



John 18:33–37

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Jewish leaders. But now my kingdom is from another place.’ 37 ‘You are a king, then!’ said Pilate. Jesus answered, ‘You say that I am a king. In fact, the reason I was born and came into the world is to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me.’

Reflection

It’s daybreak on Good Friday. Pilate, the anti-Semite, has been unceremoniously summoned outside of his palace by several members of the Sanhedrin who looked like they’d been up all night plotting no good. Thrust into his hands is Jesus of Nazareth, a rather unassuming man in his early thirties who looked like he’d already been on the receiving end of some rough

treatment by the Jews. The charge as it turns out is a serious one. For some reason likely caught up in their detestable Jewish ways they wanted this man crucified and so they'd pinned the most serious charge possible on him – the charge of rebelling against the Roman Empire. Pilate hated the Jews and begrudged the fact that he was not infrequently drawn into their petty politics. But he needed to keep the peace and the powers that be were already pressuring him for his heavy-handed treatment of the Jews in the past. Furthermore, the charge they'd come up with against this man was typical of their conniving ways. Such was their cunning, if Pilate got on the wrong side of this one, it could mean his downfall. Reading from today's passage, John 18:33–37,

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After displaying their usual disdain for Pilate's authority, the Jews had laid their charge out against Jesus. It was a serious charge. The most serious charge. While their differences with Jesus were theological, the charge they deemed most likely to stick was a political one. They've accused Jesus of claiming to be the rightful king of the Jews, in place of Caesar. Sensing the danger in their opening gambit Pilate withdraws to question Jesus inside his palace,

‘Are you the king of the Jews?’

In the Greek, the word ‘you’ is emphatic. Pilate's question would have sounded like this,

‘Are *you* the king of the Jews?’

Pilate is incredulous – especially given Jesus’ peasant dress, stained with blood and sweat from the Garden of Gethsemane and Jesus’ no doubt already bruised and swollen features. This man surely doesn’t look like a king. But Jesus’ nobility is evident in his response. To the Roman Governor of the land, the one who held his life in the balance, Jesus does not answer the question, instead he asks a question of his own,

‘Is that your own idea,’ Jesus asked,
‘or did others talk to you about me?’

Pilate is taken aback by the authority in Jesus’ voice. Far from begging for his life, Jesus interrogates Pilate. And Jesus’ ques-

tion cuts straight through Pilate's proud exterior. As with everyone, no matter their station in life, Jesus sets aside outward appearances and looks at the heart. All of a sudden it is Pilate who is on trial. 'What about you Pilate? Who do you say I am?'

In life, things are not always as they seem. And in God's economy, from his eternal perspective, there is often a mighty reversal of appearances – the meek rule, the least are the greatest, the poor are rich, the weak are strong, the doctors are sick, the unschooled are wise. Here the beaten, defenceless Christ on death row is holding court; weighing Pilate, the Roman Empire, the Sanhedrin and us. 'What about you? Who do you say I am?'

35 'Am I a Jew?' Pilate replied. 'Your

own people and chief priests handed you over to me. What is it you have done?’

Pilate can barely contain himself. The thought of him being embroiled in Jewish internal politics was enough to turn his stomach. But Jesus has his attention. Why isn't this man pleading for his life? Is he crazy? Why doesn't he respond to these obviously trumped up charges?

‘Your own people and chief priests handed you over to me. What is it you have done?’

‘My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jewish leaders. But now my kingdom is

from another place.’

Jesus finally answers, but he does so enigmatically. He proclaims himself not an earthly king but a spiritual king which leaves Pilate in a quandary. If Jesus had claimed to be an earthly king Pilate’s decision would have been easy – execution; because there is no king but Caesar. But a spiritual king? Politically, Jesus is guilty of nothing.

And so here we have a tale of two kings holding audience with each other. And what a contrast! Jesus the spiritual king and Pilate the material king. One would do anything to receive power, honour and glory. The other gave up his glory. One valued only the material; what he could touch, taste, and feel. The other lived and

taught that we are not to lay up for ourselves riches on this earth. One ruled by violence and force; the other was known as the Prince of Peace. One was arrayed in royal robes and lived in a palace; the other had ‘no beauty or majesty to attract us to him’ and had lived most of the last three years on the open road. But on this crucifixion day nothing is as it seems. It is Christ who is king, he will reign, not Pilate; and he is the one who is in control. In verse 37 Pilate exclaims,

37 ‘You are a king, then!’ said Pilate.

And Jesus does not deny it. Instead he answers,

‘You say that I am a king. In fact, the reason I was born and came into the

world is to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me.'

Jesus was born to establish a new kind of kingdom. It is for this reason, for this truth, that Jesus came into the world. And Jesus is calling a materialistic world to urgently seek first the kingdom of God.

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And again, Jesus asks Pilate where he stands. Because, 'everyone on the side of truth' listens to Jesus. 'What about you? Who do you say I am Pilate?' You might think that I am the one on trial here today

but ultimately every single person to ever walk this earth will be judged for the way they respond to what will unfold over the next three days. You, like them, are on trial. And everything hinges on your response Pilate. ‘What about you? Who do you say I am?’

Think

Time magazine would say that Jesus is the most influential person in history. Many more would say he’s a great moral teacher. Others would rank Jesus alongside Mohammad and Buddha and Krishna. But Jesus made some very exclusive claims, including this one:

Everyone on the side of truth listens to me.

Which means that there is no middle-ground in our response to Jesus. He is either who he said he is – the Son of God who died to take away the sins of the world and who will come again to judge the living and the dead – or an imposter, a liar or a lunatic who has fooled billions into following him as Lord. Consider where you stand in relation to Jesus this morning. And if you are truly his follower then are you preferencing the material over the spiritual? Things are not as they seem. Not only will the first be last and the meek inherit the earth but the most important battle that is raging in our world today is the spiritual battle for souls.

Pray

Pray this morning not for material things but for the advancement of the kingdom of God and the part that God would have you play in his work here on earth. And pray especially today for those you know who like Pilate have been deceived by the world, the devil and their own sinful flesh and have rejected the truth. Pray that they might encounter Jesus. Pray that his words might cut through their outward exterior and that his Holy Spirit might draw them to himself. In his name we pray. Amen.