

“You Say that I am a King”
John 18:28-38
Palm/Passion Sunday
March 16, 2008

Then Pilate said, “So, are you a king or not?” Jesus answered, “You tell me.”
John 18:37, The Message

More than likely there were two processions that day, two processions that seemed destined for a collision. Entering through the eastern gate of the city, probably on a stallion outfitted for war, rode Pontius Pilate—the Roman governor of Idumea, Judea, and Samaria. Pilate only came to Jerusalem on the high holy days. His usual residence was in the coastal city of Caesarea Maritima, some 60 miles to the west. But with the Feast of Passover approaching, he took up temporary residence in the Fortress Antonia. In that way he could pay his respects to the local leaders and acknowledge their customs while keeping the peace as the city swelled with pilgrims. Imagine if you will, his arrival in the city. It has been described as:

A visual panoply of imperial power: cavalry on horses, foot soldiers, leather armor, helmets, weapons, banners, golden eagles mounted on poles, sun glinting on metal and gold. Sounds: the marching of feet, the creaking of leather, the clinking of bridles, the beating of drums.¹

Those who gathered to watch Pilate’s entrance more than likely silently lined the streets—some awed, most resentful that this foreigner occupier would be present during such an important Jewish feast. Remember now, Passover was not only a celebration of God’s deliverance of the children of Israel from Egypt, but a reminder of that time when God made them into a nation. So the arrival of Caesar’s representative was a far from joyous occasion. Add to that unwelcome entry the fact that inscriptions on various banners and shields proclaimed that the emperor Pilate served was not only the ruler of Rome but also the self-proclaimed Son of God, and you have the makings of a very tense situation. His coming into Jerusalem from that western gate generated little if any sympathy from those who stood by and watched.

¹ Marcus Borg & John Dominic Crossan, The Last Week, HarperSanFrancisco, New York, 2006, p. 3

Now on the other side of the city, entering through the eastern gate, rode Jesus—the carpenter of Nazareth turned itinerant preacher. Coming down the Mount of Olives, he rode on a borrowed donkey, a beast of burden. As he came near the gate, enthusiastic followers spread out their cloaks and laid leafy branches on the road. In the Palestine of that day, doing so was the traditional way to welcome a national hero. Quite appropriately, and unlike those who stood silently on the other side of the city, those who watched Jesus ride through the gate shouted, “Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David! Hosanna in the highest heaven!” There are some who say that, “Jesus’ procession deliberately countered what was happening on the other side of the city. Pilate’s procession embodied the power, glory, and violence that ruled the world. Jesus’ procession embodied an alternative vision, the kingdom of God.”² That may or may not be true. Whatever the case, as usually happens when two competing visions vie for the hearts and minds of the very same people, an inevitable confrontation was bound to occur.

Now let me take a moment and remind you that throughout the season of Lent, we have been taking a look at some of the “I am” sayings that are found in the gospel of John. As I have told you over these past six weeks, Jesus took common, everyday images and used them to not only to give us a better understanding of himself, but a better understanding of ourselves as well. And by looking at these sayings during these 40 days of Lent, by remembering that Jesus said such things as, “I am the Bread of Life”...“I am the Light of the World”...“I am the Good Shepherd”...“I am the True Vine”...“I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life,” I believe that we can come to understand what will happen next Sunday better than we ever have before. Now I will have to admit that the “I am” saying for this week is not one that is usually considered to be in that particular group of sayings. You might even say that it is quite a stretch to be including it in our discussion of these famous texts. But on this day, as we begin to shift the focus of our attention from the excitement of Jesus’ entry into the city to the sorrow of Jesus’ death outside the city, it seems to me to be very appropriate to do so. I sure do hope I can show you why.

² Ibid, p. 4

The “I am” saying for this morning comes from that moment when those two processions finally did meet. It is taken from that moment when the bearers of these two competing visions finally stood in front of one another. As you heard me say earlier, a confrontation like this was probably inevitable, as Jesus and Pilate represented very different understandings of the ideas of kingship and kingdom. Now I’ll cut Pilate a bit of slack at the beginning. I’ll acknowledge that this was a confrontation that he really did not want to have. It was clear that the Jewish authorities were attempting to manipulate him for their own ends. But as the encounter progressed, it is also clear that the decisions he made were his own. Hearing what the Jewish authorities had told him, and also probably knowing of what had happened during that Sunday procession, the Roman governor started his interrogation by asking the Jewish preacher, “Are you the King of the Jews?” Jesus responded with a great line that turned the tables on him: “Did you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?” Caught off guard, and realizing that Jesus saw how the authorities were trying to manipulate him, the governor tried to appear strong by asking, “I am not a Jew, am I?” Well, technically, no. Although little is known about Pilate’s life before he was appointed as governor, it is obvious that he was not Jewish. He was a friend of Caesar. He was Roman and he worshiped Roman gods. He was definitely not Jewish. But in John’s gospel, “the Jews” represented anyone who rejected Jesus. And it seems obvious that Pilate was in the process of doing so. I like what one has written. Listen:

Pilate...is not a victim in this trial, nor is he some hapless innocent, trapped by the machinations of the Jewish leadership. Rather, Pilate is a man, like so many others in this Gospel, to whom Jesus speaks the truth about himself and God. Pilate is given the opportunity to make his decision about Jesus—not his legal decision, but his theological decision. That is... Jesus puts Pilate on trial. Pilate is asked to decide whether he will receive Jesus’ word, whether he will identify himself with those who “have the love of God” in them, or whether he will turn his back on God.³

