***ARE YOU A KING?***

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Texts: Revelation 1:4-6 and John 18:28-38

Are you a king? It is the question at the heart of Pilate’s interview of Jesus. More specifically, Pilate’s question is, “Are you the King of the Jews?” You may recall it is that title that will be nailed to the cross above Jesus’ bleeding head. In the synoptic gospels – Matthew, Mark, and Luke – Jesus’ response to Pilate’s question is, “You say so,” and then he says nothing more. John alone has this extended dialogue between Pilate and Jesus as Pilate tries to flesh out who this man is who provokes such wrath on the part of Jewish leaders. The leaders brought this dilemma to Pilate contending that Jesus was a criminal; in their minds that should have been enough for Pilate to pass sentence on him. But Pilate recognizes that their issues with Jesus have little to do with violations of Roman law. For some reason the leaders are determined to put this man to death, but they do not want his blood on their hands – perhaps because they fear the crowds that followed Jesus. Blasphemy was not a crime under Roman law; while that was the crux of the leaders’ complaint, it was not a reason for Pilate to condemn Jesus to death. Why then is he executed? Perhaps for this reason: because he **IS** a king!

There is an edge to this confrontation as John tells it. Pilate asks Jesus if he is the King of the Jews, and a somewhat sharp-tongued, almost sassy, Jesus replies, “Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?” He is pointing to the lack of any real evidence against him and pointing out to Pilate that he is working on unreliable hearsay evidence that will haunt his legacy for generations. Jesus is asking whether Pilate is an impartial judge or just a puppet for those who want him out of the way. By confronting him with that reality, Jesus forces Pilate to own the case before him which then leads Pilate to his next question, “What have you done?” No longer is he relying solely on what the leaders have told him; now he is asking for Jesus’ side of the story, outside of the earshot of those who want him condemned.

It is too bad that Pilate did not ask that question of Jesus’ disciples or those in the crowd who had followed Jesus, for they could have told Pilate what Jesus had done: he healed the sick, he restored sight to the blind, he cured the lame, he cast out demons. He fed 5,000 people with a handful of loaves and fish. He encouraged the people to forgive and to love and to live with humility and kindness. He rebuked the religious leaders for their unrighteous ways and told the people to give to Caesar what was Caesar’s. Yes, he caused a ruckus in the temple when he overturned the tables and chased out the moneychangers, but aside from that incident, never did he provoke a riot or hint at insurrection or encourage unrest. That is what those in the crowd could have told Pilate he had done. But Pilate did not ask them. He asked only Jesus: *What have you done?*

Were you called as a witness, how might you answer that question? What has Jesus done in your life? Has he made any difference at all? The African-American spiritual asks, “Who’ll be a witness for my Lord?” Would you be such a witness or would you try not to get involved, remain silent, and let someone else testify? It is not a hypothetical question. You answer that question every day by what you say and what you fail to say, by what you do and what you fail to do as a disciple of Jesus Christ. A host of witnesses is watching and listening and judging your response. Will you be a witness for the Lord who you say is your Lord?

But Pilate didn’t ask you. He asked only Jesus: “What have you done?’ In response Jesus did not rattle off the list of his accomplishments as we might wish he had done. Instead, he answered the underlying question about kingship with which Pilate began “My kingdom is not from this world.” In so doing he implies that he is a king while suggesting that he poses no threat to Caesar. “So you are a king?” asks Pilate directly. “You say that I am a king,” replies Jesus. But in claiming that kingship, he describes something alien to Pilate’s ears:

*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.*”

What kind of king speaks of such a kingdom and such a calling, not to rule over people or lands, but to testify to the truth – whatever that is? It befuddles Pilate who can only ask, “What is truth?” – a question that will forever belong to him – before declaring to the Jewish leaders that he can find no case against Jesus.

It is a fascinating dialogue between these two – one a Roman governor trying to solve the problem that has been dumped in his lap; the other, the problem himself who is as enigmatic and resolute as ever. Jesus taught in parables which required some parsing to understand; his response to Pilate was no easier to grasp!

The difficulty is that the kingdom of which Jesus speaks is not a physical presence that can be seen but a reality in which to live. It is perhaps better understood as the reign of God. It is a reign grounded in justice and mercy, love and righteousness, peace and grace, and all those other churchy words that seem to have little place in the kingdoms of the world but are central to the kingdom of God! As theologian Jurgen Moltmann puts it:

*The kingdom of God doesn’t come to the higher echelons of human society and at the spearhead of progress, among the achievers and the powerful. It comes to the unimportant people at the bottom of this world’s social ladder.[[1]](#endnote-1)*

Pilate didn’t care much about those folks as long as they didn’t stir up trouble; in proclaiming that he could find no case against Jesus, he suggests that he doesn’t care much about Jesus and his self-described kingdom either. He was more interested in the Pax Romana, the reign of Caesar that was grounded in fear and the power of a mighty army and violent oppression of its opponents in order to preserve Caesar’s power and a Roman peace.

As we know, in the end Pilate will cave under pressure from the religious leaders and crowd; despite his best efforts to avoid giving them what they want – the crucifixion of Jesus – he is too weak and fearful of unrest and anxious about his own status to do the right thing. He chooses preserving his own position over what he knows to be the truth, what he has declared to be the truth – that Jesus is innocent of the charges and poses no threat to Rome. So he will send Jesus to the cross to be nailed there beneath a sign reading KING OF THE JEWS, ironically bearing witness to the truth of who Jesus really is – a king! The people who urged that he be crucified will make their choice: they choose the reign of Caesar over the reign of God.

Which reign do you choose? Which Truth do you embrace? These days truth seems to be a malleable term that can be manipulated to suit one’s desires. The Truth Jesus proclaims is not so squishy. It is Truth embodied in him. “I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life,” he says. It is the truth to which he bears witness in his life, death, and resurrection. It is the truth about the reign of God that is rooted, not in political or military power, but in love. “You cannot serve God and mammon,” he says. You cannot choose the reign of God and the reign of wealth in your life. You cannot choose the reign of God and the reign of Caesar or any other power or president or priority to rule your life. You must choose. Are you first and foremost a citizen in the kingdom of God, a servant under the reign of God embracing the truth God has revealed in Jesus Christ, or is your life governed by some other power or priority or truth? In his book *The Myth of a Christian Nation*, Gregory Boyd suggests:

*“As people whose citizenship is in heaven before it is in any nation and whose kingdom identity is rooted in Jesus rather than in a political agenda, we must never forget that the only way we individually and collectively represent the kingdom of God is through loving, Christlike, sacrificial acts of service to others. Anything and everything else, however good and noble, lies outside the kingdom of God.”[[2]](#endnote-2)*

“Are you a king, the king of the Jews?” asked Pilate. “You say I am a king,” says Jesus. What do you say? “Am I not just a king, but your king?” asks Jesus – not of Pilate, but of you? Do not think you can answer with your lips; you will answer with your life and the Truth you embrace day by day! Choose carefully, my friends! Choose well! For he will reign forever and ever – with you or without you. Alleluia! Amen

1. Jurgen Moltmann commenting on Mk 10:14; MT 19:14; Lk 18:16, *In the End – the Beginning*, Fortress Press: Minneapolis, 2004, p.13 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Gregory A Boyd, *The Myth of a Christian Nation*, Zondervan:2005, p,.93 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)