

The Solemnity of Christ the King – Year B

³³ Pilate said to Jesus, “Are you the King of the Jews?” ³⁴ Jesus answered, “Do you say this on your own or have others told you about me?” ³⁵ Pilate answered, “I am not a Jew, am I? Your own nation and the chief priests handed you over to me. What have you done?” ³⁶ Jesus answered, “My kingdom does not belong to this world. If my kingdom did belong to this world, my attendants (would) be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not here.” ³⁷ So Pilate said to him, “Then you are a king?” Jesus answered, “You say I am a king. 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 Roman Trial of Jesus

Roman civil involvement in the death of Jesus was recorded by the Jewish historian Josephus where, speaking of Jesus, he states, ‘And when Pilate, because of accusations made by leading men among us, condemned him to the cross’ (*Ant 18.3.3 §63-64*). Pilate served as ‘perfect’ (sometimes referred to as ‘procreator’ or ‘governor’) from 26 AD to 36 AD. His normal residence was at Caesaria Maritime; however, he was known to have come to Jerusalem during Passover, with his legions, in order to maintain the Roman peace. During his governorship Pilate repeatedly clashed with his Jewish subjects. Pilate brought into Jerusalem the standards of a military unit that bore the image of the emperor (*Josephus, War 2:169-74; Antiquities 18:55-59*). He took money from the Temple treasury to build an aqueduct for Jerusalem (*War 2:175-177; Ant.18:60-62*). He brought into Jerusalem shields dedicated to Tiberius and mounted them on the Temple outer walls (*Philo, Legatio ad Gaium 299-305*). He brutally put down a disturbance among the Samaritans (*Ant.18:85-90*) and is said to have mixed the blood of certain Galileans with their sacrifices (*Lk 13:1*).

Josephus reports Pilate's deeds without spending much time evaluating his character. Philo is not so circumspect. In describing the mounting of the shields, Philo states that this was done, not to honor Tiberius, but to annoy the multitudes. He goes on to say that Pilate was “naturally inflexible, a blend of self-will and relentlessness”. According to Philo, Pilate only backed down in the matter “for he feared that if they actually sent an embassy [to the emperor Tiberius] they would also expose the rest of his conduct as governor by stating in full the bribes, the insults, the robberies, the outrages and wanton injuries, the executions without trial constantly repeated, the ceaseless and supremely grievous cruelty.”

Unlike the other gospel writers, John's principal focus is on the Roman trial. The Jewish legal proceedings are reduced to a single question by Annas (*Jn 18:19-24*). There are several theological reasons for the Johannine emphasis. The setting emphasizes the role of Jesus as King - the questioning by Pilate is on that basis, Jesus is mocked on that basis, and he is ultimately put to death under that banner. The setting also echoes *Ps 2:2, 'The kings of the earth rise up and the princes conspire together against the Lord and against his anointed.'* And lastly, Pilate's role becomes representative of the State being asked to decide between the world and truth. John is using Pilate to show that the State cannot remain neutral to truth, for neutrality will force the State to temporize even in the most elementary questions of justice and to act against its own real self-interests. By not deciding against the world, the State is soon subjected to the world.

Pilate is also typical, not of the State that would remain neutral, but of the many honest, well-disposed men who would try to adopt a middle position in a struggle that is total. In the gospel regarding the Samaritan Woman (*Jn 4:4-26*) we see a person who, despite attempts to escape decisions, decides to believe in Jesus. Pilate's story is the other side of the coin, for it illustrates how a person who refuses decisions is led to tragedy. As he did with the Samaritan woman, Jesus will challenge Pilate to

recognize the truth. Pilate will not face the challenge of deciding for Jesus and against the Jewish leadership; he thinks he can persuade them to decide in favor of Jesus. First, Pilate offers them a choice of prisoners: Jesus or Barabbas. When that fails, he begins to yield to the world and has Jesus scourged and mocked, hoping that this will be sufficient. When that fails, he offers to hand over Jesus to the Jews under a set of impossible conditions: if they want Jesus, he will make them ask in such a way that they have to deny all their messianic hopes and proclaim that the emperor is their only king. But the Jews will not even balk at this blasphemy; for they know that this is a struggle to the death, and that if Jesus does not die, the world will be vanquished by truth. And so Pilate, the would-be neutral man, is frustrated by the intensity of the participants. Having failed to listen to the truth and decide in its favor, he and all who would imitate him inevitably finish in the service of the world.