³ Gail R. O’Day, The Gospel of John, The New Interpreter’s Bible, Vol. IX, Abingdon Press, Nashville, 1995, p. 826

In the midst of his own interrogation, as the world was quickly turning against him, Jesus put Pilate on trial, just as he puts us on trial. We too are forced to answer the same questions as Pilate. But I'm getting ahead of myself. Let's get back to the story. Thrown off his game, the governor tried to gather himself. He asked, "What have you done?" He wanted Jesus' own words to be heard. But he didn't answer Pilate's question. Instead he claimed that his kingdom "is not of this world." Now with those words Jesus didn't mean that his kingdom was somewhere "up there." He wasn't talking about some place called "heaven." Rather, he simply meant that his kingdom exercised a different kind of power than those kingdoms of this world—a power that brings light and life to all it touches. It was a kingdom centered upon revelation, not revolution; upon truth, not treason. And unlike Pilate's kingdom, it was the truth of God's love, not the truth of imperial might, which would be the source of its amazing growth. But Pilate was incapable of hearing that truth. In his way of thinking, there was only room for one king. So he couldn't help but demand an answer. "So you are a King?" And once again Jesus put Pilate on trial by saying, "You say that I am a King." The translation known as The Message renders those words like this: "You tell me." Or as another has put it, "You have said it, but is that what you believe?"

There is a story that can give us a better understanding of the thinking behind that question. It is a story about an old Methodist businessman who was once confronted by a rather enthusiastic young evangelist. This well-meaning preachifier asked the man whether or not he had been saved, and whether or not he had accepted Jesus Christ as his personal Lord and Savior. The old Methodist businessman thought for a moment and then replied, "Why do you ask me such a thing? I could tell you anything. Here are the names of my banker, my insurer, and my employees. Go and ask them if I have been saved." That old man could have told that young evangelist anything, you see. He could have referred to himself in all manner of flowery speech. But in the end, all that really mattered was what the young man thought. Based on his own experience, after talking with others who knew the man well, what was his decision? When all was said and done,

you see, all that counted was what this young evangelist had come to believe. When he looked at that old Methodist, did he see someone who was saved?

That is exactly what Jesus was saying to Pilate. Jesus could have made any kind of self-declaration, but what was important was what Pilate believed. What was important was whether Pilate thought he was a king. The future of both men was depending upon it. Now, if nothing else, Pilate was smart. He could not have stayed in office for the 10 years that he did if he had not done his homework. More than likely he had read the reports of what Jesus had been teaching, heard the stories of what Jesus had been doing, and now saw the type of person that was standing right in front of him. He also knew how the Jewish authorities had trumped up the charges against this carpenter from Nazareth. And he was wise enough to know that this exhausted human specimen before him, this man who had been abandoned by everyone who once followed him, the one in whom he could find no crime, could never cause the type of trouble that Barabbas, that imprisoned champion of the Zionist activists, had caused. Yet his question of “What is truth?” showed that he was truly indifferent to everything that was going on. And that indifference, that refusal to answer the question, that choice to do the politically correct thing rather than the morally correct thing, caused Jesus to be taken outside the city and nailed to the cross.

“You have said it, but is that what you believe?” That is a question that haunts me. For the past several weeks, you see, I have talked about what Jesus has said about himself. I have stood before you and told you that Jesus said, “I am bread, I am light, I am life...” Now today, at the start of Holy Week, it is time for me, just like Pilate before me, to decide what I will say about Jesus. It’s no different for you. As a matter of fact, everything about this upcoming Holy Week reminds us that a decision is demanded of us. When the guards came to the garden to arrest Jesus, for example, the disciples were forced to make a decision: should they stay or should they run. When Peter was asked in the courtyard if he had been with Jesus, he was forced to make a decision: should he answer “yes” or should he answer “no.” When Pilate stood in front of Jesus, he was forced to make a decision: to release him or to crucify him. The governor of Judea was

caught right in the middle and he didn't like it. But then, who would? There is no neutrality before the cross, you see. There is no safe place to stand. And because that is so, we are brought back to Jesus' all-important words.

“You say that I am a King.” My sisters and brothers, this “I am” saying is one that we are going to have to affirm ourselves. It is one that you and I will have to decide whether or not to make before this week is over. For just like Pilate before us, Jesus has put you and me on trial. I read something earlier this week that went like this: “Whether we say so or not, Jesus is still king. If we fail to say so, even the rocks will cry out...Look at your life, your relationship to Jesus. Can Jesus say to you affirmingly, tenderly, acceptingly, ‘You say that I am a King.’”⁴ Or as an anonymous poem I found this week more pointedly put it:

*I stood alone at the cross of Christ,
In the hush of the twilight dim,
And faced the question
That pierced my heart,
What shall I do with him?
Crown or crucify, what shall it be?
No other choice is offered me.⁵*

⁴ Maxie Dunham, *Jesus' Claims, Our Promises*, The Upper Room, Nashville, 1985, p. 86

⁵ From Edward Markquart's "Sermon Notes," www.sermonsfromseattle.com