

Sermon: Who are you, Jesus?

John 18, 19

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Good Friday is our annual day of great mourning over Jesus; our Lord was killed in an awful manner. We also mourn because we realize that his death was intimately related to us here.

Jesus was crucified because the Jewish leadership wanted him out of the way and because the Roman governor of Jerusalem, Pontius Pilate, did not want trouble. But in the end, all of humankind must be held accountable. Humankind deemed him unfit for this world. He was too good and therefore he undermined our self-esteem.

Pilate did not find any fault in Jesus; there was no legal reason to condemn him to death. But as we see more often, for politicians truth and ethics are not always key criteria for behavior. Jesus was innocent, but his death was politically convenient.

At the same time, in a mysterious way, the will of God was done.

Pontius Pilate interrogated Jesus and asked four crucial questions that help us discover the facts.

- Are you the King of the Jews?
- What have you done?
- What is truth?
- Where are you from?

Are you the King of the Jews?

Pilate starts with: "Are you the king of the Jews?" The Jewish leaders, who delivered Jesus to Pilate, had accused Jesus of claiming to be a king. That would be a political crime, as the Roman occupiers only accepted the Herod family as their puppet-kings over Israel. Anyone else who claimed to be a king in Israel, would thereby stand up against Roman rule and would be sentenced to death.

"Are you the king of the Jews?" Jesus initially did not give a straight answer. He wants Pilate to think. He wants us to think.

Often, instead of giving a straight answer, it is much better to make people think for themselves, as that internalizes the issue that occupies your mind. What do we think of Jesus? If we say that he is a king, how does this impact us? Do we obey our king?

So Pilate thought and quickly realized that Jesus did not claim to be a freedom fighter or a politician opposing the Romans. He realized that the Jews had just made up a claim that might work with the Roman authorities.

In their own private examination the charge the Jews had formulated was one of blasphemy. But Pilate would not proceed on a charge like that. He would have said it was their own private religious quarrel and they could settle it as they liked without coming to him. But if that happened, the Jews could also not have him killed. Capital punishment was in the hands of the Romans only.

So in the end what the Jews produced was a charge of rebellion and political insurrection. They accused Jesus of claiming to be a king, although they knew this was a lie. Hatred does not hesitate to twist the truth;

The Jews denied every principle they had. The most astonishing thing they said that day was: "We have no king but Caesar." The prophet Samuel's word to the people was that God alone was their king (1 Samuel 12:12) and that was also the belief of the Jewish leaders in the time of Jesus.

So when the Jewish leader said to Pilate: "We have no king but Caesar", they threw away all off their own principles; this must have taken Pilate's breath away, and he must have looked at them in half-bewildered, half-cynical amusement. The Jews were prepared to abandon every principle they had in order to eliminate Jesus.

What have you done?

So Jesus, what have you done to anger them so much! That is Pilate's question. 'What have you done!'

Actually, Jesus then admits that He is a king, and that He has a kingdom, but it is a kingdom 'not of this world', and a kingdom where there is no fighting. No weapons. No rebellion against the Romans.

The kingdom of King Jesus is a kingdom "not from this world." This means, you cannot point to any place on the map, not even to the Holy Land, that Jesus claims to be His land, His Kingdom. His rule over people is of a different kind. It is not based on power and might, and being part of this Kingdom of Jesus Christ is a voluntary matter.

So Jesus puts this choice before us. Are we ruled by the habits of the kingdoms of this world? Or is it His Kingdom where we have our citizenship and whose rules are paramount for us.

This must have been confusing for Pilate. Jesus claims to be a king and to have a kingdom, but he underlines that it is completely different from this world's view of kings and kingdoms.

Do you not sometimes wonder why Jesus and His rule have nothing to do with power and weapons? Would that not be useful? Look at other religions, that freely use weapons and the threat of force to keep people inside the box of their religion.

One leader here in Egypt accused the churches a few years ago to stockpile weapons in their basements. This may be the method of some religions, but for us Christians, we know that this would betray our Lord.

His kingdom is not of this world. But the very presence of this challenge - a challenge to leave our present life that we are so used to behind us, may be a reason to crucify Jesus. Some killed him, but others simply ignore him.

Jesus then defines his rule, his kingdom, a bit further to Pilate:

"You say that I am a king. For this purpose I was born and for this purpose I have come into the world—to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice."

What is truth?

Jesus defines his rule and his Kingdom as being a testimony to the truth. Not weapons, not worldly might is his method, but truth.

