

Thought for the Week 22nd November 2020

John 18:33-40

³³ Pilate then went back inside the palace, summoned Jesus and asked him, “Are you the king of the Jews?”

³⁴ “Is that your own idea,” Jesus asked, “or did others talk to you about me?”

³⁵ “Am I a Jew?” Pilate replied. “Your own people and chief priests handed you over to me. What is it you have done?”

³⁶ Jesus said, “My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jewish leaders. But now my kingdom is from another place.”

³⁷ “You are a king, then!” said Pilate.

Jesus answered, “You say that I am a king. In fact, the reason I was born and came into the world is to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me.”

³⁸ “What is truth?” retorted Pilate. With this he went out again to the Jews gathered there and said, “I find no basis for a charge against him. ³⁹ But it is your custom for me to release to you one prisoner at the time of the Passover. Do you want me to release ‘the king of the Jews’?”

⁴⁰ They shouted back, “No, not him! Give us Barabbas!” Now Barabbas had taken part in an uprising.

Officially, this the last Sunday of the Christian year – the new one beginning with the season of preparation for the coming of the Saviour of the World, known as Advent. Today is referred to as the feast of ‘Christ the King’.

Now we Presbyterians don’t really keep to the ecclesiastical calendar, yet I’m sure we are all familiar with the way in which different countries and cultures celebrate the New Year at a different times. Culturally we celebrate New Year on January 1st, whereas Chinese New Year is celebrated at a completely different time, and the church New Year is celebrated next Sunday, which means that

this Sunday is the last Sunday of the old ecclesiastical year - a day when, traditionally, we remember the kingship of Christ.

Now, I say 'traditionally', but it's actually only a tradition that goes back some 95 years, so a little historical background is needed. 1925 was a very interesting time. The world had only just emerged from the "Great War" supposedly the war to end all wars, yet the signs were everywhere that it was hurtling towards another. Most countries were in the grip of a worldwide economic depression, and desperately looking for answers. And, of course, there were some outspoken leaders who believed that they had the answers. One was the Italian leader, Mussolini, who had just celebrated his third year in office. Lenin has just died and Stalin was coming to power in the new Soviet Republic. Another was a young rabble-rouser by the name of Adolf Hitler, who had been out of gaol for a year by that stage, and whose Nazi party was rapidly growing in popularity across Germany.

The world was watching, waiting for answers, and listening to these powerful men competing for the limelight, and so the Church felt that it was time to remind Christian people everywhere that our allegiance is to Christ and not to any worldly rulers.

And so on this 'Christ the King' Sunday we read from John's Gospel chapter 18 part of the dialogue between Jesus and Pontius Pilate which tells us something about the way Christ interfaces with the power-players of this world. "Are you a king?", Pilate asks of Jesus. "I'm not that sort of king", says Jesus. "I came to bear witness to the truth". "Hah!", says Pilate. "What is truth?"

That's the heart of the dialogue, I would suggest, and it reflects the vast gulf that lay between Jesus and Pilate. Pilate had an agenda, and you don't need to have a doctorate in Ancient Near Eastern history to work out what Pilate's agenda was. Pilate's agenda like most worldly like that of most worldly leaders was about getting hold of and maintaining power.

"Are you a threat?" he asks Jesus, because he's been told that Jesus is a competitor, a political power-monger in his own right.. "I'm not that sort of king" says Jesus. My Kingdom has to do with truth and not power, He says. And Pilate immediately loses interest. He is out the door, saying to Jesus' accusers, 'I've finished with your 'king.' You can have Him back.'

The important thing to realise, I think, is that Jesus and Pilate really had absolutely nothing to say to each other. Christians have often made the false assumption that the dialogue between Jesus and Pilate was somehow meaningful and that Pilate must have at least come out of it with a lot to think about. Indeed, there were stories circulating at one point in Christian history that Pilate and his wife became secret converts after this conversation, quietly won over by the words of truth that Jesus spoke to them. This is almost certainly complete rubbish. More likely is that Pilate learnt absolutely nothing from Jesus that day as Jesus had absolutely nothing to offer Pilate that was of any value to him.

