

John 18:33 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.

## A STORY OF KINGS

The story of the Bible is in many ways a story about kings.

After God led his people out of slavery into the Promised Land for a while the people had no king. They were a theocracy; they believed that God was their king. Whenever there was a national problem a charismatic leader (called a judge) would arise and by the power of God’s Spirit would deliver God’s people from their troubles.

But, after a while God’s people began to mistrust this system of deliverance. They wanted a more practical solution to their political problems. They wanted to be like all the other nations. They wanted a king. They wanted a strong central government that would give them security during the uncertain times in which they lived.

Unfortunately a strong central government comes with a rather high price tag. Yes, kings can strengthen the military and provide leadership during times of crisis, but they can also raise taxes. And worse than that, kings had a nasty habit of acting like were God incarnate.

Even the best of Israel’s kings were not so good. They remembered the good old days of King David and the glory of his son, Solomon. But, when you read their story you have to wonder why the people thought David and Solomon were such good role models. They made many mistakes and their poor leadership cost the country dearly.

But, I guess in comparison to the other kings of Israel David and his son didn’t do such a bad job. When you read the account of kings of Israel in the Old Testament it is a rather repetitive, boring read. Over and over the story is the same. So and so did what was evil in the sight of the Lord. His reign was a mess.

## THE PROMISE OF A NEW KING

Finally, things got so bad that God allowed his people to be defeated by a really powerful king, the Babylonian king by the name of Nebuchadnezzar. And God's people were taken into captivity.

But, here's the amazing thing. Even in captivity the people still had hope for a new king who would lead them home to freedom.

They remembered the good old days when David was king. And in the bad times God's people consoled themselves by saying, "One day God is going to restore the kingdom. One day we will once again have a great king like David. One day we will once again be in a position of power. One day we'll be number one. One day all the nations of the world will take notice of us because we will be strong and proud."

This hope was nurtured by the prophets. For example, Isaiah who had been such an outspoken critic of the monarchy before the Exile now spoke of a time when God would make all things new. Israel would get a king from God who would be a worthy and righteous leader. This king would be the Messiah, God's chosen one.

This king would be the one who was truly anointed one. (You may remember that kings were anointed; oil was poured over their heads to symbolize the fact that they were chosen by God.) In the case of the Messiah the promise would truly become a reality.

This king would be a different kind of king. This king would not be an unsavory politician who was out to pad his own pocket. This king would be the very Son of God. This king would bring about real change.

For many years the people held on to this hope for divine change. They said, "One day, when the Messiah comes, things will be different."

#### NOT THE KING WE EXPECTED

And then that day came. A baby was born. A baby was born in the backwoods of Israel, and strange prophets came and predicted great possibilities for this baby. They said that he was born a king, a king of the Jews. After all these years it seemed that the prophecy might come true.

But, was this good news for the people? No, it was very troubling news. And it was especially troubling for the current king, a man named Herod. Herod didn't need any pretenders to the throne messing up the arrangements he had with the Romans.

It's strange. We say that we want change. We say that we want a great leader who will come in and throw the rascals out.

But, when the time actually comes, we're not so sure that we want that kind of king, the kind of Messiah that God brings.

God's Messiah can't be controlled by the despots of the world, but God's Messiah can't be controlled by us either. Public opinion polls mean nothing to God's King. God's King answers to a higher power.

And that made Jesus quite disturbing to almost everyone. Jesus would not kowtow to the wishes of the religious leaders, the political leaders or even the public opinion polls. Jesus was a king, but his kingdom was not from this world.

His kingdom was not about having the strongest army or the most political muscle. His kingdom was about truth with a capital "T." His kingdom was about a salvation that came from above.

Yes, the people did voice their hopes about Jesus. When he entered Jerusalem on Sunday the people cut down palm branches and praised him like a king.

But, when Jesus enters Jerusalem his followers are disappointed. Jesus is not anointed king in the temple. Instead he just walks around and leaves without ceremony.

However, this king is anointed. But, he's anointed in a rather odd way.

