

Christ the King Sunday

2021

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 [Judeans]. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here." 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 witness to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice."

I don't think anyone, no matter their politics or religion, would disagree with me: We live in a time when it's very hard to get a grip on the truth. I have rarely in my life, at least since the Sixties, heard so many claims for the truth while so many other people disagreed. And it's not like the stakes are not high; a false move here or there could lead to economic disaster, dictatorships and even war. The stakes for truth claims regarding climate change seem to be more than we can mentally encompass. The natural world may not survive. All that said, I should tell you that in the days when this Gospel was written, the stakes for holding the truth were also terribly high. If the Roman Empire were making the truth, the whole world, including the Judean world, was going to be assimilated and disappear. If the Judeans held the truth, then only conflict and war could be the outcome. So, when Pilate confronts Jesus today and the two, Pilate and Jesus, talk truth, we should listen, and listen carefully.

We could use some background to untangle the truth in this morning's Gospel. From the vantage of Pilate, we can only see one truth, that is, that the Roman Empire must grow and prevail. To be fair to Pilate, his claim on truth depended entirely on Roman influence and power. Pilate had reluctantly accepted the assignment by Rome to govern the Judean provinces. Trust me, please, no Roman authority really wanted to be governor of Judea—the Judeans were known to be stiff-necked, hard-headed, and impossible to govern. As far as Rome was concerned, they had brought civilization to Judea. The Empire had brought highways where only dusty tracks once lay; they had brought aqueducts that still, until this day, carry water tens of miles to where no water was available. Rome had built bridges, fortresses, and docks for ships many of which, like the aqueducts, can still be seen. Most importantly, the Roman Empire brought the mail—with all those transportation and economic improvements, the people of Judea, along with the rest of the Empire, could be in regular, reliable contact. Is that important? In time, we

can ask St. Paul, whose letters employed that mail system and to change the world.

This morning, when these hard-nosed Judeans come to Pilate and tell him that this man so-called "King Jesus" was threatening the Empire, Pilate had to listen. This wouldn't have been the first or the last time Pilate and Rome confronted such a challenge. But as history will prove, this was the turning point for every generation.

When the Judeans bring Jesus before Pilate, they hope that Pilate will put Jesus to death. If Jesus claims to be king, then the Judeans don't want him—they don't need a king. And if the Judeans don't want a king, then the Empire certainly doesn't. So, this claim to kingdom and kingship becomes the central focus, the key truth that must be unpacked. If Jesus thinks he's a king, then neither the Judeans nor Pilate can accept that truth. The Judeans and the Empire believe they already have a kingdom—why would they think a backwater Judean could be king?

As you can hear this morning, this test case turns on one central truth claim—truthfully, do we need violence to govern? Or do we need peace? You see where the power of Pilate and the Empire comes from—if you stand in their way, they can imprison you or torture you or put you to death. And not just you but your family too. Pilate believes that by wielding the power of life and death, both for the Judean authorities and for Rome, he has absolute, final authority and power. And that, as far as Pilate believed, contains the entire truth—Rome is in charge and if any truth claim runs counter to Rome, then it's not the truth.

Many years ago, the confederates of Joseph Stalin told him that he was in trouble with the Pope of Rome. Stalin laughed, and asked "The pope? How many divisions does he have?" And that's the issue of power that stands between Jesus and Pilate—if Jesus is king, then where are his armies? Where does the strength for his power come from? How could this man Jesus hold the authority over the Empire? Jesus answers Pilate, that if he laid claim to the power of his followers, his followers could violently destroy the Empire. The truth is, if Jesus wanted to establish his authority on human terms, only violence could be the outcome. But Jesus has another power, a greater power, a cosmic, not an earthly power, and most of all, it's a surprising power—Jesus

has the power of kindness, forgiveness, and love. Jesus holds the final truth, that God rules with love.

How do we know this? Time and again, Jesus tells the world that his power doesn't depend on "here," that is, this world. When Jesus is attacked at Gethsemane, and Jesus tells Peter to put away his sword, the truth cannot be lost—the world cannot be held by threats of violence, nor by the powers of this world. The truth is the world can only be led by a loving a God.

I wish the people who devised the lectionary hadn't ended this passage so soon. Immediately after this dialog between Pilate and Jesus, Pilate will ask Jesus, "What is truth?" That question exposes everything about the truth of this world—if Pilate cannot see the truth, or even if he cynically rejects it, it finally doesn't matter. Knowing the truth is not about propositions, nor facts, nor violent claims. Especially not violent claims. Jesus has said it, and Pilate and Judea, and the Empire and the world will one day see it—Jesus spoke, I am the way and the truth and the life. Jesus isn't telling people that the truth is an absolute that can only be enforced by the threat of violence. Jesus instead is saying that the truth doesn't depend on this world. Truth is not a "thing," truth is a way of life that comes from God. In other words, if you want to be a king, to be a true leader, then your authority can't come from this world. If you want to be a king forever, your authority must come from a loving God. And that's the solemn, God's-own truth. Amen.

The Rev. Jeff Bullock