Now, admittedly, we do see Pilate making an effort to release Jesus, and it may be tempting to assume that this was because Pilate was somehow touched by Jesus' innocence, but when you look at Pilate's broader history of dirty deeds and mass violence, it would have been out of character for him to have tried to free Jesus out of any pious concern for justice.

Far more likely is that any attempt Pilate made to free Jesus was more a by-product of either his sincere dislike of the Jewish leaders, such that he would have loved to have annoyed them by leaving Jesus as a thorn in their side, or that it was because of some superstitious fear that he held, such that

harming Jesus might have caused him harm - a belief that could well have been based on a dream that we are told Pilate's wife had. Pilate had assumed of course that Jesus would be very keen to dialogue with him - "Do you not realise", he says to Jesus, "that I have the power to kill you and the power to set you free?" (John 19:10) but Jesus tells him that he doesn't have as much power as he thinks he has. "You have no power except that which is given you from above", and indeed, Pilate knows full well that just as power was given to him from the Emperor, so it could be very easily taken away.

We might raise the question in this scenario, 'who really has the power?' Pilate thinks he has supreme executive power - the power of life and death - but it is Jesus who is really in control of his own destiny. True enough.

The more important insight here though, for our purposes today, is that the sort of power that Pilate had was of no interest to Jesus. He wasn't interested in competing with Pilate for power at that level. He just didn't play that game! Pilate is playing a power game. Jesus is playing a different game. In His own words, He's concern is with 'truth', and, as He points out, unless you are already of the truth, you can't play. "Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice", says Jesus. Pilate, of course, does not 'belong to the truth', so he doesn't hear Jesus' voice, and so he doesn't have a clue what Jesus is talking about.

We Christians all-too-readily forget this as we try to engage with the world. "Jesus is the Answer" we like to say, but it's really a stupid thing to say for it depends entirely on what the question is.

Pilate had questions:

- * How do I hang on to my power
- * How to I stick to the Jewish leaders

Jesus was the answer to none of those questions!

We make the same mistake when we try to build our evangelistic outreach by trying to scratch where we believe contemporary people are itching. They are asking lots of questions, such as

- * how do I get ahead in my work?
- * How do I invest wisely so as to get a bigger bank balance?
- * What other things can it get that will make me happier?
- * How can I improve my sex life?

and in each of these cases again, Jesus is NOT the answer of these questions!

Jesus doesn't answer those questions. What Jesus offers is truth, and those who are of the truth recognise it when Jesus speaks it - truths such as

- * that under God all people - Romans and Jews and black and white and in between - are all equally people.

* That those who live by the sword die by the sword, and that the pursuit of power is a lust that is never satisfied

* That a person's life does not consist in the abundance of their possessions, but that self-sacrifice is the key to self-fulfilment.

Pilate needed to hear those truths, but he was never going to hear them, because he wasn't of the truth, and couldn't afford to be, as his whole life's focus was elsewhere.

So what does this say to us on Christ the King Sunday 2020. The world has changed significantly since 1925 though a surprising number of things actually have remained the same. We are in the middle of a pandemic and we're heading for a recession. People are looking for answers, and once again there are great political power players strutting the world stage and offering to give those answers.

So how does Jesus line up alongside these power-players of the 21st century? Just like with Pilate, for the most part, He really has nothing to say. He does not take them on, on their own terms. He does not fight fire with fire. He just doesn't play those games at all. Instead He offers truth, and only those who have ears hear.

Maybe that sounds a bit defeatist, but on the contrary, the Good News - the really Good News - is that in the end truth wins! It always does! Look back in history at the long history of lies and violence and global deception that has been foisted on the human race – for example (and very topically), the mass enslavement that was based on the lie that persons of one skin colour are superior to persons of another skin colour. In the end truth wins!

For He who brings down the mighty from their thrones and lifts up the lowly, who fills the hungry with good things while sends the rich away empty, will see to it that in the end truth conquers all, and that the earth will be as full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.

And until that day comes, we must continue to proclaim in faith that Christ is King and that His truth is the future of our world - His is the Kingdom, His the power, His the glory, forever and ever. Amen