

“Looking for Jesus, Seeing Like Pilate”

John 18:33-38

Christ the King Sunday

John 18:33-38

³³Then Pilate entered the headquarters again, summoned Jesus, and asked him, “Are you the King of the Jews?”

³⁴Jesus answered, “Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?”

³⁵Pilate replied, “I am not a Jew, am I? Your own nation and the chief priests have handed you over to me. What have you done?”

³⁶Jesus answered, “My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here.”

³⁷Pilate asked him, “So you are a king?”

Jesus answered, “You say that 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.”

³⁸Pilate asked him, “What is truth?”

After he had said this, he went out to the Jews again and told them, “I find no case against him.”

Prayer for Christ the King Sunday

Here on this last Sunday in the cyclical pattern of our annual worship calendar, we acknowledge, celebrate, and reaffirm in our hearts the reign of Christ.

O God,

distracted by histrionic headlines and cynical click bait,
bloated on punditry and manufactured outrage
while starving for a sense of humanity,
our throats parched for wisdom and knowledge
as we drown in information,
paralyzed by apathy, and a hopelessness
that anchors our collective and individual indecision,

it is perhaps no wonder that now, as in Biblical times,
our world still craves leadership, direction, and unity,

but so often settles for

demagoguery and over-inflated hero-worship;
fear-based mythologies

of ourselves, and the world, and especially other people—
the convenience of preconceived assumptions
about other people and their suspicious motives;
the misleading expediency of mob rule;
and the occasional thrill of nurturing self-righteousness
into violence, whether physical violence
or verbal violence or social violence.

Most of the time, O God, we probably don't even know what we want. We just know that we feel like we don't have it.

Help us to look to you, King Jesus,
 through a wider lens than our fearfulness usually allows us—
 help us look to you with eyes of trust and hearts that know
 that the Holy Spirit is more creative
 than any situation that appears to us insolvable,
 and that your love is the realest thing in the universe—
 maybe the only real thing in the universe;
 that Jesus, and all that he was and all that he is,
 is above all,
 and the most compelling truth in our lives.

Help us find again, O God,
 if we ever really had it in the first place,
 enough belief, and hope, and even trust in each other,
 and in ourselves,
 to bring into observable reality
 our trusting faith in you.

The Sermon

Mira Hadlow wrote a typically concise poem called “Home”
 that simply reads:

All I ever wanted
 was to come home
 to a place
 that couldn't
 be taken
 from me.ⁱ

This Christ the King Sunday finds our church in nomadic mode, as we have been before and still know how to do: setting up our tabernacle outside our home sanctuary, not knowing week to week, day to day or even hour to hour when we will be able to return.

Which is, of course, a microcosm of the past 21 months, ever since Covid-19 began its tragic and transformative march around the world.

Regardless of the all the prophets and talking heads and knee-jerk correctors of semantics whose heaven-appointed task it apparently is to say—and not incorrectly—“Stop talking about ‘going back’ because it isn’t ever going to be the way it was before (or the way we thought it was before)”—

You can say that all you want, and it’s true; but somewhere in almost every one of us, I daresay, the reality is that there is some pleading, yearning voice that is constantly asking: “When do we get to go back?”

“All I ever wanted was to come home to a place that couldn’t be taken from me.”ⁱⁱ

I think for many, that also goes back to the sort of “next-level” discombobulation of the 2016 election cycle. Right now is not the time to dissect or even revisit that long, arduous march toward a result that, either way, was going to be seen by many tens of millions in this country as total catastrophe. We thought we were used to painful quadrennial trudges toward inevitable disappointment, but 2016 managed to leave both the losing and

the winning sides wounded, sullen, defensive, sputtering with rage, psychotically afraid, and very, very dark.

The word psychosis is defined by the National Institute of Mental Health as a condition “where there has been some loss of contact with reality... [when] thoughts and perceptions are disturbed and the individual may have difficulty understanding what is real and what is not.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Symptoms include delusions (or, “false beliefs”), and hallucinations “(seeing or hearing things that others do not see or hear). Other symptoms [can] include incoherent or nonsense speech, and behavior that is inappropriate for the situation..., depression, anxiety, sleep problems, social withdrawal, lack of motivation and difficulty functioning overall.”^{iv}

Why is this an exact description of our whole political/media-saturated landscape right now?

The mid-20th century theologian Paul Tillich and many others have been right to speak of it being incumbent on Christians to carry a Bible in one hand and a newspaper in the other: it is our mandate to stay informed about the world, especially as it involves the welfare of people we may or may not otherwise think about or even know about.

But sometimes, putting on your own oxygen mask first starts with shutting off the TV and the radio and all the other information technology and going for a walk, or looking out the window, or just making breakfast or something—or, just not doing anything. It takes a long, long time for even the most

dedicated spiritual practitioners to sit in silence—hours, sometimes—before the feverish conversation going on in our head quiets down a little bit and we can truly, finally, have an uninterrupted audience with King Jesus.

Or, said more correctly: that he can finally get some uninterrupted time with us. Because it's not he who is the distracted one.

Which is also true in John's setting of this scene here in a governmental room where, just before he will be sent to the cross, Jesus is being interrogated by Pilate.

Pilate wants to talk about kingship, so Jesus sort of says, OK, let's talk about kingship. But if you want to do that, I'm going to be talking to you about Truth.

It's only natural that Pilate would feel some sense of disconnect between what he wants to talk about, and the way Jesus will answer him. Because Pilate speaks for a world that understands kingship as power—earthly, soulless, desperate, self-reinforcing power.

