

“A Different Kind of King”

“Pilate asked him, ‘So you are a king?’”

Pontius Pilate probably hated his job.

The Roman governor of Judea was like many Roman officials of his era, ambitious to climb the career ladder to reach the desired goal of serving in the court of the emperor in Rome. Pilate knew that to achieve this goal, he would have to pay his dues by serving in one of the many outposts of the far-flung empire; but Pilate could not have imagined the challenges he would encounter when he was assigned to Judea. It was far from Rome in so many ways – not only geographically, but culturally. Pilate was forced to encounter a people who had a strange religious belief in one God, a God whose name was unpronounceable in their native language. For a Roman who worshipped a pantheon of gods, it was unthinkable to have a religion where only one god was venerated. These “monotheists” proved to be strange in other ways; their customs, rituals, and diet were baffling to the governor, and their religious officials were often contentious and demanding in their encounters with him. As much as he might have dreaded being in their presence, Pilate knew that it was important for him to keep the peace with these contentious people, because one of the keys to advancement in the Roman system was to keep the *pax Romani*, the peace which the Empire often enforced through such harsh methods as crucifixion. If Pontius Pilate wanted to achieve his goal of serving in the royal court in Rome, he needed to deal with people and situations which he probably hated, and looked forward to the day when he could leave Judea once and for all.

One day, Pilate arrives in his office where he is informed that the religious officials have brought a man before him on the charge that he has declared himself to be the “King of the Jews.” While Pilate could not have cared less about the religious traditions and laws of these people, someone who was claiming to be a king might be a threat to the reign of the emperor, and therefore might have to be dealt with through harsh methods. As he walks to the place in the praetorium where the man was being held, Pilate was imagining the sight that he would encounter: probably another “wannabe” king dressed in a poor imitation of the emperor, someone who might fool the people but would be no match for the power and grandeur of the Caesars. He might look powerful and impressive to some, but to Pilate he was

simply another threat to Roman authority who would need to be dispatched quickly and quietly.

But when Pilate encounters this man who has been brought before him as an ersatz king, he is shocked by what he sees: instead of someone presenting himself as a powerful warrior prepared for battle against the Romans, what he sees is a beaten, broken man dressed in rags with a crown of thorns embedded in his skull, blood streaming down his face. There is nothing about this person that appears to be royal, much less someone prepared to lead a rebellion. It is no wonder that Pilate's first question to the man before him is one of bewilderment: "*Are you the king of the Jews?*" (John 18:33).

The question about Jesus' kingship with which Pilate begins his interrogation is found in all the Gospel accounts of the trial (Matthew 27:11, Mark 15:2, Luke 23:3). Jesus has previously been hailed in John as "king" by Jewish persons who saw him as the promised Messiah, the one whom God would raise up to overthrow their Gentile overlords and rule over a restored monarch in Israel, the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy of the day when "*the root of Jesse shall stand as a signal to the peoples; the nations shall inquire of him, and his dwelling shall be glorious*" (Isaiah 11:10). For the Romans, anyone claiming to be a king would make him a rival of the emperor and thus an affront or threat to Roman imperial rule ("*They were all acting contrary to the decrees of the emperor, saying that there is another king named Jesus.*" – Acts 17:7). Political sedition fell under the jurisdiction of the Roman courts, and Pilate's questioning about Jesus' political claims ("king" occurs nine times in the trial before Pilate in the Fourth Gospel) points to the Roman awareness of the political threat that Jewish messianic hopes posed to their governance. Even someone whose appearance was shocking and contrary to Pilate's preconceptions of the appearance of a king might still be a threat to Roman authority and Pilate's hopes of career advancement and would need to be dealt with accordingly.

But when Pilate asks this man if he is indeed the "king of the Jews," he does not receive the "yes or no" answer he is expecting. Instead, as is typical of Jesus throughout the Fourth Gospel, Jesus responds to Pilate's question with one of his own: "*Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?*" (18:34). Jesus' words move to the heart of John's depiction of this trial, for they question whether Pilate can act on his own or only in response to others. Jesus' question also signals the direction of the rest of the trial, because despite his outward appearance he turns the tables on Pilate and positions himself as the interrogator. Jesus' counterquestion implicitly raises the issue if what sort of king Pilate has in mind.