Questioning by Pilate

The Jewish Authorities ask Pilate to Condemn Jesus (*Jn 18:28-32; Lk 23:1-2*). The Civil proceedings against Jesus begin after the religious trial by the Sanhedrin. Jesus is bound and led to Pilate. The opening confrontation with Pilate and the Jews is described with subtle irony. Having cynically decided on the death of Jesus because it was more advantageous that one man die than that the whole nation be destroyed, the Jewish authorities are, nevertheless, scrupulously correct in their observance of ritual purity. They do not hesitate to make use of the Gentile to destroy their adversary, but they will not enter the Gentile's house. In the ritual impurity would affect their participation in the Passover seder (Johannine chronology) or the Chagigah offering, a special paschal offering the morning after the seder (synoptic chronology).

Pilate is dressed and ready to participate in the trials and comes out of praetorium. He immediately asks, *'What charge do you bring against this man? (Jn 18:29)*. The question is part of the provincial system of administering justice through the personal *cognitio* of the governor. While charges and penalties were freely formulated, eventually a proper and formal accusation had to be made to the holder of the *imperium*, so that he could investigate and acquire personal knowledge (*cognitio*). Pilate may have cooperated with the Sanhedrin in putting a possible troublemaker under temporary arrest during a traditionally dangerous festival period; indeed, he may have been the moving spirit behind the arrest of a man who he had heard was a revolutionary, and he may have intended the Sanhedrin to investigate whether the man should undergo trial. But now the Sanhedrin authorities were turning over a prisoner for an official trial, and Pilate had to follow legal format. He asks for the findings of the Sanhedrin "grand jury" and the formal accusation.

In the Johannine account, the Jewish leaders say, *'If he were not a criminal, we would not have handed him over to you.'* (*Jn 18:30*). Perhaps there is a tone of insolence here. And insolence would not be unexpected if the Sanhedrin had been working in concert with Pilate and felt sure that he would accept their decision. But Pilate answers their insolence by insisting on correct procedure. If he has ordered or allowed them to conduct an inquiry, he has not ceded his right to judge. The Jewish leaders would be capable of judging Jesus guilty on religious grounds and Pilate invites them to do so according to their laws (*Jn 18:31*). Only in response to his rebuff so the Jewish leaders indicate to Pilate that they are accusing Jesus of a capital civil offense, implicitly the offense that Pilate had suspected: Jesus is a revolutionary with monarchical pretensions. The rumors that had reached Pilate and had caused him to send Roman troops to arrest Jesus had proved correct: Jesus is claiming to be the 'King of the Jews'. This version is a reconstruction that seems to make sense of the Johannine narrative, but one based on the judicial posture similar to that of the Roman officials described in *Acts 18:14-15* and *Acts 23:28-29*. (Note: In the Luke account, they present charges of *'...misleading our people, he opposes the payment of taxes to Caesar and maintains that he is the Messiah, a king.'* (*Lk 23:2*).)

Pilate Questions Jesus about Kingship (*Jn 18:32-38a; Mk 15:2; Mt 27:11; Lk 23:3*). The next exchange is between Jesus and Pilate in the private surroundings of the praetorium and is built around Pilate's question, '*Are you the King of the Jews*' (*Jn 18:33*). This title is not a messianic formulation, but rather it has a nationalistic political connotation and is fitting in the context of the civil trial. *John* alone offers a response and an explanation of the kingship. Jesus first distinguishes between 'king' used in a political sense which the Romans would understand and 'king' in the Jewish sense with its religious implications. Jesus answers, '*Do you say this on your own or have others told you about me?*' (*Jn 18:34*). Jesus, the accused criminal, asks the questions as if he were the judge, and from the first words of Jesus it is the governor who is on trial. Pilate is a man who is facing the light and who must decide whether he will prefer light or darkness (*Jn 3:19-21*). Pilate answers that he is simply repeating what has been told him, and with Roman bluntness asks what Jesus has done, seeking to understand if this 'king' is any threat to the emperor.

