

Not From This World

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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?"

POLITICS AND RELIGION

Jesus told Pilate, "My kingdom is not from this world."

What did Jesus mean when he said that?

Did he mean that he was not interested in what happens in this world? Did he mean that the only kingdom he cared about was in heaven?

Some have interpreted the passage this way.

They say that we Christians should think only about spiritual things.

We shouldn't soil our hands with the dirt of politics.

The separation of church and state is a sacred cow.

Let Pilate and Caesar and the crass politicians have their day. Let them worry about this world.

Followers of Jesus have no responsibility in that realm. We live on a higher plane. Right? We just need to stay in our own little world and sing "When we all get to heaven."

The way we commonly say it is this:
Don't talk about religion and politics.
It only causes conflict at the Thanksgiving dinner table.

But, there is a problem with that viewpoint.
It doesn't jibe with what the Bible teaches.

A DOWN TO EARTH GOD

God has been a down to earth God from the very beginning. The kingdom of God did not begin as a way for human beings to achieve a higher, more spiritual plane.

The kingdom of God began with the primordial waters stirred, dry land revealed, and human beings created from the dust of the ground.

And God gave made them into living beings.
God imbued human beings with the spirit of life.

God has always been a part of our world.
The kingdom of God began with creation.

The heavens and the earth, the universe formed the temple of the Lord.
And how was God's presence reflected in this holy Temple?

In human beings.
Human beings were made in the image of God.

So, the fact that God is still involved in the world shouldn't come as a surprise to us.
It's built into the process.
All of us here today reflect the creative power of God.
We are made in the image of God.

That means we are important.

Now don't misinterpret that statement.

The Bible doesn't say that the man and the woman were gods. The Bible says that the man and the woman were a reflection of God.

They were made in the image of God.

THE FALL AND GOD'S KINGDOM

But, from the very beginning the man and the woman try to be more than just reflections of the divine. They want to be like God. They want to claim divinity for themselves.

And that desire led to the Fall.

This is the root cause of why we struggle.

We want to establish kingdoms on our own terms.

We want to lord it over others.

We want to be in charge.

This desire to be like God instead of reflecting God's glory is subject to failure. The nations may rage, as the Psalmist put it, but their schemes will not defeat the plans of God.

Martin Luther King expressed that sentiment when he wrote that the long arc of history bends toward justice.

So, when I look at the raging nations today, I take heart. The reign of God is sure. False kings will not be allowed to stand.

Jesus told his disciples over and over and over again.

The ways of the world are not the ways of the kingdom.

The strivings of earthly kings will come to nothing.

The kingdom of God will last forever.

In that kingdom, the powerful and the proud will be laid low, and those on the bottom will be lifted up. Read the Magnificat, the song of Mary in Luke's gospel. After the angel tells her that she will bear God's son she sings.

And Mary's song makes it clear.

The kingdom of God is not coming to take people out of this world. The kingdom of God is coming to challenge the powers of this world.

The kingdom of God is coming to lift up those who have been trampled down.

A KINGDOM OF PEACE

All of the gospels tell the same story.

The birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus are not some spiritual parable.

They are a very real challenge to the powers that be from the very beginning.

Jesus is, in the words of Handel's Messiah, the King of kings and the Lord of lords.

And he shall reign forever and ever.

But the warmongers and the false kings will not let this go unchallenged.

In Matthew's gospel the Magi tell King Herod about the baby who is born King of the Jews, and the nutty old ruler gets even nuttier. The murderous king tries to kill his would be successor by killing all the babies in and around Bethlehem. But the angel of the Lord warns the holy family, and they flee to safety in Egypt.

In Luke's gospel Caesar's tax policy causes the Son of God to be born in a stable.

But, no matter. The heavens burst forth with praise and shepherds come to worship the new born king.

And what was the promise from heaven?

Peace on earth.

KING OF THE JEWS

John's gospel makes it even more plain.

Jesus is the Word made flesh, the Creator has come to live among His people.

He is not merely a reflection of the Divine.
He is Divine, the One through whom all things were made.

And what happens when the Divine enters the world?
The world rejects Him. The world seeks to destroy Him.

But, the world doesn't have a chance.

In John's gospel the traitors and the liars and the cowards and the political and religious authorities are merely pawns in God's long game. They play their role and step off the stage.

But, Jesus is the real King.
Jesus is the one calling the shots and everything happens as Jesus says it will happen.

We see this theme in today's reading from John.
Jesus is *supposed* to be on trial before Pilate, but listen to how the interrogation begins.

Pilate asks Jesus, "Are you the King of the Jews?"
And Jesus snaps back, "Did you think up that question on your own or did somebody else tell you to ask it?"

Here is a man on trial for his life, and he talks this way to the one who has the authority to either crucify him or let him go? Later in Pilate's interrogation he says this to Jesus: "Don't you know that I have the power to free you or let you go?"

And Jesus said in effect, "The power and authority you have is not really yours.
You're just playing a bit part in this Divine drama."

