

John 18:33-37

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 to the Jews. 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."

In a far but fractious corner of the world, an alleged criminal appears before a bureaucrat. To the world it's just another political prisoner arrested on a trumped charge and appearing before an official who knows he has no choice but to be a cog in the great machine that maintains domination and control. A local criminal of fateful insignificance appears before the local bureaucrat of an international power. Their meeting will not make the news much beyond the sticks of this remote place. But then again, their meeting does make the news—the good news, the gospel—according to John.

John's gospel tells us that, unbeknownst to the world, as the prisoner and the bureaucrat meet, two great realms are actually facing off in electric tension. One is a kingdom, an empire, a system of power clearly understood by the world. But the other is a realm that defies classification. Is it a kingdom? Maybe, and maybe not. It's different from what the bureaucrat expected, and empire is warily disturbed by it. The Gospel of John allows us to be in the headquarters, where Jesus of Nazareth appears before Pontius Pilate of Rome, and where each of us will have to decide, "Who rules?"

Now that question is harder to decide than most think. Consider the expectations that you feel you have to appease, the goals you're striving for; and your lifestyle and hopes for the good life.

And who is it—what is it, that is governing all that? Who rules—what rules in determining your goals and aspirations, your position or significance, your lifestyle and self-image? "What really governs things?" An empire of power, affluence, and "the good life"? Or that other realm of the Life of a disarming man soon to be executed?

“Who really rules?” For a moment, even Pilate wonders.

“Are you the King?”

“My kingdom is not from this world.”

“So you are a king?”

“You say that I am a king.”

I am not sure the Church has ever been wise to call this “Christ the King Sunday” because “king” is a title that Jesus clearly avoids, if not shuns. Kings have to do with empires, domination, riches and force. But Jesus displays none of these. Jesus’ rule is disarmingly different, and it makes Pilate and his empire very uneasy. And soon the difference becomes clear: Jesus will not rule by the myth of heroic greatness and might, the myth of unlimited success and wealth, the myth of guaranteed victory and undeniable right, by which all empires eventually rule. No, Jesus will not rule by the myth that dazzles, captivates, enthralls, or dominates. Instead, he tells Pilate, “For this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.” Jesus rules not by being a man of mythic proportion, but by being the one who tells the truth.

Every great person or nation becomes associated with a myth. Now, myths are not necessarily falsehoods. Most myths are formed to convey a truth in evocative and moving ways, so that people will “feel the rush,” and be inspired and captivate by a vision of what is cherished as true.

“The American Dream” or “the American Way” have functioned in this very mythic way to move you and me, and to inspire our passion for our country’s ideals. But after a while, the evocative and moving power of an *empire’s* myth always takes on a life of its own; and then the myth, very subtly, loses its footing in the ongoing truth of things and gets carried away with itself and its “rush.” Every empire generates a myth that expresses its vision of truth and glory; but as time goes on, every empire has eventually depended more and more on the power of its myth rather than on the voice of the truth.

And that is why Jesus always disturbs and comes to threaten the way of empire; for Jesus is the unsettling voice of the truth about the powers, you, and me. Jesus subverts myth’s power to enthrall because Jesus relentlessly voices the truth that frees! Empire, however, will always sacrifice the truth that frees in a vain attempt to protect the myth that enthralls and subjugates.

Empires rule by their myth; Jesus rules by the truth. Who rules—what rules our life now? An empire’s myth of affluence and success, of having the might and the right—a myth that subjugates? Or a moving truth of justice and mercy, of doing the right and the good—the truth that frees? Even America has had days of late when it’s not so

easy to tell who or what is governing our course. But I can tell you one thing: Jesus is never going to be the voice of empire's myth; Jesus will always be known and heard as the voice of the truth.

And so Pilate's dilemma . . . On the one hand, Pilate is drawn to the truth that is Jesus because Pilate, like all human beings, needs the truth. But on the other hand, Pilate knows he must try to silence the truth that is Jesus because Pilate, like all servants of empire, fears the truth. Ever been there—fearing the truth you need? At some basic level we always need to hear the truth, and in a world of so much hype and lies our souls ache for the truth . . . to set things right, to tell it like it is, and to give us the word . . . and the way we can trust. But we also *fear* the truth . . . because it might reveal . . . our complicity in the myth that has deceived. We fear the truth because it might reveal the sham not only of empire, but of you and me . . . who found the myth so wonderful and have ardently served its ways of domination and reward. Can you really handle the truth about you . . . and yours . . . and the myths you've held so dear?

Believing that his people could not handle the truth, Pilate thought he knew how to handle Jesus, alright. He would exercise the empire's power to render Jesus impotent, its glory to render Jesus pathetic, its might to render Jesus wrong, and its lethal force to make Jesus dead, gone, and most importantly silent! So much for the truth of Jesus in a world where people can't really handle the truth about themselves . . . So there was another crucifixion . . . but then, incredibly, there is a *resurrection* . . . of the Way, the Truth, and the Life! After Pilate decided, God decides that the truth can never be silenced and will always find a voice . . . because Jesus will never stay dead and will always be the Way, the Truth, and the Life!

So whose grave did Pilate really dig—Jesus' or empire's? And what really leads to the good life—the myth of grand affluence and great might, or the awful truth of our sinful need and of God's terrible love? Who rules? “Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.” To whom do you *need* to be listening? Maybe it's not always Pilate's office in far away Jerusalem. This place, here and now, is also one of those crucial corners where those two great realms still face off, you see, in electric tension. One is a kingdom, an empire, a system of power clearly understood by the world. But the other is a realm that defies the world . . . with but a word of truth—a Word spoken, a Word given, a Word made flesh—God's Word! And Satan with all his grand myths and raging power can shut neither the ears, nor the mouth, nor the grave of the Truth in Christ Jesus our Lord, who lives and reigns with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God now and forever.

Amen!