

John 18: 33 – 37

33 Then Pilate entered the headquarters again, summoned Jesus, and asked him, 'Are you the King of the Jews?' **34** Jesus answered, 'Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?' **35** 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?' **36** 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.' **37** 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.'¹

Reflection: John 18: 33 - 37

Helen Hollands 22nd November 2020

You may know the saying that power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely. This certainly applied to Pontius Pilate, who was well known for his barbaric cruelty and his exercise of military might to oppress others.

Pilate held the power to decide who would live or die, only he could order death by crucifixion and so the Jewish leaders who have already tried Jesus in their own court have sent Jesus on to him.

They stand away from everyone, and as John reports it, have this strange conversation all about kingship and power.

Imagine the scene. There is Pilate, the image of worldly power and status, no doubt dressed appropriately, his officers and servants not far away, we know that most things have worked out well for Pilate. No doubt he is fed up with having been sent another Jewish prisoner to deal with.

Then there is Jesus, the image in this moment of weakness, a prisoner, beaten, seemingly with very few supporters and apparently little status to anyone who might have witnessed this encounter.

Yet, the conversation that they share is all about kingship and kingdoms but they are almost entirely at cross purposes and Jesus, most certainly is aware of that. We also get the impression that Pilate knows they are not talking about the same thing.

¹ NRSVA Translation

Pilate's question about kingship is mocking. So where is your kingdom? Where is your army? Are you a king then? We can hear his unspoken meaning, where are all your supporters, your land and your glory?

Jesus responds, that is their word, not mine. If I am a King it is of a kingdom belonging to another world, an entirely different realm and this is a kingdom which belongs to the truth that Pilate cannot begin to understand. But Pilate is evidently discomforted by the words of Jesus who does not break down, or beg, but instead is self-composed and true to who he is. Pilate is not used to being faced with prisoners like this and we know that Jesus makes him think twice before sending him to be crucified.

Jesus is all self-giving grace which does not give in to worldly dominance, power, hierarchy or status. He does not cow-tow to wealth or might. Jesus, faced with Pilate who represents all of these things, reminds him that this is not the world he truly inhabits, it is not his *modus operandi*, or his way of being. His way of being stands outside all our human constructs and is one of truth, the truth of love, of justice, of mercy and goodness. This is the way of God.

Mary, the mother of Jesus, foresaw these things in her prophetic words at the time of his birth in the Magnificat. You may remember her words, 'he has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty...' ²This is the topsy turvy world of the kingdom of God and it is Jesus who says that many who are first shall be last, and the last first³. You may also remember those conversations Jesus has with James and John about who is the greatest, bringing before them a little child as central to his kingdom.

Today is Christ the King Sunday, the last Sunday before the season of Advent. It is a Sunday when we reflect on what the kingship of Jesus means, not only then, but now. What does it mean for us to follow this kind of king?

In recent months we have all had to reassess many things about who is important, what matters, we have learnt to value those who care, those who deliver shopping, our neighbours and all those who have reached out to make their communities better places to be.

Still in much of our world, money is still power, hierarchies' matter, the proud still look down on the poor. But the gospel of Jesus is for all people, each loved, accepted and welcomed by God. His was a way of servant hood and most of all truth, his version of power is slower, wiser, more gracious and more loving than what human structures will ever offer.

Pilate asks him the question, 'what is truth?' Each of us has to decide on our own answer to that question. As Christian disciples we get to decide which way of being will become the pattern for the way we choose to live.

² Luke 1: 51 – 52 NRSV translation

³ Matthew 19:30 NRSV translation

If you are listening to this on the 22nd November today is also known as Stir up Sunday. Lots of people make their Christmas puddings about now but the phrase actually comes from the collect for today from the Book of Common Prayer which includes these words,
Stir up, we beseech thee, O Lord, the wills of thy faithful people.

Advent is meant to stir our hearts and unsettle us a little.

In the words of the hymn, The Servant King,

*'Let us learn how to serve,
and in our lives, enthrone him.
Each other's needs to prefer,
for it is Christ we're serving.*

This is our God, the Servant King.⁴

May God stir up the will of each of his faithful people as we approach and enter this Advent season. Amen.

4

Graham Kendrick (b. 1950)

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