He is not anointed with sweet smelling perfume by the great high priest in an impressive ceremony in the Temple. No, this king is anointed outside of Jerusalem by an ordinary woman at the home of a leper. And the woman is roundly criticized because she wasted such expensive perfume of an insignificant rabbi like Jesus. (Mark 14:3-9)

After a king is anointed there is always a celebration, an elaborate banquet.

But, this king has no state dinner or inaugural ball. Instead there is a farewell dinner in which he tells his closest disciples that he is going to die. He says that soon everyone will desert him and his closest disciple will deny him.

What kind of king is this man Jesus? Is he a king? He sure seems a lot different from the king that the people of Israel longed for and the prophet Isaiah predicted. This messianic banquet leaves a lot to be desired.

And it gets worse. When Jesus finally goes to the temple it is not to be praised and anointed. It is to be condemned by the religious leaders. Nobody hails him as king. Instead they all curse and condemn him.

**ARE YOU THE KING?**

And that brings us (finally) to our lesson for today. The “king” ascends to the royal palace, but he doesn’t take his throne there. Instead, he is interrogated by a Roman politician by the name of Pilate.

Pilate had already heard about Jesus, and he is also confused about who he is claiming to be. Pilate had heard that some proclaimed him king as he entered Jerusalem, but he also knows that some are calling for his crucifixion.

And so Pilate asks Jesus the question. “Is it true? Are you the king of the Jews?”

After a bit of verbal sparring, Jesus confirms the accusation. He says, “Yes, I am king.”

But, he quickly adds, “But, I’m not the kind of king you’ve come to expect. My kingdom is not about raising armies and taxes. My kingdom is not from this world. My kingdom is about telling the truth. If you’re on the side of truth, you will listen to me.”

What an odd concept, a king, a politician who tells the truth! Pilate finds the idea absolutely baffling. He responds to Jesus with dismissive rhetorical question, “What is truth?”

They say that truth is the first casualty of war. It is often the first casualty of politics as well. Politicians aren’t interested in telling the truth; they’re interested in winning the next election. Kings aren’t interested in telling the truth; they’re interested in holding on to power at all costs.

But, now there stands before this consummate politician named Pilate a man who refuses to play by the world’s rules.

Instead of saying might makes right, Jesus says, “Right makes right.” Real power is found in telling “the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth.”

## JUDGED BY THE TRUTH

What is this truth that defines the reign of king Jesus? It is the truth of God’s love as revealed in this man, Jesus. It is the truth of God’s forgiveness as revealed in this man, Jesus. It is the truth of God’s justice as revealed in this man, Jesus.

As Jesus put it earlier in John’s gospel, “I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” If you want to see true royalty, you need look no farther than the portrait of God’s grace that we see in this man.

The story is told about a man who stood in line to see the famous painting, the Mona Lisa. When he finally stood before the painting he said, “I don’t see anything so great about this.” And a guard replied, “The Mona Lisa isn’t on trial. You are.”

The same is true when it comes to King Jesus. He isn't the one on trial. We are.

Pilate thought that he was judging Jesus. But, the astute observer can see that the tables are turned. In fact Jesus is judging Pilate.

And the same is true of us. All of us are judged by the life of this unassuming man. The question is not, "What do we think about Jesus?" The question is "What does Jesus think about us?"

Are we listening to Jesus? Are we aligning our will with his will?

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, 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 said, "What I've written I have written." And indeed what he wrote has remained.

## SPEAKING TRUTH TO POWER

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.

And truth still matters. We don't get to follow a king (or a president or a prime minister) like all the other nations. We don't get to follow leader who bases his reign upon raw power or keeping the people happy.

Instead, we are called to follow a king whose reign is based upon God's truth.

And that means like our Master and the faithful who have gone before us we too are called to speak truth to power. We too are called to put on trial the principalities and powers who dare to claim a place that only God can claim.

Pilate didn't have the courage to choose truth long ago. Instead he let the crowd choose. He said, "Do you want Jesus, king of the Jews or Barabbas, a convicted criminal?" They choose Barabbas of course. It shouldn't come as a surprise. We always choose Barabbas.