Pilate is taken aback by this response from the man he has assumed is as weak and powerless as his outward appearance indicates; his question to Jesus is one that anticipates a negative response: “*I am not a Jew, am I? Your own nation and the chief priests have handed you over to me. What have you done?*” (18:35). Pilate expresses his disdain for the Jewish people, which will govern his dealings with the Jewish authorities for the remainder of the trial. Pilate’s reference to “your own nation” (*ethnos*) reinforces the role of political expediency and self-interest in the “handing over” of Jesus.

- “Pilate distances himself from his Jewish subjects. Since no charges were specified, Pilate asks Jesus what he has done that led the Jerusalem authorities to call for his death.” – Curtis Martin and William Wright.

Jesus’ response to Pilate’s second round of questions defines his kingship by both what it is and what it is not. Jesus describes the nature and function of his kingship, not its location: “*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*” (18:36). The Fourth Gospel has repeatedly emphasized that Jesus’ origins are from God; his authority is not based on any human understandings or sanctions (“*You are from below, I am from above; you are of this world, but I am not of this world.*” – 8:33). Jesus provides an illustration of the contrast between belonging to God and belonging to “this world” in his description of what his followers would do if he belonged to the latter. The word that is translated “followers” (*hyperetai*) is the same word used elsewhere to describe the temple police (“*So Judas brought a detachment of soldiers together with police from the chief priests and the Pharisees, and they came there with lanterns and torches and weapons.*” – 18:3). Jesus is ironically contrasting his “officers” with the temple officers who arrested him and brought him before Pilate. Jesus’ kingship, unlike that of the king Pilate serves, is not secured by force.

- “Pilate thinks of kingship in terms of earthly political realities. Jesus responds to Pilate’s question with a three-part answer about his kingdom in which he reveals the true nature of his kingdom and invites Pilate to think about him in terms appropriate to his heavenly origin.” – Martin and Wright.

Pilate responds by returning to his original question: “*So you are a king?*” (18:37); this suggests that he understands that his earlier political assumptions have been confirmed: Jesus does claim to be a king. Once again, Jesus takes command of the situation, responding to Pilate that “*you say that I am a king.*” Jesus neither directly affirms nor denies Pilate’s words, but once again returns responsibility for the

decision to Pilate. Jesus defines the nature of his kingship in terms of his heavenly identity and mission as the Incarnate Word: *“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.”* The Fourth Gospel has previously stressed the connection between Jesus’ origin with God and his witness to the truth (*“I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”* – 14:6). “For this I was born” and “for this I came into the world” are synonyms that place Jesus’ kingship in the familiar Johannine idiom of Jesus’ mission in the world and affirms that the origins of Jesus’ kingship are not “of this world”:

- “Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.” – 3:17.
- “Everything that the Father gives me will come to me, and anyone who comes to me I will never drive away; for I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will, but the will of him who sent me.” – 6:37-38.
- “I came into this world for judgment so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind.”

Jesus’ claim that “everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice” recalls the claims of the shepherd discourse in which Jesus identifies himself as the “Good Shepherd” who *“calls his own sheep by name and leads them out ... the sheep follow him because they know his voice”* (10:3-4). To “belong to the truth” is thus to be one of Jesus’ sheep, to recognize in Jesus the truth of God, to see the fullness of God revealed in Jesus and to hear the words of God in Jesus’ voice:

- “... for I have not spoken on my own, but the Father who sent me has himself given me a commandment about what to say and what to speak. And I know that his commandment is eternal life. What I speak, therefore, I speak just as the Father has told me.” – 12:49-50.

Jesus’ presence in the world and the word of truth that he speaks are the moment of judgment and decision for the world. Although Jesus is the one who appears to be on trial before Pilate, he is the one who testifies to the truth, and the world is judged by its response to his witness.

