

Jesus is King

John 18.33-37

Rev Dr Jos M. Strengholt

Our Lord Jesus Christ is King. We celebrate that on this last Sunday of the church calendar. Next week is what we call Advent I - the first Sunday of the new year.

The calendar of the church is not similar to the calendar of our world. Just as our agenda is not a copy of the agenda of the people around us.

And Jesus is King, but not as we understand our own royalty. His Kingdom is not like a kingdom of this world.

Jesus and King Willem Alexander do not have too much in common.

To consider what the kingship of Jesus means for us, we will look at that strange dialogue between Jesus and Pontius Pilate.

1. King of the Jews?

The Roman governor, Pilate, was from the province of Pontus in Asia Minor. He asks Jesus: Are you king of the Jews?

What language would they have spoken together? Maybe there were translators present?

As a Roman ruler, from Pontus, Pilate must have spoken Greek, possibly as his mother tongue. It is very unlikely that he spoke Aramaic, the local language in Jerusalem.

It is likely that Jesus also spoke Greek, a very common language in Israel in those days. So I assume Greek was the language of their discussion.

The Jewish accusers of Jesus stayed outside the palace of the Roman governor. They refused to become impure by being in touch with the pagan governor of their land.

What a morality of those Jewish leaders. What a twisted view of God. Killing Jesus is doing God a service, but to enter the house of Pilate is unacceptable for God, was their viewpoint.

The leaders of Jerusalem wanted to have Jesus killed. The Roman occupiers allowed them in general to sort out their own justice, but when it came to capital punishment, this was purely the prerogative of the Roman governor.



Jesus was falsely accused of being seditious, one of the things the Romans hated. They had to deal a lot with rebels, and their method of dealing with them was simple. Kill them as gruesome as you can. There was enough wood available for many crosses.

We really do not know whether Pilate was serious when he asked Jesus whether he was the king of Israel; possibly he was just mocking. Or he hoped to get some insight in the mind of this man who was accused of being a rebel.

It was certainly an interesting event in his otherwise predictable work of managing the place.



Whatever motivated Pilate, the question was problematic. In modern law, people who stand accused in court are not obliged to answer questions that incriminate themselves.

Not that Pilate cared about that concept.

And how could Jesus reply? If he would say, 'yes I am the king,' he would incriminate himself, but based on a very wrong understanding of what sort of king he claimed to be.

And if he said, 'no, I am not,' he would not speak the full truth. Because he surely is the king. Not just of Israel, or the church, but of all creation. He made all things; He has all power in heaven and on earth, He will judge the world.

So Jesus counters with his own question. 'Do you, Pilate think I am the king, or did people tell you this, just to accuse me?'

It seems that Pilate wants to avoid involvement in the matter. He was a practical man. 'I am not a Jew, this is your internal business. And your own leaders accused you of treason, so you must have done something bad to make them so upset.'

The political games of the Jewish leaders and Pilate were a dirty game. Pilate needed these leaders to rule over the unruly little area of Judah and Jerusalem. And the Jewish leaders needed to keep Pilate happy for maintaining their own positions of power.

This was a dirty balance. It had nothing to do with justice, integrity, truth, but they were involved in a dance for power and held each other by the throat.

When Pilate asked those religious leaders of Jerusalem what Jesus had done wrong, they barely answered him. 'If this man was not doing evil, we would not have brought him to you, would we?'

The implication of this question was: 'You better do as we ask of you, or you will be in trouble.'

2. My kingdom is not of this world

Again Pilate asks Jesus: 'what have you done!' Are you really a rebel?'

Jesus refuses to use the word 'king' for himself, but he does speak of his Kingdom. But He insists, this is not a kingdom of this world, and it is not a kingdom from this world.

It is not of this world - it is entirely different from other kingdoms. And it is not from this world. Its origin is elsewhere.

And Jesus flatly denies any seditious act. If he would claim to be a worldly king, his followers would have violently fought the Jewish leaders when they came to arrest him. When Peter tried to defend Jesus, he was told off for doing that.

As Christians we have been slow at understanding this. We do not serve God with the methods of our world. We do not serve God by fighting, or by political power games, or by any means that governments use to forward their goals. The idea of conquering lands with the cross on our shields and helmets bring shame on our Lord, who is not that sort of a king.

This does not mean that sometimes war might not be justified. It does not mean that political power games are not sometimes needed.

But we must be very careful to not equate that with the kingdom of Jesus and the will of God. We cannot avoid working and living in a our rotten world, that is very different from the kingdom of our Lord Jesus Christ.

As people who participate in the eternal kingdom of Jesus, we are called by God to participate in the life of the kingdom of this world, to show love to all people, develop our world, to do what we can to make our world a better world. But that is often one step forward, two steps back.

