barbaric Roman soldier? But look at what motivated them.

Selfishness and fear. Envy and hatred. The allure of power and the mockery of the powerless. These are not so foreign to us as we want to believe. These are universal sins.

Sins we often disguise in excuses like, "I'm just being practical. I'm just being smart. I'm just learning from experience. I'm just looking out for my own welfare. I'm just being worldly." Well, yes, you are being worldly... in all the worst ways.

Because looking out for yourself usually means you're not looking out for your neighbor. Fearing, loving, and trusting the things of this world means you're not fearing, loving, and trusting the Lord. And any desire that can be fulfilled by the things in this world is not from our Heavenly Father.

It almost seems impossible to conceive of a person who could fight that level of temptation. And yet we see that very thing happen at the beginning of Jesus' ministry. Because the worldliness of Pilate and the chief priests and soldiers is the very same worldliness that Satan used to tempt Jesus in the wilderness.

Jesus was tempted to think only of his bodily needs by turning stones into bread. Just as Pilate thought only of his bodily security when he gave in to the crowds. Jesus was tempted to envy Satan's authority over the earth and bow down to him. Just as the chief priests envied the authority Jesus held over the people. Jesus was tempted to pursue power and glory by throwing himself off the Temple and showing the world his divinity. Just as the soldiers would only pursue a king dressed in the power and glory of a Roman Emperor.

Jesus was tempted by all the same worldliness of these three groups and of each of us. And yet resisted, cast off the devil's snare, and remained faithful to his Father's will. So that when he went to the cross, he truly did go as one who had done no evil. He truly did go as the holy and anointed King of the Jews.

And he truly did go as one who died in our place. Taking our sin, our worldliness, upon himself. He passed away on the cross so that our sinful desires might pass away with him. He did the will of God so that we might abide forever. The heavenly Son of God became worldly so that we, the children of the world, might become heavenly.

And might know something other than the things of this world. So that we might know the things of God. We might experience the goodness of his love and his grace. So that we might set aside that which is practical and learn the wisdom of the Gospel. A wisdom found in the sacrifice of our Lord for us. Amen.