

John 18:33-38a

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?”

THE MESSAGE OF THE ANGELS

When Jesus was born the politicians missed it. The powerful people who lived in the palace had no clue. Instead, the angels, the heavenly messengers from God came to some shepherds watching their flock in the middle of nowhere.

The heavens split open.

Songs filled the air.

And the angels said, “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors.”

And do you know where that phrase comes from? It’s almost a direct quote from Caesar Augustus, one of the world’s most effective dictators.

When the Emperor wanted to impose yet another restriction upon the occupied people of the Near East it would begin,

“Glory to the most august Caesar (otherwise known as God in the Highest), and peace on earth to those whom the god Augustus is well pleased.”

You get the idea. If you don’t do it Caesar’s way, there will be hell to pay. After all he’s like a god.

But, in Luke’s gospel we learn from the very beginning that this is not necessarily the case. When Jesus was born in Bethlehem there was a royal decree that really came from God.

“Jesus is king. And everyone else who claims to be king is just a pretender.”

AN UNLIKELY KING

Even though the decree was made in the wilderness the powers that be found out. The wise men's discovery and Herod's treachery are an important part of the story.

People who use and abuse power are amazing in the ability to sniff out opposition. There was opposition and controversy from the very beginning.

And after many years of struggle we come to today's lesson. Jesus' claims to royalty have got him trouble. In John's gospel the once heralded "King" is worn out and beaten down. He doesn't look like a king.

And Pilate, the protector and pawn of Caesar's kingdom looks at this sad looking rabbi and asks with a sneer, "So, are you King of the Jews?"

It looks like Pilate holds all the cards. He can with a wave of the hand put an end to the life of this man. He can crucify him.

He has done it before. After all Caesar did not want even the hint of opposition to his rule. And it was Pilate's job to protect the throne of Caesar at all

costs.

But, this is where there is a subtle shift in the story. Somehow the king's representative goes on the defensive. Jesus responds to the snide remark of Pilate with a snide challenge of his own. Jesus said, "Did you think this up on your own or did somebody else tell you to say this?"

WHO SITS ON THE THRONE?

Today is Christ the King Sunday, so named by the Roman Catholic Church in the last century. And it's a fitting way to end the church year.

Today we all are asked an important question. Who sits on the throne? Will you bow to the politics of Pilate or will you bow to the cross of Christ?

This week I read about a man who so disappointed with the outcome of the election that he committed suicide. Obviously not all his problems were political.

I wish I could have introduced him to a different king.

This king's power is not dependent upon winning

elections. His power comes from above. And instead of beating people down he lifts people up.

His name is Jesus. And he has taught us to pray, “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth, just like in heaven.”

NOT OF THIS WORLD

You see that’s where Jesus got into trouble, and that’s where we get into trouble as well. Once you start trying out the ideas of Jesus in the real world, the powers that be start to sniff out a rival. The politicians rev up the attack machine.

But, in the end the ravings of the politicians don’t make any difference. Jesus’ kingdom is not of this world.

Now this is where people often misunderstand this passage. When Jesus tells Pilate, “My kingdom is not of this world” some interpret that to mean that Jesus’ kingdom is purely “spiritual”, that it has no effect on politics or how we live today.

And if that’s true you can fight wars, condone slavery and even have people killed without having any fear of what God might say.

And sometimes you can even reinterpret Jesus to fit your idea of what the kingdom should be like. We can turn Jesus into our kind of King, a King that is quite unlike the King revealed in the Bible.

But, note this. King Jesus was a threat to Pilate and continues to be a threat to the powers that be today precisely because his kingdom comes from heaven to earth. Jesus' kingdom is not about pie in the sky by and by. It's about God interrupting our old world with God's new ways.

“Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth, just like in heaven.”

GOD'S WAYS ARE NOT OUR WAYS

Jesus' kingdom is about God coming to earth. Jesus' kingdom is about the Spirit of God changing things here and now.

But, let's be honest. We don't want to change. The Bible has it right, God's ways are not our ways, and we don't want to change our ways...not one little bit.

In John's gospel the first time the issue of kingship is raised is in chapter 6. After Jesus feeds the 5,000,

they try to seize him and force him to be king. I guess this was the first attempt to establish the so-called prosperity gospel.

But, it didn't work back then and it doesn't work today. Jesus refused to be defined by the desires of this world. Jesus slips away. His kingdom was about sacrificial love, not political expediency and winning a popularity poll.

There's more to God's kingdom than a full belly and fat bank accounts. The crowds didn't really want a king like Jesus. And later they would prove it. The people of God would reject Jesus as King. They would cry out, "We have no King but Caesar."

