

Sermon “A Different Kind of Kingdom”
Kirk of St James
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Chad loves to watch movies. He enjoys stories and how they are told, he finds cinematography captivating—I cannot count the number of times in the middle of a film he will ask if I notice it was done in one long shot, and to be honest I am doing well to still be awake. The downside is that also means his familiarity with films often leads to him being able to spot how a movie is going to end long before it gets there. It annoys me to no end when he asks why I didn't think it was going to “end that way” because a character made a random comment 15 minutes into the movie and didn't, I notice that? No, I was likely getting snacks! So, for him, one of the indicators of a good movie is that it manages to surprise him in some way.

Well, we may not be watching a movie, but we are at the end of the church Calendar year and closing it out with a passage that leads to the crucifixion of Jesus is an ending that many of us may not have expected. Why is this conversation between Jesus and Pilate arriving the week before the season of advent? Well, the answer to that question can be found in Jesus' idea of Kingdom—and what his arrival in a manger truly means.

In the modern world we are familiar with monarchies. We may have a general idea of Kings and Queens but, overall, their rule does not impact our lives the ways it did in the ancient world. For the most part monarchs in our day and age keep within certain careful limits. During Jesus' day Kings and Queens ruled in a more autocratic and dictatorial fashion. They had the power to live and rule as they wanted. They could promote, demote, or even have people thrown in prison and executed. They ruled by their whims and wishes and were considered all powerful.

One other thing about Kings and Queens was how they came to be in power. Theologian N.T Wright pointed out that “Often the crown would pass from father to son, or to some other close male relative. But from time to time there would be a revolution. The way to the crown, for anyone not in the direct family line, was through violence...Judas Maccabaeus had established his dynasty, two hundred years before Jesus met Pilate, through military revolution against the Syrians, winning for the Jews their independence, and for himself and his family a royal status they had not previously aspired to. Herod the Great, thirty years before Jesus is born, had defeated the Parthians, the great empire to the east, and Rome in gratitude had allowed him to become ‘King of the Jews,’ though he, too had no appropriate background or pedigree.” That is why the first question Pilate asks Jesus is so important.

Kings rise and fall, and revolutions happen, and Pilate does not want it happening on his doorstep. He is the most powerful person in Jerusalem and sits there at the behest of the greatest world power at the time. If he allows things to get out of control those who have put him in that position will remove him or worse. Few people in positions of power relish the idea of losing it. This places Pilate in a difficult position, he does not want to get involved in this issue. In fact, he tells the Jewish leaders to take Jesus back and judge him according to their laws.

Deep down I suspect that Pilate did not take their charge of Jesus claiming to be king very seriously. The young man standing in front of him has no worldly possessions, and no army, just a rag tag group of followers that deserted him when things got tough. Typically, revolutions need a little more than that to get going. It is also obvious that Pilate is not overly concerned with the goings on among the chief priests. As Pilate attempts to question Jesus, he soon learns getting a straightforward answer is not going to happen, and if he is trying to entrap Jesus by his answer it is not going to happen. Jesus does not claim to be the King, but he does begin to teach about his Kingdom.

Jesus explains his kingdom does not come from this world, but it is for this world—and that is incredibly important distinction. Jesus’ kingdom can not come from our broken world, but it is the reason he was sent into it, and why he will send his followers out into it as well. Jesus isn’t a king that Pilate can understand because Pilate only understands kings like Herod the Great, and about power, and wealth, and might. He doesn’t understand a king that would accept crucifixion. “Proclaiming the truth, being the truth, and even belonging to the truth are what make Jesus a king—and that is not something Pilate cares about. In verse 38 Pilate replies, “Truth, what is that?”

We know all too well about Jesus hanging on the cross when one of those crucified beside him accepts Jesus for who he is as the Son of God. We often miss this moment, when Jesus even when he is being questioned, and knowing what Pilate can and will do, offers him that same truth he offers the condemned man. Pilate is standing in front of the one person who can save him, “everyone who belongs to truth listens to my voice,” says Jesus to Pilate. Even to Pilate Jesus offers to be the Good Shepherd.” Pilate cannot see the truth even though it is standing in front of him, his only concern is that tomorrow he still wakes up as the Roman Governor to Judea.

John talks a lot about truth throughout his gospel. John began his gospel affirming that Jesus is God’s truth, all of Jesus’ teachings bear witness to the truth, and that truth was imparted to his disciples. Jesus’ opponents are those who reject the truth. In this passage Jesus declares that his kingdom is present in everyone who hears and accepts his testimony. As one writer said, “But what has Jesus done? In John’s gospel, he has enabled people to face the truth about themselves, their relationships, their faith, and the world in which they live.” I hear that, I really do, but our world is a lot like Pilate—what is the truth? What does that mean? If anyone told

me, they had truth figured out I would likely go in the other direction. We live in a world where there is polarization, and being seen as on a particular side is incendiary.

If I were to be honest, I struggle with this regularly, the current conflict between Israel and Palestine is a prime example. It is something that is difficult to talk about because of how people might perceive things. Chad and I visited both Israel and Palestine, and our tour guide was an incredible Palestinian man. He often talked about how complex the situation was between the two. My truth is I am absolutely gutted by the current situation in Gaza, the widespread suffering is unbearable to witness. I am also absolutely gutted by those who were killed at the Nova festival, and for those whose lives were upended by extreme violence. For families who long to be reunited with loved ones who were taken hostage. At the end of the day, I am against all human suffering. I am against violence and hate and anything that seeks to destroy because these things are not part of the kingdom of God—they are in fact the antithesis.

The Kingdom is present wherever Jesus is present. “John wants us to see it. This is what the cross will mean. This is what truth is and does. Truth is what Jesus is; and Jesus is dying for Barabbas, and for Pilate, and for those who chanted for his death, and for the world. And for you and me.” Because of that, because of the baby in a manger in our world, everything we are about to celebrate, also involves a cross. So today on Christ the King Sunday we celebrate a different kind of King, one that subverted the expectations of the world and gave everything he had so that we might gain. We do our best to live God’s truth in the world, and to usher in the Kingdom of God. May God grant us the eyes to see what Pilate could not, and hearts to act on it, one day at a time. May we share a different kind of Kingdom with those around us.