

“Worldly Eyes”

Mark 15:1–20

We use the adjective “worldly” in two different but related senses. Merriam-Webster identifies these as (1) “having a lot of practical experience and knowledge about life and the world,” and (2) “of or relating to the human world and ordinary life rather than to religious or spiritual matters.” In our Gospel today, we see both senses of the term at work as Pontius Pilate, the Jewish chief priests, the crowd, and the Roman soldiers look at Jesus through “worldly eyes.”

In the Roman Empire, you didn’t rise to the level of power that Pilate enjoyed without being worldly-wise. It didn’t hurt that Pilate’s wife was the granddaughter of Caesar Augustus named Claudia Procula. But there is now a different Caesar, and as a governor, everything boils down to convincing the emperor of your ongoing worth. So above all, you have to look out for yourself, even if that means injustice for other people. Pilate was a man with worldly desires and ambitions. Pilate also was worldly in the sense of not personally caring about religious matters. As governor of Judea, the large population of highly religious Jews was a thorn in his side. Pilate both persecuted and provoked the Jews.

Given all of that, it is a bit surprising to see Pilate basically cooperating with the Jewish leaders in the trial of Jesus. It is true that he thought Jesus was innocent, based on his own investigation and on the warning from his wife’s mysterious dream, but Pilate’s worldliness won out in the end.

His religious skepticism is on full display when he asks Jesus, “What is truth?” thus rejecting the beaten and bloodied Truth standing right there in front of him. And his pragmatism toward worldly affairs is evidenced by granting the Jews’ request for the execution of Jesus, while wicked Barabbas went free. Better to pacify the Jews rather than place his position of power in jeopardy if they decided to cause a riot or rebellion over this insignificant Jew who some are calling their king.

The leaders of the Jews had worldly eyes as well. The Sadducees saw the popularity of Jesus as a threat to the power they enjoyed through compromises with the Romans; the Pharisees saw Jesus as a competitor to their own religious influence and as an opponent of their legalistic theology. So the worldly Jewish leaders stirred up the crowds to demand the crucifixion of Jesus.

Finally, the Roman soldiers had worldly eyes as well. They knew a king when they saw one, and Jesus was the opposite of their view of royalty. Perhaps they had seen Caesar himself; others had seen kings of the East during military campaigns; still others could envision with the mind’s eye glorious kings with all their pomp and circumstance. But this Jewish carpenter, beaten and bloodied and wearing a crown of thorns? A king? He doesn’t look like a king. Their bowing down and praising Jesus was all mockery: “Hail, King of the Jews!”

Ironically, Pilate and the soldiers got it right. Regardless of what was in their hearts, they correctly called Jesus King of the Jews, that is, the eternal Messiah promised to Adam and Eve, to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, David, and all of God’s chosen people. But as Jesus told Pilate, “My kingdom is not of this world” (John 18:36). Rather, He came into this world from heaven “to bear witness to the truth” (John 18:37). And here is the truth: Jesus was and is a king, but not a worldly one, but the heavenly, divine King – God the Son standing right there in the flesh! And

while the way of the world is to look for power and glory in rulers, the true King glories in suffering and the cross, and He manifests His power to save in the very Gospel of Jesus Christ – crucified and risen.

“Crucify Him!” cried the crowds. “Crucify Him!” cried the Father from His sapphire throne in heaven. “Crucify Me!” cried the obedient Son of God. We heard St. John say, “Whoever does the will of God abides forever” (1 John 2:17), and this first and foremost refers to Jesus Himself. He came from heaven to do His Father’s will, to draw all men to Himself on the cross, bearing the sins of the masses, dying for the life of the world. “For God so loved the world, that He gave His only Son” (John 3:16) to reconcile the whole world to Himself, not counting men’s trespasses against them (2 Cor 5:19).

Was His death for you? Well, are you in the world? Then yes! He is “the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” (John 1:29), and if your worldly sins were on Him on the cross, then they are no longer on you. If your sins are placed on Him through Baptism, Absolution, and the Lord’s Supper, then they most certainly must not continue to weigh you down in guilt and shame, but you should consider them to be as far from you as east is from west – as Scripture says. Because that is the truth of the Gospel: in Christ you have been set free from sin, death, and hell, and all you have to look forward to is the resurrection of the body and life everlasting in God’s eternal kingdom!

And as Jesus says, His kingdom is not of this world, so you are called not to a worldly mind-set but to a heavenly one. St. Paul writes to those baptized into Christ’s death and resurrection: “If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God.

When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with Him in glory” (Col. 3:1–4). Jesus prayed to His Father for you on the night when He was betrayed: “[Father,] I have given them Your word, and the world has hated them because they are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. I do not ask that You take them out of the world, but that You keep them from the evil one” (John 17:14–15).

Again, as we heard St. John say, “All that is in the world—the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride of life—is not from the Father but is from the world. And the world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever” (1 John 2:16–17).

And this is God’s will: to embrace the truth of the cross, by which the world has been crucified to you, and you to the world (Gal. 6:14). This is God’s saving way, no matter what your worldly status is in this fallen creation. St. Paul writes to the church in Corinth: “For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. And because of Him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption, so that, as it is written, ‘Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord’” (1 Cor. 1:26–31).

Standing trial and bearing our sins, Christ looked weak through worldly eyes. Look with confidence with the eyes of faith to the cross and empty grave. It is there, and only there, that we see salvation. Amen.