The crowds wanted nothing to do with sacrifice and challenge. They played it safe. Caesar was not the king they wanted, but accepting Caesar was better than being crucified. Better that Jesus is killed than a whole country is destroyed.

And isn't that the same logic the politicians use on us today. Yes, this is wrong, but we have to do this wrong thing for the greater good. We have no King but Caesar. And if anyone has the temerity to challenge that they can still get into a lot of trouble.

WHO IS JESUS?

Delores Williams grew up in the South and remembers Sunday mornings when the minister shouted out: “Who is Jesus?”

The choir responded in voices loud and strong: “King of kings and Lord Almighty!” Then, an elderly woman in a voice so fragile and soft you could hardly hear, would sing her own answer, “Poor little Mary’s boy.”

Back and forth they sang – KING OF KINGS...Poor little Mary’s boy.

Delores said, “It was the Black church doing theology.” Who is Jesus? “King of Kings” cannot be the answer without seeing “poor little Mary’s boy.”

That’s the message for today. Poor little Mary’s boy is King of Kings and Lord Almighty. Each week when we say the Apostle’s Creed we remember that Jesus was “born of the Virgin Mary and suffered under Pontius Pilate” in almost the same breath.

There’s something right about that. It illustrates just how different Jesus’ kingdom is when compared to the kingdoms of the world. Pilate makes people

suffer. Pilate tries to keep people in line with a cross.

But, poor little Mary's boy is really in charge. Pilate asks him, "Are you King?" A man who is backed up by the largest army ever to occupy the Near East asks the question.

And poor little Mary's boy says, "You said it. It must be true."

VIRGIN BIRTH

In just a few short weeks I will stand up in this pulpit and proclaim that Jesus was born in Bethlehem, the son of an unwed mother who had not had sexual relations with any man. Oh, I'll probably say it in Old English, but you'll still get the message.

Jesus' mother got pregnant without the help of any man. Jesus' Father was God.

I know. Modern folks have trouble with this part of the story. It's not how babies come into the world. It would take a miracle for something like this to happen. And modern people don't like to believe in miracles.

But, suppose the God who made heaven and earth

decided to intervene in a miraculous way? Is anything too hard for God?

And if it's true, if God did come into our world in Jesus, then that means the world changed forever.

Jesus reigns and all those little tyrants who threaten our world are destined to just play a bit part in a larger story. One day they will learn along with the rest of the world that poor little Mary's boy was indeed King of Kings and Lord of Lords, and he shall reign forever and ever.

If God was in Christ, the story is not over. Jesus sits on the throne and not Caesar. Jesus is the way the truth and the life. And no one comes to the Father but by Him.

WHAT IS TRUTH?

That claim was too much for Pilate to handle. Pilate didn't believe in truth. In fact come to think of it Pilate didn't believe in much of anything except expediency. And so Pilate, an ancient ruler, but a thoroughly modern man asks derisively, "What is truth?"

How odd. The Son of God, the Ancient of Days, the

Bright Morning Star, the epitome of Truth was standing right by Pilate, and he didn't know him.

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, before this consummate politician named Pilate stands 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."

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?

KING OF THE JEWS

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.

Pilate meant it to be the final insult, but it turned out to be true, not only for the Jews but also for the whole world.

JESUS IS LORD

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 that 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.

NOT THE KING WE EXPECTED

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?’”

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?

Poor little Mary's boy had more power than anyone imagined. The presence of God really had come to earth. And so the cross was not the final insult. It became the throne from which the reign of King Jesus began.

ANGELS DESCEND AGAIN

We say each week, the third day he rose from the dead, he ascended into heaven and one day he's coming back to judge the living and the dead. And today is the day that we specifically celebrate that hope, the hidden reign of King Jesus that will one day be seen plainly by all.

We sing, "Jesus shall reign where'er the sun does its successive journeys run; his kingdom spread from shore to shore, till moons shall wax and wane no more."

And then the final verse goes, "Let every creature rise and bring honors peculiar to our King; angels descend with songs again, and earth repeat the loud

amen!”

Do you see how it all ties together? “Angels descend with songs again” the song tells us. During the Christmas season when we sing about the choirs of angels, but it’s not just a cute little tale about what happened long ago.

It’s foreshadows our hope for eternal life. One day the angels will once again descend and the loud amen will resound throughout the world.

Christ is king, the Alpha and the Omega the beginning and the end. And one day all creation will experience the power of his glory and grace. One day the angels will descend again.

Let us look forward to and let us sing of that Great Day.

Amen.