Jesus does not talk about himself but about his kingdom. Jesus does not deny that his kingdom or kingship affects the world, for the world will be conquered by those who believe in him (*1 Jn v4*). But he denies that his kingdom belongs to this world; like himself it comes from above. Pilate seems to miss the import of Jesus' remark. He has heard the word 'kingdom', for him a political reality; and so he presses for a confession. Jesus will not categorically refuse to be known as a king, but indicates that he prefers to describe his role in terms of testifying to the truth. Only those who belong to the truth can understand in what sense Jesus is a king. The real reason that Jesus is handed over to Pilate is because he has borne witness to the truth.

At one level Pilate is comfortable because Jesus' kingship presents no danger to the political interest of Rome. Yet in another way Jesus' statement makes Pilate uncomfortable, for Jesus has implicitly challenged Pilate to recognize the truth. From this point on the trial is no longer whether Jesus is innocent or guilty; Pilate admits this by immediately proclaiming Jesus not guilty (*Jn 18:38b*). The subject of the trial is now whether Pilate will respond to the truth. We see the direction in which he leans through his retort, '*What is truth?*' (*Jn 18:38a*). He does not accept the charges of the Jewish leaders, but neither will he listen to the voice of Jesus. He does not recognize the truth.

Pilate is satisfied that there is no danger from this Jewish peasant and moves to exercise the *imperium* of his position. Pilate addresses the Chief priests, elders and crowds in the courtyard of the praetorium and says, '*I find this man not guilty.*' (*Lk 23:4*). The crowd is quite adamant and replies, '*He is inciting the people with his teaching throughout all Judea, from Galilee where he began even to here.*' (*Lk 23:5*). Pilate does not display the self-will and relentlessness described by Philo. One might have expected that Pilate would have dismissed the crowd with the summary, 'I have spoken'. But Pilate may have been surprised at the vehemence of the crowds before him; perhaps he wishes to avoid direct confrontation with this assembly during the festival week. He seizes on the Galilean heritage of Jesus and sends him to Herod who had jurisdiction over Galilee. The would-be neutral man makes his first compromise and attempts to avoid a decision.

The Sentence by Pilate

Pilate seeks to release Jesus. After Jesus is returned, Pilate makes another attempt to appease the crowds. He addresses the chief priests, elders and scribes:

'You brought this man to me and accused him of inciting the people to revolt. I have conducted my investigation in your presence and have not found this man guilty of the charges that you have brought against him, not did Herod, for he sent him back to us. So no capital crime has been committed by him.' (*Lk 23:13-15*).

Pilate refuses to issue a death warrant, but he must sense the animosity of the crowd or have some weakening resolve. Realizing Jesus was politically harmless and seeking to put an end to the trial,

Pilate raises the custom of *privilegium paschale* whereby one prisoner is released during the festival. (Note: In Mark, the crowd raises the issue. This custom is not attested outside of Scripture.) Pilate asks, 'Which do you want me to release to you, [Jesus] Barabbas or Jesus called Messiah.' (Mt 27:17). The Aramaic name Barabbas means "son of the father"; the irony of the choice - to select the "son of the father" or the true Son of the Father.

The Jewish leadership has presented Jesus as a revolutionary, a would-be-king; but now they would prefer the release of one who is truly a revolutionary. John captures the irony of the situation with the simple statement, 'And Barabbas was a bandit' (Jn 18:40). There would seem to be an implicit contrast with Jn 10:1-10. There we have a contrast between the model shepherd who sheep hear his voice and the bandit who enters the sheepfold surreptitiously. Here we have a contrast between the Jesus, 'Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.' (Jn 18:37) and the bandit/revolutionary.

At the same time, we see the futility of Pilate's attempt to avoid a decision between the truth and the world. The world represented by the Jewish leaders is not interested in a compromise: truth must be exterminated. Ironically, by failing to give Jesus justice and to release him after declaring his innocence, Pilate is forced to make a travesty of justice by releasing one who is guilty. By not protecting Jesus' interest, Pilate now finds himself compelled to act against his own interests. Pilate did not accept the challenge to listen to the voice of Jesus. Pilate does not listen to the voice of his own wife who tells him of her dream that he should release this righteous man (Mt 27:19). Now he must listen to the voices of the Jewish leaders as they demand the release of a bandit. Weakened by his failure to decide, Pilate is reduced from a position where he could have commanded the freeing of Jesus to a position where he must bargain for it.

