

Thought for the day: *I do not understand my own behavior. I fail to carry out the very things I want to do, and find myself doing the very things I hate. . . . For although the will to do what is good is in me, the performance is not.* —Romans 7:15, 18

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### **Kingdoms in Conflict**

Christ the King Sunday  
John 18: 33-37

Have you ever wondered why this Sunday is called "Christ the King"? This last day of the church year began to be called "Christ the King" in 1925 when Pope Pius XI felt that the followers of Christ were being lured away by the increasing secularism of the world. They were choosing to live in the "kingdom" of this world rather than in the reign of God. Therefore, as we prepare to begin a new church year, we would do well to pause and reflect upon who Jesus the Christ is in OUR lives. If we are to live in God's reign we, like Pilate, need to know for us who this man Jesus is. "Are you the king of the Jews?" Pilate asked. "Is that your idea," Jesus said to him, "or did others tell you about me?"

Jesus was essentially crucified by authorities who listened to gossip and rumor. An urban legend had developed around his ministry that he was going to lead a revolt against Rome. In his conversation with Pilate, Jesus finally does imply that he is a king. "My kingdom," he explains, "is not of this world." Not of this world. That's what it takes. That's what it takes to find a King who identifies with his people. A King of heaven, a King of kings from someplace other than this world. Pilate and Jesus. Kingdoms in conflict. There are great lessons found in the tension between these two.

First let's take a look at the kingdoms of this world. Pilate represents the powers of authority. But who was this man? And why has the church remembered him throughout the ages? Even our creed, which does not mention any of the disciples, mentions him: "I believe in Jesus Christ...born of the virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate." We know that he was about the same age as Jesus and probably had mixed feelings about his appointment as Governor of Judea. He knew that it was one of the most difficult places to govern because of the religious sensitivities of the Jews, and yet he also must have thought that if he did a good job, avoided making errors, he could be assured of a good future in the foreign service of Rome.

But from the beginning almost everything went wrong for Pilate. At first Pilate tries the strong-arm approach with these fanatical Jews who hate the Roman government with a passion. In an attempt to force Rome upon the people he ordered his soldiers to carry images of Caesar into the Jewish Temple (Recall the 10 Commandments? No graven images.). Caiaphas, the high priest, immediately retaliated by ordering 2000 praying Jews to surround Pilate's palace for 6 days and nights. Pilate threatened to massacre

them, and in defiance these protestors knelt before him, stuck their necks out and dared him to do it. They had called his bluff. Enraged and humiliated, he ordered the images which he had erected in the Temple to be taken down.

Next Pilate tried the benevolent approach. Jerusalem needed a fresh water supply so Pilate agreed to build an aqueduct. But he made the mistake of financing this capital improvement project with funds from the Temple treasury. There was a riot, soldiers were called in to put it down, there were some deaths, and Pilate ended up with a scathing rebuke from Rome.

Pilate had lost control. Caiaphas, the Jewish high priest, and the council, had Pilate over a barrel. He didn't rule them; they ruled him. And so by the time the Jesus incident arose, what we see is a frightened man, insecure, knowing well that he could not afford to make one more mistake. Pilate has become the most cautious of politicians.

Listen again to the conversation:

Pilate: Are you the king of the Jews?

Jesus: Is that your idea or did someone tell you that?

Pilate: Am I a Jew? I don't know your customs. What is it you have done?

Jesus: My Kingdom is not of this world.

Pilate: You are a king, then!

Jesus: Yes, I am, born a king to testify to the truth.

Pilate: What is truth?

Pilate is trying to get Jesus to implicate himself but Jesus won't do it. He is king but not king of the Jews. Jesus' subtle distinction puts Pilate in a difficult position. He must find fault with Jesus based on Roman law. He cannot. The Jews have found fault with Jesus on religious grounds. What's Pilate to do?

All the might and power of Rome at his fingertips but he has become a timid man. Why? Because he must satisfy his constituents. He is not pursuing Truth, he is reaching for compromise. Where's the middle ground between Roman law, the Jewish high council, his own position as procurator, and Jesus' innocence or guilt? I'm not sure any of us would fare better. This is politics at its core. It is the way governments and kingdoms of this world function.

But there is a second kingdom, Jesus tells Pilate that his kingdom is not of this world. Here is another kingdom, an alternate kingdom, the kingdom of heaven which now before Pilate is being presented.

This is the last week of the church year and on this last Sunday we celebrate Christ as the King. It began in the 1800's, when the world's great empires--British, American, Spanish, French, German, Russian, and Japanese--were all at war or about to go to war somewhere.

The Pope seeing the world torn by war wrote a letter in which he dedicated the world to Christ the King. He reminded these empires that God is present with all peoples, that he alone is king. The Pope's idea was eventually adapted to what we celebrate this day: Christ The King Sunday. This celebration at the end of the year is a reminder that Christ will return at the end of time as ruler over all creation. It's the thought echoed in the last book of the Bible: Revelation. Paul's very last words about Jesus touched upon it (2 Tim. 4:1). It is the last concept touched upon in the life of our Lord as he stands before Pilate. "You are right in saying I am a king," Jesus says to Pilate. "For this very reason I was born." It is the only place in scripture where Jesus touches upon his birth and he does so to emphasize his Kingship. He is king at birth and king in his death but these things are lost on Pilate.

In the published diaries of Joseph Goebbels, the infamous Nazi Propagandist, there are two or three references to Mahatma Gandhi. Goebbels believed that Gandhi was a fool and a fanatic. If Gandhi had the sense to organize militarily, Goebbels thought, he might hope to win the freedom of India. He was certain that Gandhi couldn't succeed following a path of non-resistance and peaceful revolution. Yet as history played itself out, India peacefully won her independence while the Nazi military machine was destroyed. What Goebbels regarded as weakness actually turned out to be strength. What he thought of as strength turned out to be weakness.

We often name the name of Christ, but do we comprehend what we are saying? A recent Gallup Poll conducted in the United States revealed that more than 86% of Americans considered themselves Christian, but less than half knew who preached the Sermon on The Mount. The same Poll showed that sixty percent of the country was in Church last Easter, but one out of four did not know what Easter celebrates. So when we name Jesus as King, when we call him Lord, do we know what we are doing? Do we accept it and believe it? And if we accept it and believe it, do we understand it?

I wonder if many of us utter quietly the words of Pilate when we are confronted by Christ, "What is truth?"

These two kingdoms, the kingdom of Pilate and the Kingdom of Jesus, are not compatible. The kingdom of God and the kingdom of man do not see eye to eye. They are in conflict. Let's look at the truth we learn from the conflict of the two.

We learn that the meek shall inherit the earth. It is said that when George III of England lost the colonies in the Revolutionary War he felt so terrible that he could not say the word "independence" without tripping over it. The King was sure that George Washington would soon have himself crowned "Emperor of the New World." That's what had always been done. But when he was told, on the contrary, that Washington planned to surrender his military commission and return to farming at Mt. Vernon, George III said, "Well, if he does that, he will be the greatest man in the world."

There is power in giving up power, in emptying oneself. Jesus knew it, Pilate didn't. Perhaps this is the very answer to Pilate's question, "What is truth?"

Truth? Truth is when brother stands up for brother. Truth is found in a mother's love. Truth is choosing Kingdom values over earthly values. Truth is found in service over self. Truth is found in protecting the innocent, not in satisfying constituents. If Pilate had done that he would have been a great man in the world. But he didn't and unwittingly he played a part in killing the greatest man the world has ever known. Amen.