

I have been waiting for this passage to come around again for a while now. For obvious reasons: fake news, alternative facts, propaganda campaigns, generally high levels of mendacity from people who we should be able to trust. Sometimes I feel like Pilate, asking with exasperation, “what is truth?” I have heard different theories about what Pilate meant here, that he was trying to be sort of philosophical, or that perhaps he was even mocking Jesus, but in the context of things I think he is really just sort of tired of the nonsense and he really does want one good reason to get this particular unpleasantness off of his list.

To quote the Warden from *Cool Hand Luke*, “What we’ve got here is failure to communicate.” This scene is essentially about two men who, while they may be speaking the same language, are not really having the same conversation. You may have experienced something like this, maybe at the thanksgiving table, trying to have a civil conversation with someone who doesn’t exactly share your worldview or even seem to be using the same frame of reality. It seems to happen to people quite a bit, fortunately most of the time, the person we are failing to communicate with doesn’t have the authority to have us crucified.

This is Christ the King Sunday, and the conversation around the notion of Jesus being a king is central to the rationale for Pilate doing what Pilate does. Let’s run through the big picture: an angry mob of Jews shows up outside Pilate’s office at the crack of dawn, interrupting his morning coffee. They push this bedraggled, beat up guy towards him and say deal with him, he’s a bad guy. Pilate says, “what kind of ‘bad guy is he?’” But they don’t give him an answer they just say, “trust us, he’s a bad guy or we wouldn’t have brought him here.” Now, it’s early in the morning, and Pilate is not known for being super sensitive to justice and such, but even he is not just going to crucify some poor sot on the say so of a bunch of people he probably doesn’t really like very much in the first place. So Pilate brings Jesus inside and begins to question him.

Their conversation is interesting. Pilate asks him whether he is the King of the Jews, now this could have been because he had heard about some of the ruckus that happened a week ago when Jesus rode into Jerusalem, or it could have been exactly as Jesus said and someone told him that was the question to ask. Pilate’s response is a little terse revealing that perhaps Jesus was close to the mark. Jesus claiming to be a king or some kind of leader would be the sort of revolutionary behavior that Pilate would be on guard against. It would be grounds for crucifying someone as a rebel or an insurrectionist.

Jesus doesn’t exactly say he’s a king, but he also doesn’t flat out deny it. He claims a different sort of kingdom, the kind that men like Pilate have no interest in whatsoever. For Pilate and those like him, the kingdoms of the world are enough to manage. In the kingdoms of the world, truth is relative, history is written by the winners. Pilate appears to judge that Jesus is rather not a threat to the Empire, but he knows what is waiting for him outside the headquarters is a mob that has demanded Jesus’ blood. He knows that truth is often defined by those who are strong enough to impose their version of it on others. I’m not sure that he even knows what Jesus means by truth.

My question for us though is, do we? Do we understand Jesus and his Kingdom, or do we keep running to leaders like Pilate and hope they can do their best to fix things? You hear echoes of Pilate asking that question all the time: “What is truth?” The implication is always that we can’t really know what the truth is, we don’t have enough facts, we don’t know who to believe. In Pilate’s world the truth can be a little slippery. In Jesus’ kingdom though the truth is not hard to find. In Jesus’ kingdom the truth has markers, he often referred to them as fruits of some sort in his parables. He told his disciples to bear

fruit worthy of the Kingdom. You may not always know whether to believe what someone tells you, but you can look at how they behave. Jesus' Kingdom does not function the way Pilate's beloved Empire does. In Pilate's world, truth doesn't really matter as much as power. In Pilate's world ruthlessness is probably better than grace, I mean even when he makes a half-hearted attempt at being just, he doesn't really try that hard before defaulting to violence. In Pilate's world showing strength is preferable to showing love.

Jesus' Kingdom is nothing like that. We who claim to follow Jesus very often make the mistake of believing that somehow it is. We put our hope in the Pilates of the world and in the way that the Empire runs. Jesus was obviously not immune to the violence of the Empire, but he is thoroughly unimpressed by it, even when it was about to rear up with terrifying brutality. Jesus doesn't seem to hold any deep enmity towards Pilate or the system he represents. Rome is never really the villain, even though objectively they were the ones who put up the crosses and drove the nails. Pilate is presented almost sympathetically, even though what history tells us about him is that he was anything but reluctant to be brutal and violent.

Pilate is more or less irrelevant to Jesus even though he has ultimate power over his life and death. Jesus doesn't even try to convince Pilate about anything, he knows that the bridge is too far. He would never be able to convince such a man that truth could be known, in fact it is standing right in front of him. He would never be able to convince such a man that Love is stronger than death. He would never be able to convince such a man that mercy is better than power and that kindness is more effective than violence. He would never be able to convince Pilate of those realities because in Pilate's kingdom none of it is truth. The question is, can he convince you? Do you hear his voice? Do you resonate with the truth of who he is and what he teaches? Can you believe that his kingdom is not from here, and yet it can be here with us? Or do you just want to call for the bandit?