

## Sermon John 18:33-38 – ‘Not of this world’

### Reign of Christ

November 24<sup>th</sup>, 2024

Today’s gospel has an almost Shakespearean quality, don’t you think? Here we have a scene, highly dramatic, a key moment in the entire story of the passion of Christ. This is a scene which is almost dangerously low key, but we can feel the tension between Jesus of Nazareth and Pilate, Roman Governor. The reign of God and the Roman Empire go head-to-head in this scene.

Did you notice that almost the entire dialog between Jesus and Pilate consists of questions? Are you the king of the Jews? Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me? I am not a Jew, am I? What have you done? So, are you a king? And, finally: What is truth?

Most questions come from Pilate. Which seems only natural, because he is the one who supposedly holds the higher power; he is interrogating Jesus. And we get the feeling that Pilate circles Jesus carefully, not quite knowing how to approach, or to attack him. Pilate seems to sense that this man standing in front of him has *some* sort of authority and potentially could be ‘dangerous’. Pilate just doesn’t know what kind of danger it is.

So today’s gospel scene is a power play, in a sense, a game Pilate only knows too well. Now it must seem to Pilate that he is coming out the winner in this battle. After all, he, Pilate, has the power to condemn and to set free, he has the power vested in him by the Roman emperor himself, and he is surrounded by more than enough military to prove it. Worldly power and raw force is all Pilate knows. He is playing according to the rules of Rome, which say: we bring you stability and prosperity and peace, the Pax Romana, if you only submit to our values, our ideals, our obvious superiority. If not, we will force you into submission through terror and war. And Pilate, according to many contemporaries, was very good at the terror thing. He once ordered the mass crucifixion of an entire community in Palestine – about 2,000 men, women, and children.

This is how the Roman Empire, the Roman kingdom, the Roman reign works.

So Pilate is suspicious of Jesus. Are you are king – a king who maybe could lead a guerilla army into a war against Roman rule?

But Jesus makes it very clear: my kingdom doesn't work like your kingdom. My kingdom is not of this world. This doesn't mean God's kingdom is a place, far remote, somewhere in the clouds, but that God's kingdom does not follow the rules of earthly kingdoms, earthly power. Jesus says: If my kingdom were from this world, if my kingdom functioned according to the rules you know, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jewish leadership. But they don't. God's kingdom, God's rule, is something you, Pilate, just cannot grasp.

Pilate's question at that point is highly interesting. 'So, are you a king?' Depending on how you ask it, this question could have different meanings. So, ARE you a king? Are you a real threat to me and Roman power? So, are YOU a king? Could be a derisive remark, indicating that Jesus doesn't know what kingship is all about, and he better leave that claim to others. So, are you a KING? Jesus, whatever you are telling me, it doesn't sound like you are the kind of king I's familiar with. But no matter how Pilate asks this question, Jesus in his response makes clear that Pilate just has to clue about him. 'For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth.' It is not about raw power, it is not about the pursuit of worldly riches, it is about God's truth: that God became human to reconcile the world. That, to be the greatest, one has to serve others. That God's love is stronger than any power on earth, even death. That the most powerful weapons God has - and we have as those worshipping this God - are love, grace, and forgiveness, faith and hope.

'Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice,' Jesus says. Pilate is offered the truth right there. But he just cannot or doesn't want to grasp this strange kind of truth. And so he asks, maybe cynically, 'What is truth?' And, without waiting for an answer, goes out and tries to negotiate Jesus' release with the Jewish leaders. Pilate has come to the conclusion that Jesus is not a threat. In Pilate's eyes, Jesus is powerless. What kind of king is that?

Little did Pilate know that the mighty Roman Empire would crumble within a few hundred years, but the Christian church would spread all over the world. Little did

Pilate know that, whereas the name of the Emperor who ruled in Jesus' adult days would be forgotten, the name of Jesus Christ, the King, would be praised and adored for thousands of years thereafter. Little did Pilate know that we would be here today, in a different age and a part of the world that wasn't even known by people on the Eurasian continent in those days, celebrating Christ, the King, or the reign of Christ, and that we would be singing about Christ's triumph over hatred, sin, and death.

Little did Pilate know. He didn't get Christ's power. Now on the other hand, I'd argue that many followers over the last two millennia didn't get it, didn't get Christ's humble power, as they were holding a bejeweled cross up high and often on the forefront into battle against Jews, Muslims, and even fellow followers of Christ who were perceived to be heretics. I'd say many zealous crusaders for Christ today don't get it, those who are eager to 'save' those different from them, while often condemning other opinions, other ways of life, and being judgmental gatekeepers to the kingdom of God.

Do we get it? Do we get it in this highly competitive world, in a world that holds pride in higher esteem than humility, and which favors blatant displays of power over compromises? Do we get it in a world that more and more defaults to authoritarian political power?

The festival of Christ the King was first celebrated in 1925 – so not even a hundred years ago - by the Roman Catholic Church, as a sign that Christ is the one who rules our hearts and our lives in a sinful and broken world. Back then, fascism was on the rise all over Europe, with its leaders demanding – and often receiving - almost messianic adoration. So the festival of Christ the King was meant to be a strong and bold confession, but also a protest against succumbing to worldly and often destructive powers.

So what are we confessing today? What is our protest today, in a day and age when people worship and/or revere celebrities, politicians, money, or military power almost as if they were God? What is our protest in this day and age when many claim they have the truth, even though it is distorted or twisted?

Do we confess **the** truth? Do we confess that Christ's crown is made of thorns? Do we confess that Jesus' majesty and greatness was and is in stooping down to where

there is so much brokenness, poverty, and hurt? Do we confess that Christ's reign is not defined by crude force, but by the much gentler and persistent power of love and mercy? Do we confess that we follow this king, the anointed of God, not as a people in arms, but a people who have been empowered by God in the similar manner that Jesus was empowered?

I will leave you with these questions. And in the meantime, let us pray: thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth, as it is in heaven. Amen