Oh, we say that Jesus is Lord, that Jesus is our king when all is well on the way into Jerusalem. But, when the going gets rough we choose Barabbas every time.

We choose that criminal whose name is also "Expediency" or "Practicality" or "Self-Interest." Like Pilate and the others in this tragic story, we too are often driven by our fears and desires.

Could it be that the politicians we criticize so roundly are in reality just a reflection of our own weaknesses? It was true when Pilate interrogated Jesus long ago, and I suspect it is true of us today.

We too are tempted to crucify Jesus on the cross of self-interest and self-preservation. We too are tempted to trust Caesar for our salvation instead of trusting in the Lord. We too want a strong leader instead of a strong Savior.

We want a king; we're just not so sure that we want a king like Jesus.

#### A HARD TRUTH TO SEE

The truth of Jesus is like the truth of a mirror on a bad hair day. It's the truth, but we don't want to look. The truth of Jesus confronts us with an image of ourselves that is hard to see.

Barbara Brown Taylor told of going to a retreat when the leader asked them to think of someone who represented Christ in their lives. When it came time to share their answers one woman stood up and said, "I had to think hard about this one. I kept thinking, 'Who is it that told me the truth about myself so clearly that I wanted to kill him for it?'"

What is this disturbing truth embodied by the life of Jesus? What is it about Jesus that makes him king of kings and Lord of lords?

Jesus is a king, but he's still not the kind of king that we expect.

He is not in the business of squashing enemies. This king is in the business of forgiving enemies.

He is not in the business of condemning people. He is in the business of redeeming lost sheep.

He is not in the business of giving sanction to the rich and powerful. He is in the business of adopting the weak and lowly as his own children.

This is the true kingdom as revealed by God's Son, Jesus. In a world that runs on self-interest Jesus proclaims the power of grace and service.

Some of you may say that the principles of the kingdom don't sound very realistic. In fact they sound weak. The world would crucify someone who dared to live by those values.

And, of course, that's precisely what the world did. Over and over again they have done it. The sons and daughters of Jesus have been crucified in every generation. And yet when all those kings and kingdoms have passed away guess whose truth remains?

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 turn on a dime, and when that happens we will need and want a Lord and Savior who can take charge in our life.

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.”

We belong to him.

It's appropriate that we end the church year in the same way that we begin it. We sing the words of the prophet, “And he shall reign forever and ever.”

With the faithful of all the ages we proclaim, "Jesus is Lord. Jesus is King."

We don't say Jesus is Lord if we let him be Lord. We don't say Jesus will be Lord some time in the future. We say that Jesus is Lord here and now ... and forever.

It's important to know who sits on the throne. Knowing makes all the difference.

### A CHILD OF THE KING

Before the Civil War, some visitors from the North were watching a company slaves in New Orleans. Most were very discouraged as they shuffled along the dock. But, one slave stood in striking contrast to the others. He held his head high and strode among them with the dignified air of a person who was in charge.

Someone asked, "Who is this fellow? Why does he act so differently from the others?"

It seems that this young man had been taken into captivity as a child. But, before he was captured his people told him that he was the son of a king. He was royalty.

That fact gave him hope ... even in the worst of circumstances. Even after half a lifetime of hardship and abuse that had broken the spirit of others, he was still the son of a king. And that made all the difference.

That's why today's message is so important. In a world filled with violence and pessimism Jesus still comes to us with a word of hope. You don't have to live this way. I am the King of kings, and you are my children. Listen to me instead of the voices of despair.

That's the message for today. When the world seems to be coming apart, when it seems like the darkness will never end, remember that you are a child of the king. He's a different kind of King whose Truth cannot be defeated by the powers of evil. He's a different kind of King whose reign cannot be ended by death.

He gives us freedom in the midst of slavery. He gives us hope in the midst of despair.

Hear the good news.

Jesus is Lord. We know who sits on the throne, and that makes all the difference.

Amen.