Jesus embodies God's cosmic truth: that in all of creation, down to each atom in our own bodies, and stemming from the mind of God, from which was born the mind of all those made in God's image,^v the one, sovereign truth is love.

It was early morning after the night that Jesus was arrested, and Pilate, the Roman governor, was in the Governor's palace, and

he had Jesus brought to him and said: “Are you the king of the Jews?”

And Jesus said, “Are you saying this on your own, or have others spoken to you about me?”^{vi}

Pilate said, according to Eugene Peterson’s translation, “Do I look like a Jew? *Your* people and *your* high priests turned you over to me. What have you done?”

No one can know the mind of God, but what do you imagine might have gone through Jesus’ mind when Pilate asked that question: What have you done?

Did he see the faces of people who had been fed on miraculous, abundant, bread; who had feasted with miraculous wine at Cana?

Did he see the faces of parents whose children he had restored to life and health?

Did he remember the eyes of a once-blind person who could now see?

Did he remember the at-first faltering but joyful legs of someone who had not been able to walk for years, but now, because of what Jesus had done, wanted—and was ready—to run and dance?

Did he see, in his mind’s eye, the faces of his beloved fellow travelers—even Peter, who at that very moment was out there

somewhere not too far from Pilate's headquarters, ashamed for having betrayed his best friend?

Your own people have handed you over to be executed, King Jesus. What have you done? What did you do?

Pilate's world understands kingship only as power, and sees the world only in terms of threats to his power.

In God's world, fully embodied in Jesus, the only sovereign truth is love.

Back to Pilate's original question: Are you the king of the Jews?

And Jesus said, depending on your translation: "My kingdom doesn't originate from this world" (CEB). Or "My kingdom doesn't consist of what you see around you" (MSG).

He said, "If my kingdom were from *this* world, my followers would be fighting so that I *wouldn't* be handed over. "My kingdom is not from here."

"Your 'kingdom!' So, you *are* a king," says the governor who understands kingship only as power, and sees everything else in terms of threats to power.

And Jesus says to the one person on earth who will make the final, authoritative decision either to bring about his death or spring him from the whole corrupt ordeal:

You say that I am a ‘king.’ Here is what I am here to tell you about kingship: “For this I was born, and for this I came into the world: to testify to the truth.

“Everyone who belongs to the truth hears my voice.”

In the kingdom from which Jesus comes, love rules over all.

“If I am a ‘king,’ it is only in that I came here to testify to the truth, and everyone who belongs to the truth hears my voice.”

And if you understand kingship only in terms of power, and all my people are more loyal to love than to your earthly power, and its threats, and lies, and machines of death, the implications are staggering.

I have a world of people who do not recognize the power of the state as having a greater call on their lives than the power of God—and God’s desire to use us—to infuse this world, again and again, at all levels, with love.

Think of the implications: Billions of Christians in the countries of the world.

Our savior, our sovereign, who embodies infinite beauty and absolute truth, eternally loving, restoring, healing, regenerating; nurturing life, feeding, healing, teaching—our sovereign Lord teaches and commands us to love the poor and the powerless just as uncompromisingly as he does, and the Bible witness makes it clear that the poor and powerless includes even us: we who, in this world, do have some resources and some power.

We are brought into this world to be joyful servants, grateful subjects, willing participants in God's great project in this broken and beautiful world, with these broken and beautiful people, every single one of whom is made in God's image.

Jesus' kingship is infinitely realer and truer than anything that Pilate's limited, worldly lens would allow him to see or expect, because Pilate's lens is trained to see only in terms of power, and tends to filter out the cosmic rays that would show him clearly the sovereignty, the majesty, of love.

Friends, it is God's universe, and Christ is our king.

But we live our lives in Pilate's world, and it takes faith and hope and love—strength and courage and determination—to be God's ambassadors at all times,

in every word and every action;

in every interaction, and every moment of self-restraint;

in every decision of whether and how much to give,
and where;

in how we spend our time and how we pray for the world.

We live in hope and trust, while we minister to a world where both winners and losers are wounded, sullen, defensive, sputtering with rage, and psychotically afraid.

We are here to bring them all healing and joy and justice and understanding and the confidence to accept themselves and those around them for who they are,

and to invite them all to grow, as we seek to grow, into the people that God created us to be.

What does the LORD require of us but to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with our God?^{vii}

“Lead on, O king eternal, till sin’s fierce war shall cease,
and holiness shall whisper the sweet amen of peace;
for not with swords’ loud clashing, nor roll of stirring drums;
with deeds of love and mercy the heavenly kingdom comes.”^{viii}

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ⁱ Mira Hadlow, “Home,” in Hadlow, *As Muses Burn* (211-212). Miranda Williamson. Kindle Edition.

ⁱⁱ Hadlow, “Home”

ⁱⁱⁱ “RAISE Questions and Answers: Questions & Answers about Psychosis,” National Institute of Mental Health (<https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/topics/schizophrenia/raise/raise-questions-and-answers#1>)

^{iv} “RAISE Questions and Answers,” NIMH

^v C.H. Dodd has an excellent discussion of this in Dodd, *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1951).

^{vi} In this section, I am making abundant use of both Eugene Peterson’s translation in *The Message Bible* (MSG) and that of the Common English Bible (CEB), as well as the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), which is the primary translation I use for study and preaching.

^{vii} Micah 6:8

^{viii} Ernest W. Shurtleff, 1888