The Roman Soldiers Scourge and Mock Jesus. In Jn 19:1-4, Pilate has Jesus scourged as part of a plan for Jesus' release. Before and after this episode, Pilate affirms that Jesus is not guilty; therefore, we must suppose that Pilate is having Jesus reduced to a bloody and battered figure in order to placate the assembled crowd and to persuade them that Jesus is too helpless to be a threat. Roman scourging was more than a beating. Scourging consisted of multiple lashings with a whip each strap having a shard of glass/metal attached to the end. At the end of the scourging Jesus fulfilled the prophesy of Isaiah '...so marred was his look beyond that of man, and his appearance beyond that of mortals... (Is 52:14). The soldiers then begin the coronation ritual, weaving a crown of thorns to place on Jesus' head and clothing him in a cloak of royal color. The soldiers then take up the mockery and address Jesus as the King of the Jews. Unknowingly, these Gentiles confess to the truth. Jesus next undergoes another ceremony in the coronation ritual: he is brought out, royally bedecked *ad empurpled*, to be presented to his people for acclamation. Israel's long wait for its messianic king has reached an ironic fulfillment.

In presenting him Pilate says, 'Look, I am bringing him out to you, so that you may know that I find no guilt in him.' (Jn 19:4). Perhaps Pilate is making him an example of Roman brutality in order to anger the people and arouse them to ask for his release. The weakness exhibited in Pilate's concession is instinctively recognized by Jesus' enemies. The ploy fails. They have sensed his weakness in this second attempt to compromise, and so they hail their king with a strange acclamation: 'Crucify him, crucify him!' (Jn 19:6). A far cry from the *Hosanna, Blessed is the King of Israel*' (Jn 12:13) that greeted Jesus five days earlier. Pilate's irritated response, 'Take him yourselves and crucify him, I find no guilt in him.' (Jn 19:6) causes the Jewish leadership to begin psychological warfare against him. If Pilate will not yield to their expressed desire, they will wear him down by a type of blackmail: they will imply that his conduct in this case will bring him disfavor in Rome. It is thought that Pilate was vulnerable in Rome, as Aelius Sejanus, to whom Pilate owed his appointment, had lost favor with Tiberius the Emperor. Perhaps the tremors that presaged the fall of Sejanus were already felt by sensitive political observers, and Pilate feared that soon he would have no protector at Court. A

shrewd ecclesiastical politician like Caiaphas would have been quite aware of the governor's vulnerability and ready to exploit the weakness.

On the question of Pilate's not respecting local customs, the Jews open their attack. Pilate has found Jesus not guilty and refuses to continue the civil trial against him, but he has ignored the fact that Jesus, whether or not a revolutionary, has violated the Jewish religious laws: *'We have a law, and according to that law he ought to die, because he made himself the Son of God'* (Jn 19:7). Beneath this assertion is the reminder that Roman provincial administrators characteristically respected regional religious practices. As soon as this point is made Pilate retreats in fear. Pilate tried to be neutral to the truth, now he is enslaved by his own fears.

Pilate Talks with Jesus about Power. Pilate goes back into the praetorium to question Jesus and asks *'Where do you come from?'* (Jn 19:9). Perhaps the exasperation has left governor grasping for straws and that he himself does not know how to proceed. He is now dealing with a religious charge beyond his understanding; but well within his fears. When Jesus is silent to his questions, Pilate begins to bluster about his power. It is evident that Pilate has lost patience with the uncooperativeness of the man he is trying to protect. Pilate's previous efforts to find a middle way in the struggle between the truth and the world have been no more accommodating. He is speaking to a Jesus who has consistently rebuffed even more serious overtures of friendship or approval when they fell short of faith (see Jn 2:23-25, 3:2-3, 4:45-48).

The core of the episode is Jesus' statement about power or authority. Pilate has spoken of his physical power over Jesus - he can take Jesus' life away. Jesus speaks to him on another level, the level of truth and of genuine power - *'You would have no power over me if it had not been given to you from above.'* (Jn 19:11). This saying must be understood in light of Jn 10:17-18: no one can take Jesus' life from him; he alone has power to lay it down. However, Jesus voluntarily entered the "hour" appointed by his Father when he will lay his life down. In the context of the "hour", therefore, the Father has permitted men to have apparent power over Jesus' life. Although Pilate does not realize it, the power is his because God has assigned him a role in the "hour". Pilate has tried to use his power to free Jesus. He will not be successful because he has not totally committed himself to the truth and has sought in vain to be neutral.

