

Before I comment on our Gospel passage this evening, I want to start by reminding you of a passage from the 8th Chapter of Mark. In verses 27 to 30, we discover Jesus and his disciples in Caesarea Philippi, a primarily Gentile village that was founded by Herod the Great's son Philip. The location may well be another example of Jesus' journeys in Mark back and forth between Jewish and Gentile territory. It is also significant in that Caesarea-Philippi is situated in a lush area around the base of Mount Hermon that had been a significant site for pagan worship, particularly the God Pan. The area was thus associated with licentiousness and debauchery. Philip founded Caesarea Philippi in honour of his Roman masters and himself. Interestingly the area also had a grotto that was believed in ancient times to be the gates of Hell. Mark, undoubtedly positions Jesus there as part of his practice of compare and contrast.

This short passage of 3 verses in Mark 8 is significant for the most important question in the entire Christian scriptures. Jesus says to the disciples *Who do people say I am?* The disciples answer, *John the Baptist and others, Elijah, and still others, one of the prophets.* Jesus counters with *But who do you say that I am?* Peter answered him, *You are the Messiah.* Mark's late mid-first century Jewish readers in Rome would not have missed the significance of "I am". They would have remembered Moses question about God's name and God's reply "I am who I am". But the significance of this short passage from Mark 8 to our understanding of our later passage from Mark this evening is the question: *Who do you say I am?*

After much scheming to eliminate Jesus, the Priests and the scribes have succeeded in bringing him before Pilate. Pilate asks him on the question who do you say I am, *Are you the King of the Jews?* Jesus says, *You say so.* Then Pilate rehearses the charges the Chief Priests have brought against Jesus, but Jesus has no response. Jesus knows that nothing will prevent his ending up on the cross. The next short passage is one of the most disturbing in Christian scripture. The Roman Governor has a tradition of releasing a prisoner to commemorate the Passover, when Pilate offers to release Jesus, the crowd demands that he release Barabbas. When Pilate asks what he should do with the man they call the King of the Jews, they scream, *Crucify him.* Even when Pilate asks *What evil has he done?* The crowd roars all louder *crucify him.*

And here we see the relevance of this story for our time: the weakness of power and the evil of populism. As I have said recently in a previous homily, Pilate served as the governor at the pleasure of the Emperor. The Emperor's pleasure was entirely dependent upon Pilate's ability to squelch rebellion and maintain the peace – not a peace for the benefit of the people, but a peace to ensure Roman rule was undisturbed. Even as the chief priests were afraid of a riot as we heard last week, this week we hear that they were able to manipulate the crowd that welcomed Jesus earlier in the week to call for his death. And now it is Pilate who is afraid of a riot which could well spell the end of his holding the Emperor's pleasure. In our reading last week, the priests were determined to get rid of Jesus, but they feared the mob. This week we hear how they have manipulated the mob and turned the risk away from themselves and

placed the burden of risk on Pilate. Pilate knows Jesus is innocent, but his innocence counts for nothing alongside the fragility of Pilate's power.

This scenario is repeated every day on the front page or front screen of every major news outlet. Whether it be Trump, or Putin, or Orban, or Modi, or Farage, or Erdogan, we have a whole cohort around the world of populist leaders abusing the powers entrusted to them to shore up their authority through manipulation and the permission of a spineless cohort of enablers. Think of the American example: there are 272 Republican members of the Congress who are not even prepared to defend the rights of Congress before Trump's authoritarian, unconstitutional, and evil acts because they see the main chance by kowtowing to him. Pilate has legions of successors. There are examples everywhere. We mustn't lose sight of the victims: undocumented migrants, conscientious public servants, truth-tellers. Today, Jesus has lots of company on the road to the cross.

On the morning, I began to write this homily, in the Guardian, a cartoon appeared, Nigel Farage the populist leader of the UK Reform party and, if the polls are right possibly the next Prime Minister, is standing in the aisle of an aeroplane smoking a cigarette. A sign on a seat back makes it clear that this is a flight to deport refugees. The caption coming out of Farrage's mouth is *No point doing a flight safety demonstration...not where you're going*. That captures perfectly the abject cruelty to which any group that populism names as enemy is subject.

How is populism so successful for the chief priests and the scribes – at least for a time, or for those who exploit the populace today. For the exploiters there are several useful characteristics: narcissism, no compunction about lying if the lies are useful, a complete absence of shame, comradeship with fellow exploiters, and preparedness to criminalize all in their way. And the characteristics for the population that is exploited: again some level of narcissism, although nothing like the heroic levels of it in the exploiters; insecurity; taking comfort from naming an enemy, and a perverse ability to enjoy any suffering that can be visited upon those so-called enemies. In short, everything that Jesus would have us reject and repent of if we have been guilty. And what is more, Jesus would have us bring aid, comfort, and support for those who are victims of the evils of populism.

We are blessed that the populists in Canada have yet to find the success of their counterparts in the United States, but do not imagine that they are not working hard – much harder than we are working to stop them. How can we stop them? We can simply judge all our actions and our inactions by the simple question do they express love for God and love for neighbour. Or as Micah said: *...what does the Lord require of you, but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God*.

Who do we say Jesus is? And does our answer drive what we do? Amen