RULED BY FEAR

When Pilate heard that the real reason the religious leaders wanted to have Jesus killed, because he claimed to be the Son of God, how did Pilate react?

He was afraid.
Pilate represents Caesar and has the might the Roman army to back him up.

And yet in the presence of Jesus he is afraid.

Pilate doesn't know what to do with Jesus.

He flogs him and dresses him up as a mock king.
But, the crowd has become insistent.

They don't want Jesus as their king.
They want Jesus dead.

And they cry out, "We have no king but Caesar."

That was blasphemy of course.
Caesar not only claimed to be king but also a god as well.
And yet God's people said, "We have no king but Caesar."

When push comes to shove the people make their deal with Caesar.
The pax Romana might not be much of a peace but at least it's something.

As their high priest put it earlier, "Better one man die than a whole nation be destroyed."

But, we know that it never ends with the death of one man.
The kings and kingdoms of this world think that it can obtain peace
through violence, but it never works.

The crowd's sad statement did do one thing.
It backed Pilate into a political corner.
Despite his misgivings, out of fear he crucified Jesus.

THE SIGN

Pilate gave one last order to get back at his Jewish adversaries.
He had a sign placed above Jesus on the cross.

Every year someone asks me what the letters on the cross behind me
mean.
They are the first letters of the Latin words that spell out Jesus of Nazareth,
King of the Jews.

Pilate, in an effort to humiliate the religious leaders attached this inscription
to the cross.

The religious leaders wanted Pilate to change it; it was insulting to them.
But, Pilate would not change the sign.
He said, "I'm in charge. Deal with it."

But, he wasn't in charge.
This sign spoke the truth.

King Jesus reigned from the cross.
He sacrificed himself to take upon himself the sins of the world.
The sting of sin and death was defeated on that cross.

He purposely laid down his life so that he could take it up again with the resurrection.
He told his disciples as much before the crucifixion and resurrection.

The power of God's grace was concentrated on that cross.
And from the cross Jesus proclaimed, "It is finished."

It was not a cry of defeat.
It was a cry of victory.

The kings and kingdoms did their worst.
The powers of evil sought to destroy the king.

But, in the end even a guarded grave was not enough to hold him.
Jesus of Nazareth, King of Jews became Jesus of Nazareth, king of the world.

NOT OF THIS WORLD

Let's go back to Jesus and Pilate.
Jesus said that his kingdom was not from this world.

We've already said that it can't mean that God was not interested in what happens in this world. God has been involved with the world from the very beginning.
The prophets and Jesus made a direct connection between social justice and the kingdom of God.

So, what did Jesus mean?

How exactly is the kingdom of Jesus different from the kingdoms of this world?

Jesus does not establish his kingdom by force.

Jesus told Pilate that if he was interested in establishing the usual kind of kingdom he would have allowed his disciples to defend him against the religious leaders who came to take him prisoner.

But, Jesus did the opposite of that. He told Peter to put the sword away. And then Jesus reminded the disciples that his capture was all a part of the Divine plan. The cross was not a tragic end to a promising career. The cross was the crowning defeat of sin and evil.

They meant to humiliate and destroy Jesus on the cross.

But, in the end it was the political and religious authorities that were humiliated and defeated.

And what was the weapon used against them?

What was the force that rendered these rulers powerless?

It was truth, God's truth.

When Jesus told Pilate that his kingdom was not from here, Pilate seized on that and replied, "So, you are a king?"

Jesus didn't deny it.

In fact Jesus affirms the whole story.

He said, "I was born to be a king. And I will bring in my kingdom by speaking the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to me."

Pilate had no time for philosophers speaking about the truth.

Life for Pilate was about making the hard choices in difficult times.

Pilate, like so many politicians, believed in expedience.

He thought, "How naive to believe in something so quaint as truth."

And so the governor met Jesus' claim to truth with a sneer and a question dripping with cynicism, "Truth? What's that?"

WHAT IS TRUTH?

Let's answer Pilate's question. What is truth?

Truth is the Word of God embodied and proclaimed in the life of Jesus. Truth was right in front of Pilate, but he didn't recognize it.

Truth is a call to proclaim and practice justice, mercy and forgiveness. And when that Word is preached and lived out by His followers, those who would be king still become quite upset.

N.T. Wright put it this way in his book, *How God Became King*,

"... truth is what happens when humans use words to reflect God's wise ordering of the world and so shine light into dark corners, bringing judgment and mercy where it is badly needed. Empires can't cope with this. They make their own 'truth,' creating 'facts on the ground' in the depressingly normal way of violence and injustice."

We cannot bring in the kingdom of God by using the tactics of the devil. Violence and lies will not bring us salvation. Instead, we must shine God's light into the dark corners of our world.

We can sing with gusto that Jesus is king of kings and lord of lords at Christmas and Easter. But, we need to do more than sing. We must (as the prophet put it) do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with our God. (Micah 6:8)

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?

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.

Amen.