

First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida  
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### John 18:33-38 (NRSV)

Then Pilate entered the headquarters again, summoned Jesus, and asked him, "Are you the King of the Jews?" [34] Jesus answered, "Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?" [35] Pilate replied, "I am not a Jew, am I? Your own nation and the chief priests have handed you over to me. What have you done?" [36] Jesus answered, "My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here." [37] Pilate asked him, "So you are a king?" Jesus answered, "You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice." [38] Pilate asked him, "What is truth?"

After he had said this, he went out to the Jews again and told them, "I find no case against him.

### IS JESUS A KING?

Is Jesus a king?

This is the question that Pilate had to answer.

To be more precise Pilate had to know whether Jesus was *claiming* to be king. Pilate knew full well that this beaten man before him was not a king in any sense of the word.

Pilate was a man with experience. He knew what it took to be king. A king had power, the power of life and death over his subjects. If you wanted to look at a king, you had to look no farther than his boss, Caesar.

Now Caesar was a king. He not only had the power of life and death over his subjects; he also made those under his power to worship him as Lord. There was no power and no authority that King Caesar did not claim.

But, Pilate still had to take the claims against Jesus seriously. Pilate was a long way from Rome. The religious leaders in the Middle East were religious fanatics. They wouldn't even come into his home for fear of defiling

themselves for their feast of Passover. Pilate shook his head in amazement when he thought about it.

There they stood outside his house shouting at him to take this poor excuse of a man and sentence him to death. What was the charge? They didn't say. They just said that this man deserved to die. "Trust me on this," they said. "This man deserves to die."

Pilate didn't trust anyone, especially these Jews.

## ZEALOTS

But, Pilate also knew that there were some who did threaten Rome in a more direct way. They were called Zealots, and they would stop at nothing to end the Roman occupation. No matter how many they crucified; these crazed guys just kept coming out of the woodwork. Today they would be "suicide bombers." They were people who loved their country and their ideals more than life itself.

Yes, Pilate would have to interrogate this Jesus carefully. He might look harmless enough, but this situation had all the earmarks of a real problem. The Jewish leaders were not in the habit of bringing any of their own people to Pilate for judgment.

There was something going on with this Jesus.

Pilate began to think about a commotion that had occurred earlier in the week. Some of his guards told him about it. It seems that there was an unauthorized parade that took place outside the city. The details weren't all that clear in Pilate's mind, but there was something about a royal cheer, "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord."

Pilate would have taken action on this, but when he heard that the so called king was riding a jackass; he thought that it was pretty funny. Now he wished that he had done something earlier. Then he wouldn't have these crazy people beating on his door so early.

## THE INTERROGATION

But, Pilate was sure that he could get to the bottom of this problem. He had been trained in interrogation techniques. This guy would be no match for him. He began by asking Jesus straightforwardly, “Are you the King of the Jews?”

A yes or no answer would have sufficed, but this Jew had to make things tough on everyone. He asked Pilate, “Is this your own question or did somebody else tell you about me?”

Pilate began to feel his blood boil as he snapped back at this impudent Jewish upstart, “I’m not a Jew. I can’t figure out what your people are doing. I don’t even care about what your people are doing. I would just as soon go home and let you have this dust bowl that you call the Promised Land. But, your own people have brought you to me; they say you’re a criminal. And I’m inclined to believe them.”

Pilate had experience in matters such as this. He had been in charge of enough trials to know that if someone ended up in a courtroom they were probably guilty. It was just a matter of finding out what they had done wrong.

Jesus is not put off by Pilate’s angry outburst. Calmly he replies, “You’re right. I am a king. But, I’m not the kind of king that they accuse me of being. My kingdom is not of this world.

If I were a Zealot who was trying to overthrow the rule of Rome, don’t you think that some of my followers would be fighting right now to try and prevent me from being captured by the Jews? But, I’m not that kind of king?”

Pilate seized on that idea and said, “So you are a king?”

And Jesus replied, “You said it. But, my kingdom will not be based on military might or money or power or any of those things that the world associates with royalty. My kingdom will be based upon Truth with a capital “T.” My kingdom will be based upon God’s truth, and my followers will be those who seek that truth.”

## WHAT IS TRUTH?

Once again Pilate shook his head. This foolish man thought that there was something called Absolute Truth. Only children believed in such things.

One thing Pilate knew. There was no truth. There was no universal standard by which everyone would be judged.