"Ah", Pilate sighs... "what is truth...". Again, Jesus does not give an answer. For Pilate, truth is certainly not very important. He has Jesus crucified even though he admitted that he found no fault in Him. He admitted that the truth was that Jesus was innocent: Jesus was not planning to overthrow the Roman rule over Israel by the use of force.

So when Pilate said, 'what is truth' this was not a postmodern statement that there is no truth. Pilate knew there was truth, but it did not mean much to him. He preferred to do what was practical and to do anything necessary to maintain his rule over Israel, even at the expense of truth and morality.

His question 'what is truth' therefore meant, 'who can know the truth.' We all have our viewpoints, we all think we are right, but in the end, how do we know! In the end, power is what counts.

So Pilate directly contradicted the claim of Jesus. Jesus said He had come into our world to testify to the truth. He came from the world of God into our human existence to speak of the unknowable: of God.

This focus on truth, eternal truth, was the reason why Jesus was born; it was also the reason why He gave his Holy Spirit to his Church. Days before Jesus was questioned by Pilate, he spoke to his followers these words:

"I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth, for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak. (John 16:12-13)

So, the Holy Spirit is, just as much as our King Jesus, marked by speaking real truth about God. The Spirit of God takes what He knows of God – inside information – and makes it known to us.

Truth is not only a load of facts about God – it is relational knowledge of God as well.

And this truth of God himself is an incredibly powerful weapon, stronger than prison, stronger than the threat of death, stronger than any weapons, stronger than any worldly kings or presidents in their palaces. Yes, threatening to all powers. Because it makes us unafraid of their threats.

Jesus knew where he had come from, He knew God inside out, and this knowledge made Him prepared to die at the hands of evildoers. Because He also knew that God, who Himself is the ultimate truth, is stronger than any enemy, stronger than death even. Yes, stronger than Pontius Pilate.

Jesus made some amazing claims about himself in his interrogation by Pilate. He claims to have come from God; He claims to know the truth about God; He says that all people who belong to the truth – who are in a relationship with God – listen to him, to Jesus.

When Pilate was still not prepared to crucify Jesus, the Jewish leaders told him that He should die because He claimed that He is the Son of God. Son of God, a term used about the Roman Emperor. This made Pilate ask his fourth crucial question:

Where are you from?

“Where are you from?” If you claim to be the Son of God, you must be so powerful! Again, Jesus decided to not give a direct answer. He was silent. What do you think, Pilate?

What do we think, today? Where is Jesus from?

Pilate seems to get irritated. “Do you not realize Jesus, that your life is in my hands? Do you not think that this idea that you are the Son of God is ludicrous? You are the Emperor? You are divine?”

Pilate thinks that the life of Jesus is in his hands. That is often what people think when they have the weapons in their hands. The rulers in their palaces with the tanks to defend them, truly believe they are powerful.

What religion, what political system is it that depends on the use of force to keep people in line? Jesus comes with truth only. The church of Christ has its Gospel message only. But because Jesus Christ our Lord has come from God – because He is God from God, light from light – his truth is incredibly powerful.

So Jesus laughs at Pilate and his misguided ideas about his authority. “You would have no authority over me at all unless it had been given to you from above.” (John 19:11)

No one on earth, no government, no political movement, no religion, has any authority or power from itself. Our God reigns. Even in the death of Jesus Christ, He reigned. Because those Jewish leaders and Pontius Pilate, those people set against Jesus, were very perfectly fulfilling the will of God and thereby they broke their own spine.

Jesus knew He had to become the sacrificial lamb to take away the sins of the world. His crucifixion was not an accident, not just a bad alignment of the stars, not just a plan of some evil people. It was the will of God.

At the beginning, when Jesus was arrested, the soldiers fell to the ground when they saw Jesus. He could have walked away. He knew he had been born for the purpose to witness to the truth, and his moment had now come. And only because God wanted this to happen, Pontius Pilate could have Jesus crucified.

So concluding...

Jesus is King – He rules in the Spiritual realms. His kingdom is the kingdom of God where the weapons are not carnal, not the guns or the tear gas of the rulers of this world. His power is the weakness of the cross.

And even though we follow a crucified Lord, people come to Jesus Christ in large numbers. Because of the force of truth.

Read about his life, study his life. Ask all the critical questions that might be asked. Look at the churches and all their weaknesses and problems. But the truth is marching on.

And this same truth, the knowledge of God who is with us, enables us also to follow Him even in our own dark hours. Because we know that in the end, the truth of our King is always mightier than any darkness around us or in us.

AMEN