

“Christ the King”

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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?

That's what Pilate wanted to know.

Actually, Pilate really wanted to know whether Jesus was *claiming* to be king.

Pilate knew full well that this beaten man before him was not a king.

Pilate 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 truly a king.
He not only had the power of life and death over his subjects;
he also made those under his power worship him as Lord.

But, Pilate still had to take the claims against Jesus seriously.

After all, he was a long way from Rome.
The religious leaders in the Middle East were fanatical.

Why, they wouldn't even come into Pilate's home to make their request.
They were afraid that this would leave them ritually unclean
and unable to celebrate their feast of Passover.

Pilate shook his head in amazement.
There these religious leaders stood outside his house
shouting at him to take this poor excuse of a man and sentence him to
death.

What did he do wrong?
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.

Terrorists. Zealots they were called
And these "nut jobs" would do anything 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 probably be called "suicide bombers."

They were people who loved their country and their ideals more than life it-
self.

Yes, Pilate would have to interrogate this Jesus carefully.

This so called "king" looked harmless enough.
But, Pilate knew he should be careful.
This situation could get out of hand in a heartbeat.

After all, the Jewish leaders were not in the habit
of bringing their own people to Pilate for judgment.
There might be 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."

What did that mean?
Who knows?
These Jews were a real mystery to Pilate.

Pilate thought about taking action on this,
but when he heard that the so called "king"
was riding a donkey;

...well, he thought that 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 in the morning.

THE INTERROGATION

But, Pilate was sure that he could get to the bottom of this problem. After all, he had been trained in enhanced interrogation techniques.

This guy would be no match for him.

He began by asking Jesus an easy question, "So, 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.

Jesus 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 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,
"But...you are a king?"

And Jesus replied,
"You said it. It's my mission in life.
But, my kingdom won't be based on military might
or money or power.

My kingdom will be based upon Truth.
My kingdom will be based upon God's Truth,
and my followers will seek that Truth."

WHAT IS TRUTH?

Once again Pilate shook his head.
This foolish man thought he had "the truth".
Only children believed in such things.

Pilate knew better.
He was a man of the world.

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 make the rules,
and the one truth that Pilate had followed all of his life was this:

He wanted to please those who were in charge.
That’s how Pilate got his job.
And Pilate was determined to keep that job.

Pilate was never 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 winning.
Caesar never got tired of winning.

And Caesar expected his subordinates to win too.

If Pilate showed any weakness,
any weakness at all,
he would be judged to be a failure.

That was his truth.

And yet, there was something about Jesus that bothered Pilate.

This man did indeed carry himself like a King.

Despite the circumstances, despite his enhanced interrogation techniques,

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, Pilate suppressed those feelings.
He knew his role.

He wasn't seeking the truth.
He was seeking a solution to a potential problem.

And he wanted to solve this problem
as soon as possible.
This would be in his own best interests and the interests of the Empire.

And so Pilate, a thoroughly modern man
even though he lived centuries ago asked a question that dripped of sarcasm,

“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. Right?

The person who worries too much
about what is right and wrong
has never had to make any real decisions.

Sometimes a leader just has to act
and worry about the casualties afterward.

And if truth is the first casualty in this war,
then so be it.

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.

Pilate knew that he might have to do what was expedient instead of what was right
when it came to Jesus.

And so he asked, "What is truth?"

Sometimes a leader has to do terrible things to retain power.

Sometimes you even have to ignore the law.
Sometimes you even have to tell a lie so often that
some even begin to believe the lie is the truth.

There was no truth in Pilate's world.
And there are some today who believe the same thing.

Truth and justice and righteousness are a fiction.

The only reality is that there are winners and losers. And it's better to be
on the side of the winners.

INNOCENCE

But, today the words rang hollow,
even in Pilate's own ears.

There was a truth in this case.
And 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 just end the matter, that he could just
let this innocent man go
and forget about all the squabbles of this contentious people.

But, he probably suspected this would be too much to hope for.

He knew that the Jewish leaders.

They would insist on having their way.

They would insist on punishing this man, even though he was innocent.

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.
Pilate had Jesus flogged.

The soldiers mocked Jesus as they beat him,
calling him the King of the Jews.
They place a crown of thorns on his head.

The Jewish leaders, in order to get what they wanted even rejected their own faith.
When Pilate presented the tortured Jesus and said, "Behold your king!"

They replied,
"If you release this man, you are no friend of Caesar.
Everyone who claims to be king sets himself against the emperor.

This man is not our king.
We have no king but Caesar." (John 19:15)

Maybe Pilate had a point.