While Pilate is clearly taken aback both by Jesus’ appearance and his responses to the governor’s questions, in the end he treats Jesus the same as he would with any perceived threat to Roman authority: *“he handed him over to them to be crucified.”* (19:16). But Pilate unwittingly identifies Jesus as the different kind of king he is when he had an inscription written and put on the cross that read *“Jesus of Nazareth,*

the King of the Jews.” (19:19). When the religious authorities objected and ask Pilate to replace this sign with one that read “*this man said, ‘I am the King of the Jews’*” Pilate remained firm: “*What I have written I have written.*” (19:21-22). Pilate’s identification of the man on the cross as the “king” witnesses to the true nature of the kingship of Jesus, the one who saves his people from all that would oppress and enslave them, but accomplishes this liberation not through military might but by his death which destroys the power of death:

- “He has purchased and freed me from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil, not with gold or silver but with his holy, precious blood and his innocent suffering and death. He has done all this in order that I may belong to him, live under him in his kingdom, and serve him in eternal righteousness, innocence, and blessedness, just as he is risen from the dead and lives and rules eternally. This is most certainly true.” – Martin Luther, *Small Catechism*.

On this last Sunday of the church year, we celebrate Christ the King Sunday, acknowledging that Jesus Christ is “*king of kings and Lord of Lords.*” We join with Christians around the world in proclaiming that Jesus Christ is the one who accomplishes God’s will for humanity as our Messiah through his death and resurrection, through which we have the assurance that “*if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his*” (Romans 6:5). As we prepare to celebrate the birth of Jesus at Christmas, we will hear the call for all who believe in him as Saviour and Lord to “*come and worship Christ, the newborn king.*” But our belief in Jesus as Christ the king is one that is not shared by all people, either in the past or the present. For many, Jesus did not meet their expectations of a warrior/king who would defeat the Roman Empire and restore Israel to the power and grandeur it once enjoyed. For people like Pontius Pilate, Jesus was not the powerful figure who would strike fear into his enemies and awe among his subjects. To this day, the Jesus who appears before Pilate and who dies on the Cross is not the king who will make their nation great again; many even attempt to go against the Gospel teaching of Jesus as “a different kind of king” to recreate him in an image more acceptable to modern audiences. Paul acknowledges that the Christian confession of Christ crucified is foolishness to some and a stumbling block to others, but for those who see beyond his outward appearance to the true nature of his kingship he is “*Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength.*” (1 Corinthians 1:24-25).

- “John crafts his narrative so that Jesus’ kingship becomes most visible in his crucifixion. It is as if his crucifixion is his enthronement as king, the moment

at which the declaration of his kingship is made public ... Those who can hear or see the message of his crucifixion see a true king.” – Susan Hylen.

Pontius Pilate disappears from the biblical narrative following the crucifixion of Jesus. We do not know whether he achieved his goal of serving in the court of the Roman emperor, but he did achieve a fame that he probably would not have anticipated or desired in his place in the creeds of the Christian church in which our Lord Jesus Christ is remembered as the one who “*suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried*” (Apostles Creed). Pilate may be believed at the time that by condemning Jesus to death he was putting an end to any claim to kingship that this man may have held; but he becomes the unwitting instrument through which God’s Will is accomplished through the king whose death on the cross destroys the power of death, and whose resurrection offers all who believe in him the promise of everlasting life in the presence of our Lord who will one day “*come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end*” (Nicene Creed). As we celebrate Christ the King as those who see in the Cross the one whose reign is eternal, we also acknowledge that as followers of this different kind of king that we are to live and serve in accordance with the sovereign Lord who came not to be served but to serve:

- “All those who know the way of this king and his kingdom willingly bear the cross. For they not only know that Christ, the eternal king, fared in the same way and is thus himself willing and ready to suffer (because a servant should not fare better than his Lord), but they also take comfort in the knowledge that life in the eternal kingdom is full of joy and splendor, even though suffering must be endured on this earth. That makes Christians joyful even in the midst of sorrow and trials.” – Martin Luther, 1545.

So, you are a king?

Yes, Jesus is a king, a different kind of king who comes not to fulfill human expectations but to accomplish God’s Will. He comes not to reign over people through fear and terror, but to liberate them from all that would enslave them so that they might be free to love and serve in his name. His throne is not in a palace but on a wooden cross, the means through which the one who was “*crucified under Pontius Pilate*” accomplishes the victory so that all who believe in Jesus Christ as King of Kings may join in proclaiming “*thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ*” (1 Corinthians 15:57).

Amen.