There was only one “truth” as far as Pilate was concerned. “Might makes right.” Those in charge made the rules, and the one truth that Pilate had followed all of his life was to please those who were in charge. That’s how Pilate achieved the position that he had.

Pilate was never all that concerned about what was right or wrong. Pilate was worried about what they thought in Rome. Pilate was worried about what his boss, Caesar might say. Caesar never worried about what was right or wrong. Caesar just worried about conquest and total victory. Anything less and Pilate would be judged a failure.

And yet, there was something about Jesus that bothered Pilate. This man did indeed carry himself like a King. Despite the circumstances it didn’t seem like Pilate was putting Jesus on trial. It seemed like Jesus was putting Pilate on trial. All this talk about the truth, about what was right and wrong had stirred something in Pilate.

But, he suppressed it. Pilate knew his role in this affair. He was not seeking the truth. He was seeking a solution. He wanted to solve this problem as soon as possible. He wanted to do what was practical.

And so Pilate, a thoroughly modern man even though he lived centuries ago said, “What is truth?” That’s what every leader is tempted to say when the choices are complex and dangerous. “What is truth?”

In a time of danger we have to do what is necessary instead of what is right. The person who worries too much about what is right and wrong has never had to make any real decisions. A leader sometimes has to act right away.

Those pinheaded intellectuals in Rome might have the luxury of debating the truth. But, in this violent and dangerous land Pilate had to live by his wits.

And so Pilate knew that he might have to do what was expedient instead of what was right when it came to Jesus. “What is truth?” he asked no one in particular. He was already trying to comfort himself once again with the idea that truth is an outmoded concept. It had worked before when he had to make hard choices for the sake of his country. Sometimes a leader has to do terrible things to retain power.

## INNOCENCE

But, today the words rang hollow, even in Pilate’s own ears. There was a truth in this case. The truth was this: Jesus was not a danger to anyone. He certainly was not a danger to the Roman Empire. And so Pilate said to the Jewish leaders, “I find no case against this man. He has done nothing wrong.”

Pilate no doubt hoped that this would end the matter, that he could just let this innocent man go and forget about all the squabbles of this contentious people.

But, he knew better. He knew that the Jewish leaders would insist on punishing this man. They would, as they had done so many times before, threaten to complain to Caesar. One thing Caesar didn’t like was complaints.

The ruler of Rome had heard too much about Pilate lately anyway and so Pilate knew what the outcome would be. He would wash his hands of the matter, and that would be that.

After all he really didn’t care what happened to Jesus or the Jewish leaders. All he really wanted was to go home and leave this seemingly god-forsaken place.

## KING OF THE JEWS

Of course we know the rest of the story. We know that Pilate finally gave in and let them take Jesus, an innocent man to be crucified. We know that the soldiers mocked Jesus as they beat him, calling him the King of the Jews.

And we know that Pilate took one last jab at the Jewish leaders, putting a sign over the crucified Jesus that said, “Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews.” The sign was in Hebrew, Greek and Latin so that everyone could read it. The religious leaders wanted Pilate to change the sign to say something like “this man claimed to be King of the Jews” but Pilate finally got a little backbone and said, “What I’ve written I have written.”

And indeed what he wrote has remained.

Long after the death of Pilate and Caesar and the Roman Empire, we still celebrate the reign of King Jesus. Indeed, we wouldn’t even know the name of Pilate had he not played a role in the death of Jesus. He is forever immortalized in our faith, having a line in our Creed when we say that Jesus, the Son of God and our King “suffered under Pontus Pilate.”

In the New Testament we find one of the earliest creeds of the church. In a world where people were required to say “Caesar is Lord” Christians dared to say “Jesus is Lord.” The similarity was not lost on the Roman government. As Pilate had Jesus killed, Rome had many followers of Jesus killed. Why was it so important for them to say that Jesus is Lord, that Jesus is their King? Why were they willing to die rather than give him a lesser title?

It was because that those early Christian disciples discovered personally what the Pilates and the Caesars of this world could never know. Truth does matter.

In fact there are some truths even worth dying for. As the song puts it, “Jesus, Jesus, Jesus ... there’s just something about that name. Kings and kingdoms will all pass away but there’s just something about that name.”

Those early Christians knew that King Jesus had a crown of thorns and ruled from the throne of a cross. But, he was also an eternal Ruler who brought hope not only for this life but also for the life to come. The third day he rose from the dead, he ascended into heaven and one day he will come to judge all things.