Truth? Who knows the truth?

Even religious leaders,
the so called guardians of truth and righteousness can bend the truth to suit
their aims.

Why worry about the truth?

And so, Pilate finally gave in and let them crucify an innocent man.

But, we know that Pilate took one last jab at the Jewish leaders.

He put a sign over the crucified Jesus.
“Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews.”

The sign was in Hebrew, Greek and Latin
so that the whole world 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.”

Pilate was mocking Jesus and the Jews.
And yet, what he wrote was profoundly true.

And 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 Creed when we say that Jesus,
the Son of God, the King of kings

“suffered under Pontius Pilate.”

In the New Testament we find one of the earliest creeds of the church.
It was very simple, just one line.
“Jesus is Lord.”

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 these early Christians to say
that Jesus is Lord, that Jesus is 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 this truth was even worth dying for.

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,
the living and the dead.

A DIFFERENT KIND OF KING

Jesus is King.
Jesus is Lord.

Some of us still have a problem saying that.

We don't want a king
We don't want someone
who will demand absolute allegiance.

That sounds so undemocratic, so un-American!
After all, we are satisfied with the life we have.

We don't want the truth;
we just want what we want...today.
Forget about tomorrow.

We still allow rulers to tell us
that the truth doesn't matter,
that we can achieve good goals
through immoral means.

We settle for half-truths and outright falsehoods.

We allow others to control us by tapping into our insecurities and our fears.

But, fake news is never good news.
Good news always begins with the truth.

Today the King of kings reminds us
that truth does indeed matter.
And truth begins with Jesus.

Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth and the life."
Jesus is the way to God. And the way to God always goes through the
Truth that sets us free.

We don't have to fear what tomorrow may bring.
Tomorrow is in His hands.

Indeed, as the song puts it,
It is “because he lives” that we can face tomorrow.

Christ is not a politician
who tells us what we want to hear.
Christ is a Savior who tells us what we need to hear.

Christ tells us the Truth.
Christ is King, and we are his people.

But, our King is different.
Our King plays by different rules,
rules that are often the opposite of what the world believes.

Our King doesn't establish His authority by subjecting us to his power.
Our King establishes his authority by serving us.

Our King does not rule by greed or manipulation.
Our King rules by self-sacrifice.

Our King does not raise an army
to dominate people by force.
Our King gives up everything for the sake of others.
He fights evil with the power of love.

Jesus served and healed
and lifted up those who were downtrodden.
Instead of doing what was easy Jesus did what was right.

Jesus put truth into practice.

They crucified Jesus for telling the truth.
And King Jesus willingly died
at the hands of people he loved.

Someone once wrote,
“All the kings and queens...in history
sent their people out to die for them.”

But, only one king decided to die for his people.

King Jesus.

That's why Jesus is a King with scars.
 He was wounded for our transgressions.
 He died for us.
 He was crucified for us.

But in the end the cross did not prevail.

The resurrection changed everything.
 And those terrible wounds became a source of salvation.

In fact, the Bible tells us that
 "by his wounds we are healed."

In the New Testament we learn that after the resurrection Christ he is recognized by his scars.

When the disciples doubt who he is,
 he shows them his hands, his feet and his side.

And then they know the truth.
 Christ is King.

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.

They are wounds inflicted by us when we accept lies as the truth.

But, Jesus takes those wounds,
 and transforms them
 into a sign of hope and salvation.

Those scars remind us that our King died for us.
 And our King has made us an undeserving part of the royal family.

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.
We wouldn’t run from the truth.

Who are we?
We are those for whom Christ gave his life.
We are children of the heavenly king.

This Sunday we celebrate Christ the King
We learn the truth about King Jesus.

But we also tells learn something about us.
We are a part of the royal family.

Long ago people used to say,
“Nobility has its obligations.”
In other words,
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.
Out of gratitude for God’s grace,
we are called to live in a different way.

If we truly believe that Jesus is King of kings,

If we truly believe that Jesus is
the way, the truth and the life,
then we must live according to that truth.

We cannot let the cynicism of this age infect us.
We cannot ask Pilate's cynical question.
"What is truth?" ...as if there is no truth.

We know the Truth.

The Truth is grace that is greater than all our sins.
The Truth is the power of service and sacrifice.

The Truth is the King of kings and Lord of lords.

And in contrast to worldly kings,
our King does not conquer by escalating the violence and weaponizing our
worst instincts.

Our King conquers with the power of forgiveness
and a hope that is eternal.

Jesus is King.
He sits on the throne,
the throne of grace.

That is The Truth,
the Truth that will set us free.

Amen.