

Which Truth?

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Church of the Redeemer

Pilate entered the headquarters again, summoned Jesus, and asked him, "Are you the King of the Jews?" Jesus answered, "Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?" 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?" 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." 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." John 18:33-37

Today we celebrate the Feast of the Reign of Christ the King. Our Gospel lesson might seem a strange choice: Jesus coming before Pilate? What sort of image of kingship is this, I wonder? And what meaning could it have as we contemplate Christ as King. Let's explore it, shall we?

A weary Pilate enters his headquarters. He is not a happy man: they've roused him out of bed to handle another one of these local disputes. Ordinarily, he'd make them wait, but this is one of their blasted festival days – Passover, do they call it?– and if he doesn't deal with it immediately and firmly, things could get nasty. Now, what's this? The religious authorities can't come into him; they'll defile themselves before the festival? Oh, please.... Will I ever be rid of this accursed place!?

So Pilate, irritation mounting, goes out to them: "Judge him yourselves," he tells them. "We can't put a man to death," they persist. Then for the first time, Pilate looks at this man they want him to condemn to death, looks him in the face. He'd looked like an ordinary peasant standing there: rough clothing, dirty hair and beard, marks of the beating they must have given him already – but as their eyes meet a dis-ease steals into Pilate. Where is the fear in this man? Or at least, the anger, the hatred...? Something's wrong here; something's different about this one. A king, did they say? This man thinks he's a king...? But then, where's the crazed look? Who is this? What's happening here?

What's happening is that two realities are meeting one another. What we're seeing is the confrontation of two kinds of power, two sets of values based on two very different understandings of what's really Real and what's not.

Pilate is intrigued, but more than a little uneasy; he must know more. "Bring him inside," he tells the guard, knowing the Man's accusers will not follow. Once inside, Pilate waves his men away and turns to address the Man himself: "Are you a king?" He means the question to be ironic, or perhaps, accusatory. But his own uncertainty betrays him. This Man seems to see into his very soul: "Are you asking for yourself or have others told you this?" the Man says, almost gently, his gaze never wavering.

This is too much. Just whom does this man think he's talking to? Am I not the governor of

this accused backwater; am I not an agent of his imperial majesty, almighty Caesar, emperor of the Roman Empire? "You think I'm one of you people?" he replies, "Your life is in my hands...."

"If my kingdom were like yours, if my power were like yours, my followers would be fighting and this conversation wouldn't be happening. My power is not like yours; but all power—even yours – is given from above. My life is not in your hands...."

Two realities. Two kingdoms. Two kinds of truth.... One leads to life; the other, to death. But only one of these men sees this clearly, only one of them knows to Whom he belongs, only one of them sees the irony, the paradox, of this life and death drama. Pilate has staked his life on another sort of truth, but does he even know it? He knows power when he sees it, though. I wonder: is there something buried deep within Pilate that longs for this other kind of power?

Pilate has seen the blood drain from the faces of his most hardened soldiers when he uses this menacing tone, but this man's eyes have never left his own; he reads there a strength that more than matches his own. "You are a king then." He intends to intimidate, but, again, uncertainty betrays him. "King' is your word. My way of being in this world is entirely different from yours. I've come to show you a deeper Reality, the way to a deeper truth, to another way of living and being. Everyone who belongs to this truth listens to my voice...."

For a split second, Pilate hears the invitation; for just an instant, he sees the choice. He looks down; who is the judge here and who the judged? he tries to remind himself, but somewhere inside himself, he knows the answer already, and in spite of that – or perhaps, because of it – he declines the invitation....

He stares at the Man for a moment, and then turns away: "What is truth?" he scoffs and leaves the room.

That's the question, isn't it, "What is truth?" Every day we're confronted with that question, and with the choice, in big and small ways. A choice of "truths," as it were; a choice of powers: will it be the power of God's way or the power of Caesar's? Which - or Whom – will we serve; to which truth will we belong? But I wonder how often we notice. And I wonder what these choice points look like for us, living ordinary lives in a very different time. We're not powerful people, after all, are we? I mean, our decisions aren't matters of life and death... are they? I wonder....

When my youngest daughter was about 14, she did something that made me really mad; I no longer remember what it was. But full of righteous parental anger, I let her know, in no uncertain terms, exactly how I felt. We were about to get in the car, on our way to a potluck – at church, no doubt – when the voice of Truth whispered to me that I had a choice. I can still remember that as clearly as if it were yesterday: the covered dish in one hand, the other on the door into the garage, I knew I was being invited to let go of the anger; having said all I needed to say as a parent, I saw I could now back off and befriend this beloved child, or I could use Pilate's sort of power and continue to lord it over my child. So, I wonder: was one choice a way toward life and the other a way toward death ...?

I wish I could tell you I chose to let go of the anger....

But, here's the good news: the Spirit of Truth wasn't finished with me. Having made the wrong choice, I put the covered dish on top of the car as I continued my ill-tempered fussing, opened the garage door, and still fuming, got in and backed the car out of the garage ... as the covered dish slid from the roof of the car onto the driveway, shattering in a dozen pieces and spilling my potluck contribution all over the ground. Now, I got it. Laughing at my foolishness - what else could I do?— I apologized to my daughter and picked up the pieces of the shattered dish, saving one of them. I still have that pottery shard somewhere. And funny thing: I often seem to come across it at just those moments when I need to remember that I serve a deeper Truth, owe allegiance to a different kind of king, and that, yes, I have to keep choosing every day.

Now, friends, this may be a trivial example, but the point is we all have power and the way we use our power makes a difference, serving either the values of God's Kingdom or maintaining life-draining power of Caesar. We all answer to someone or something. Even if you're older and live alone, you have the power to choose a way of compassion and integrity: through the way you treat those who serve you, through intercessory prayer, through the use of your resources, through the time you simply spend in God's Presence.

And what about those of us who lead more active lives: will it be power with or power over? Will it be a power that makes room for another so that together we can create something new; or a "power over" that maintains itself at the expense of the other and keeps the New at bay? I wonder what this looks like at school where you may think, because you're a student, you have very little power. Yes, you may find "Pilate's" at school, but you may also discover within yourself a power to say and do, with compassion, what you know is right. How 'bout at work: I wonder where these two powers meet; I wonder what your choices are? And at home, with family, near and far: whom will you serve?

Look, I know this isn't easy. It wasn't for Jesus, either. That's why he spend so many nights alone in prayer; he had to ground himself each day in that Reality He served, so that when the choice points came, he would be ready. And we have to be ready, too; we, too, have to find ways to stay present to the Truth to which we belong. Advent begins next Sunday. I invite you to find a little time— even if it's only five minutes a day while you're commuting to work, or at the end of the day as you ready for bed— find a few minutes to open yourself to this Mystery we call God, pledging your allegiance to the King we call "Lord," and praying for both the wisdom to see the choices when they come, and the courage to choose the Way that leads to Life....