As citizens of the kingdom of God, we do impact the world we live in, and hopefully we are good representatives of our Lord and King.

But our best of intentions, the things that we do, what we achieve, never has the perfection of God's Kingdom, and whatever we do and achieve is always a mixed bag. And we must be careful not to use the name of God in vain for our those ventures.

Your serious acts of love are surely a sign of the kingdom of God, but we know our heart. Even our best intentions are only rarely not mixed up with selfish motives.

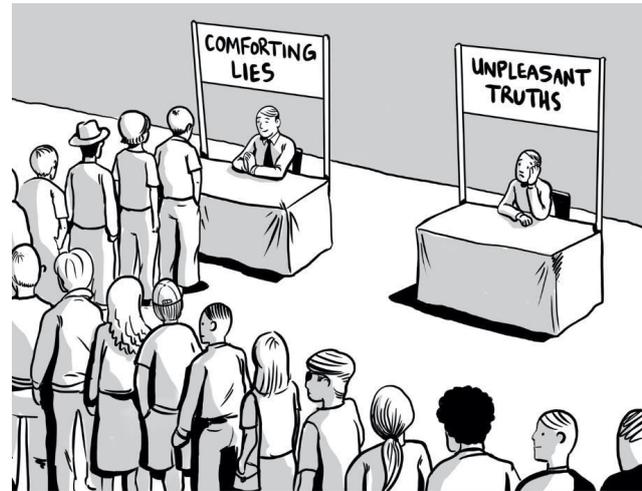


The tares grow up between the weed, and to see the difference is often hard, even for ourselves.

This continues to be difficult for us to grasp. We so easily assume that economic growth is the will of God, our fight against terrorism does God a favour, a powerful church is similar to the kingdom of God, and the angels rejoice when a Christian party wins more seats in parliament.

If we find it hard to see the difference between the kingdom of God and our life in this world, we cannot blame Pontius Pilate that he concluded, 'so you are a king after all. You have a kingdom.'

Again Jesus refuses to say yes or no. 'You say I am a king.' Because he is aware that Pilate will not understand the distinction.



3. His Kingdom is from above

And so Jesus continues, "For this purpose I was born and for this purpose I have come into the world—to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice."

His Kingdom is not from this world. And He has come into the world. Twice Jesus underlines his extraterrestrial origins. He has come from the world of God.

And He came to bear witness to the truth.

Now truth is not the prime motivator for political leaders, I believe. So Pilate shrugged his shoulders, 'what is the truth'. Truth does not keep the rulers in power. It does not put butter on your bread.

And in a sense, speaking the truth costs Jesus his life. The Jewish leaders were not interested in Him talking, because He undermined their position of leadership in Israel.

Jesus came from God - He was God's ultimate spokesman, the self-revelation of God. And that, predictably, clashes with the vested interests both of the palace and of the temple.

And this is where the Kingdom of God, and the King, will always clash with the world we live in. Truth reveals the lies. Light reveals the darkness, Love lays bare the roots of our hatred.

We cannot stand that. We all desire love, peace and joy, but please, on our own terms. The love, the peace and the joy of God however, that pure self-revelation of God, is always painful. Always hurting us.

Our King, Jesus Christ, shakes us to the core. It is very pious to say that we love Him and that we desire Him close to us. But do we?

Meeting with Jesus Christ is the toughest thing because He confronts us always with who we are.

Now thank God, when his light reveals our darkness, he is always present as the forgiving Lord. His balm of love and forgiveness softens our wounds. But the confrontation is always there.

“Everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice,” says Jesus to Pilate. Clearly, Pilate is not interested. He is not of the truth. He did not open his mind and his heart for receiving the King as a presence in his life.

Conclusion

We who have received Him in our life, have allowed the truth to shine in us. Maybe just a glimpse. But it's a start.

And as soon as we are part of his Kingdom, because we recognise his kingly rule over us, this confrontation with truth never stops, because He is never far from you.

This confrontation with truth is not in the first place something of us on the side of Jesus against others. The confrontation is first and foremost within ourselves. His truth enlightens us to show us who we are. That is painful.

Jesus Christ, our King, is our highest authority. But because He is so different from all powers in this world, because He is so different from us, there will always be major friction.

We live our Christian life on the interface between the Kingdom of God and the kingdom of this world. And living on that interface hurts because two kingdoms pull at us, and we can, in this life, never fully belong to one or the other.

We are pilgrims in a dry land. We desire to fill our heart and mind with the mind of Christ; but that puts us on a ram course with our modern culture, which also continuously demands our full loyalty.

We are, from the perspective of the world, subversive people.

Because we side with Jesus Christ. Our King.

Amen.