**JESUS IS LORD**

In one of our Bible studies a member who had visited a country in Central America said that she noticed the churches in that part of the world emphasized that statement, Jesus is Lord much more than we do. She wondered why that might be.

I suspect that brothers and sisters who struggle more than us can appreciate the importance of that royal title more. Jesus is King. Jesus is Lord and Savior. Jesus is our only source of hope and salvation.

But, we who have it so much better financially and politically are tempted to think of Jesus in other ways. We don't want a king who will demand absolute allegiance. That is so undemocratic so un-American! We are too satisfied with the life we have.

But, despite living the good life today, we need to remember that it is all subject to change. Life can change in an instant, and then we will need and want a Lord and Savior who can take charge in our life. Fortunately for us that is who Jesus is.

As Handel put it, he is "King of kings and Lord of lords and He shall reign forever." One commentator wrote, "To say that Christ is king implies that we are subjects. The heart of this relationship is our dependence on a ruler who holds our lives in his hands. We do not choose a ruler as we elect a President; hire a CEO or contract with a therapist. We are Christ's people."

## A KING NOT OF THIS WORLD

And we need to remember that as subjects of Christ's kingdom, we have a King whose kingdom is not of this world. We have a king who plays by different rules, rules that are the polar opposite of what the world believes.

First of all we have a King who establishes authority not by lording it over us, but by serving us. This strange King Jesus is a servant king who does not rule by raw power. He does not rule by greed or manipulation at the expense of others. Jesus does not raise an army to dominate the hearts and minds of the people by force.

Instead, Jesus modeled a different way. Jesus emptied himself for the sake of others. Jesus served and healed and lifted up those who were downtrodden. Instead of doing what was practical and pragmatic Jesus always did what was right. His kingdom was all about the truth lived and practiced.

And second, King Jesus is a King with scars, and by his wounds we are healed.

Charles Colson wrote, “All the kings and queens I have known in history sent their people out to die for them. I only know one king who decided to die for his people.”

In a reading from the Celtic Daily Prayer, there is this question and answer:

Question: “What are the only human-made things in heaven?”

Answer: “The wounds in the hands, feet and side of Christ.”

In the New Testament we learn that after the resurrection of Christ he is revealed by his scars. When the disciples doubt who he is, he shows them his hands, his feet and his side.

Those scars are the signs of the greatest love the world has ever known. The King died for us, and we still recognize the risen Christ by the wounds which he bears on our behalf. Jesus takes the worst we have to offer and transforms it into a sign of hope and salvation. Those scars remind us that our King dies for us.

## A CHILD OF THE KING

I wish every child in this world could grow up singing the little gospel song of old, “I’m a child of the King, I’m a child of the King, with Jesus my Savior, I’m a child of the King.”

Talk about doing something for our self-esteem!

The tragedy of most of our lives is not that we think too much of ourselves, but that we think too little.

I believe that if we all knew who we really are and acted upon that knowledge, we wouldn't make some of the tragic mistakes that we make. We wouldn't fritter away our lives pursuing concerns of little consequence. We wouldn't degrade ourselves with ambitions unworthy of us.

Who are we? We are those for whom Christ gave his life. We are children of the heavenly king. The celebration of this Sunday, Christ the King tells us about Jesus and who he is, but it also tells us about us and who we are.

Long ago people used to say, "Nobility has its obligations." Those who ruled as kings and queens had a responsibility to their subjects.

If Christ is King and if we are his children, that salvation has a claim on us. We are obligated; we are bound by the grace of God as revealed in Jesus. Out of gratitude for the salvation that is ours in Christ Jesus we are called to live in a different way. If Jesus is the way, the truth and the life, then we must live according to that truth. Our lives must be ordered around that hope.

The story of told of an Amish man who was asked by an inexperienced but enthusiastic evangelical youth, "Are you saved?" And the Amish man said, "Why do you ask me that? I could say anything. Here are the names of my banker, my grocer, and my farm hands. Ask them if I've been saved."

Jesus said that some of those who would call him Lord would just be talking. It's one thing to lay down your lips for the Lord. It's quite another to lay down your life. Today's lesson reminds us that Jesus is not just our friend, therapist or financial consultant.

Jesus is King. Jesus is Lord. And if we are his children we will follow him and obey him for the rest of our life. Take heart my friends. We know who sits on the throne, and that makes all the difference.

Amen.

**FIRST PRESBYTERIAN**