

PODCAST START:

[intro music]

Brian: Welcome to the Queer Theology podcast!

Fr. Shay: Where each episode, we take a queer look at the week's lectionary readings. We're the cofounders of QueerTheology.com and the hosts for this podcast. I'm Father Shay Kearns —

B: And I'm Brian G. Murphy. Hello hello hello and welcome to another episode. Today we're taking a look at the lectionary for Sunday, March 25th. It's Palm Sunday. The Gospel reading for today is pretty much all of Mark 14 and 15. It's basically the entire passion narrative. So [laughing] we're not going to read it to you because it's very long, but we're going to dial in and look at specifically Mark 15:1-15. This is the trial before Pilate, and I will read that part to you now.

At daybreak, the chief priests—with the elders, legal experts, and the whole Sanhedrin—formed a plan. They bound Jesus, led him away, and turned him over to Pilate. Pilate questioned him, “Are you the king of the Jews?”

Jesus replied, “That’s what you say.” The chief priests were accusing him of many things.

Pilate asked him again, “Aren’t you going to answer? What about all these accusations?” But Jesus gave no more answers, so that Pilate marveled.

During the festival, Pilate released one prisoner to them, whomever they requested. A man named Barabbas was locked up with the rebels who had committed murder during an uprising. The crowd pushed forward and asked Pilate to release someone, as he regularly did. Pilate answered them, “Do you want me to release to you the king of the Jews?” He knew that the chief priests had handed him over because of jealousy. But the chief priests stirred up the crowd to have him release Barabbas to them instead. Pilate replied, “Then

what do you want me to do with the one you call king of the Jews?"

They shouted back, "Crucify him!" Pilate said to them, "Why? What wrong has he done?" They shouted even louder, "Crucify him!"

Pilate wanted to satisfy the crowd, so he released Barabbas to them. He had Jesus whipped, then handed him over to be crucified. [CEB]

Okay, Shay. [laughs] We're looking at the politics of Jesus this season of Lent, and it just seems like politics are embedded in this passage. You can't escape them if you wanted to, from the trial and the empire and the religious leaders. So, what do you make of this? Where do we start unpacking the politics of Jesus in this passage?

FS: Yeah, like you said, it's all over it. It's fascinating for me to read this passage through a political lens, right, to maybe even set theology aside for a little bit and to really focus on what, what is the political system of this time doing? I think it's fascinating that the religious leaders are really using the political system to get what they want, to get their way. And, also, the system itself is rigged against someone like Jesus, someone who is an itinerant preacher, someone who is a prophet, someone who says stuff that is upsetting or could potentially sway the balance of the political system. Someone who's inciting crowds, right? [Brian laughs] This is during a festival, so there are lots and lots of people around. And Jesus wasn't the only prophet and itinerant preacher around in his day, and lots of times, these guys stirred up crowds. Many of them were trying to stir people up to armed rebellion and to fight back. And so obviously, anytime you've got someone stirring up a crowd and a political power that's feeling threatened, shit gonna get real, and someone's gonna get hurt. [both laugh] And so that overlays all of this for me.

But then I also feel like, you know, so often our political systems are set up not to protect the people who need protection, but to protect the people with power and money and privilege. I think there's been a lot of conversations in the Twin Cities, and everywhere else, around the Me Too movement. And there's been talk about – so I work for a theatre company, and talk about theatre companies creating these sexual harassment policies. And a friend of mine, a really gifted director who has worked in law before, says, you know, the reason that companies set up harassment policies isn't to protect people, it's to protect the company. So that if

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someone has a complaint, the *company* doesn't get sued and lose something. That really struck me, because in my mind, these policies should be about protecting the people who are the most vulnerable, the people who would suffer harassment or suffer assault. And I think that often, that's how our political system is. It's *not* designed to protect the people who most need protection. It's designed to protect the interests of people with power and wealth. And when you fight against people with power and wealth, then the hand of the law comes down and it comes down hard, and leaves you without a lot of recourse. So I think that what's happening here is something we see happening every day in our political system and our injustice system – this system that penalizes people and makes it so that they can never get out of that system again. It's just – it's heartbreaking to see. And also it's instructive that, like, the politics that we are talking about, we have to grapple with this and we have to wrestle with it and we have to do something about it.

B: When I look at this passage now, you know – I *used* to think that Jesus was crucified because it was this God-ordained thing that had to happen so that, by Jesus's death, sort of, [laughs] the blood of Jesus could wash away my sins. Which, like, put a pin in that. If you're interested in why Jesus died, we're doing a webinar all about atonement on Tuesday, April 10th at 9 pm. You can register at QueerTheology.com/atonementwebinar. But, back to my larger point, which was – you know, I *used* to think that Jesus died because Jesus claimed to be God. That was a strictly religious, completely apolitical claim. And because of that, Jewish people crucified him. And what I know now is that, a few things that we see in this passage. One, Pilate questioned him, "Are you *king* of the Jews?" Not religious leader, not are you the best prophet, but are you *king* of the Jews? And king is a particular political word that, at that time, there *was* a king of the Jews, who was in partnership with the Roman Empire, who was occupying and oppressing the Jewish people at the same time. So we see in this passage Pilate, as an agent of the Roman Empire, is the one who ultimately makes the decision to crucify Jesus. And in part because of this fervor that gets whipped up around this political claim that the religious leaders of the time were saying that Jesus was making. Which [laughs] he was, a bit. We've been talking all month long about how religion and politics are inseparable. We see that in this passage, right here, that they go together.

When I ask what this passage might mean for us today – you know, this passage is read on Palm Sunday. Just maybe five days earlier, Jesus makes this sort of entrance into Jerusalem on a donkey that's – we have, in other podcasts and articles, talked about how it was this sort of nonviolent, direct action, political protest, and **I'll put links to those in the show notes**. But there was a crowd there

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that was very excited and supportive. And we see in *this* passage a crowd that's shouting to crucify him. One explanation is that, in just the span of five days' time, the crowd is fickle and got whipped up into a fervor to turn against Jesus. But another explanation is that it's a different crowd! If this is a trial, who was let into this area, to this hearing, is different than the folks who had gathered outside of Jerusalem to welcome Jesus in on Palm Sunday. And that sort of asks me, that question of which crowd do we listen to, feels just as pressing now as it did two thousand years ago. Do we listen to the crowds protesting in the streets that black lives matter, against police violence, against brutality of trans people, against ripping families apart around immigration, or do we listen to the crowds of NRA members? Do we listen to the crowds of white evangelical leaders seeking to consolidate and hold onto their political power? Which crowds do we give voice to and give meaning to, and which crowds do we appease? Unfortunately, our government, much like the Roman government there, is listening to the crowds that are against justice. I think that we have to ask ourselves, what crowd are we going to be a part of, and what crowd do we want our government to respond to? Do we want it to respond to the ones who are protesting and yearning for justice, or do we want the ones who are protesting and yearning for oppression and violence? This passage speaks to me very much today, and feels alive and relevant.

[outro music]

B: The Queer Theology podcast is just one of many things that we do at QueerTheology.com, which provides resources, community and inspiration for LGBTQ Christians and straight cisgender supporters.

FS: To dive into more of the action, visit us at QueerTheology.com. You can also connect with us online on Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr and Instagram.

B: We'll see you next week.

PODCAST END

Transcript by Taylor Walker

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