Pilate Yields to the Jewish Demand for Jesus' Crucifixion. As the episode opens, Pilate has been moved by Jesus' charge that he is guilty of misusing his God-given power; and so he tries again to effect Jesus' release. This prompts the Jewish leaders to renew their political blackmail by implicitly raising again the threat of denouncing him to Rome. Now his loyalty to the emperor is openly challenged: *'You are no Friend of Caesar. Everyone who makes himself a King opposes Caesar.'* (Jn 19:12). The Jews may be threatening to move to have the honorific, "Friend of Caesar", taken away from Pilate by reporting to the emperor that Pilate has not dealt with the charge of *lese majesty*. The governor who boasted to Jesus of his power is now deprived of a truly free exercise of that power. If a charge of *lese majesty* is filed in Rome against Pilate for releasing a king who is a potential threat to the emperor, Pilate will be thoroughly examined, and all his shortcomings as governor will come to light. Possible disgrace is too great a price to pay for defending the truth. Pilate yields to the Jewish leaders and sets the scene for passing judgment. Seated on the judgment seat, with a final gesture of defiance and perhaps with a still half-hearted hope he can obtain clemency, Pilate shows Jesus to the Jews as their King - *'Behold your king'* (Jn 19:14). When they persist in demanding crucifixion, Pilate takes his revenge by humiliating their nationalistic spirit - *'Shall I crucify your king?'* (Jn 19:15). In their quest to have Jesus condemned, the Jewish leadership has shown a touching loyalty to the emperor - does this mean they have given up their hope in the expected king? No price is too great to pay in the world's struggle against truth: the leaders utter the fatal words: *'We have no king but Caesar.'* (Jn

19:15). The real trial is over, for in the presence of Jesus, the leaders have judged themselves; they have spoken their own sentence.

Israel had proudly claimed Yahweh as its King (*Judges 8:23; 1 Sam 8:7*). From the time of Nathan's promise to David (*2 Sam 7:11-16*), according to the theology of Jerusalem, God's kingship was made visible in the rule of the Davidic king whom He took as His son (*Ps 2:7*). In post-exilic times a mystique had grown up around the unique anointed king of the House of David, the future Messiah, who was to come and establish God's rule on earth. But now hundreds of years of waiting had been case aside: the leadership had proclaimed the Emperor of the Roman empire to be their king. Israel has renounced their status as God's people. Here during Passover, the traditional time for God's judgment of the world (Mishnah *Rosh Hashanah 1:2*), they have judged themselves by condemning the one whom God has sent into the world, not to judge it but to save it (*Jn 3:17*).

Pilate sees no further means of bargaining. Unwilling to recognize the truth, he washes his hands of the incident saying *'I am innocent of this man's blood. Look to it yourselves.'* (*Mt 27:24*), an action that would have been seen by the Jews as a protestation of innocence (*Dt 21:6-9*): *'the elders...shall wash their hands...and shall declare, "Our hands did not shed this blood.." ...let not the guilt of innocent blood remain in the midst of your people. Thus they shall be absolved from the guilt of bloodshed.'* The people answer: *'His blood be upon us and our children'* (*Mt 27:25*). Thus the guilt of innocent blood remained in the midst of the people; people who do not seek absolution. With that Pilate releases Jesus to crucifixion.

Notes

John 13:36 - ***My kingdom does not belong to this world.*** These words are filled with Johannine theology. The kingdom (*basileia*) of Jesus may not be "of this world" but that does not mean it cannot be found in this world.

John 13:37 - ***You say I am a king:*** It is at best a reluctant affirmative. In parallel, peculiar to Matthew: "You have said so" (see Matthew 26:64; 27:11). This is a half-affirmative. Emphasis is laid on the pronoun and the answer implies that the statement would not have been made if the question had not been asked. ***to testify to the truth.*** In John truth (*aletheia*) means the revelation of God, thus here, Jesus is saying to make God known in his person. ***Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.*** This echoes the Johannine saying of the Good Shepherd