

[Introduction]

Our text for today is John 18:33-37.

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

³⁴ Jesus answered, “Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?” ³⁵ Pilate 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?” ³⁶ Jesus 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.” ³⁷ Pilate 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.”

I want to invite us for a moment to step into the text. To imagine yourself as personally present in these events. To place yourself in the scene. Let’s pause, and step into the shoes of the gentile ruler, Pilate.

There was a riot building outside the praetorian palace grounds. As Pilate approached Jesus their angry cries grew steadily louder in his ears. It was morning, and there was a sense of urgency, of thick tension in the air. He approached the stranger, the accused criminal, Jesus, the cause of it all. But he did not find what he expected.

Pilate was serving as a Roman Governor of one of the most powerful empires of all time.

At that time, the Jews were a subjugated people. A conquered people. The Roman Empire had stretched out in seemingly endless directions and conquered peoples wherever it went. And He, Pilate, was the dispenser of Roman law and authority over the conquered peoples of Judaea. As governor it was his job to keep the peace. Pilate had the authority to send out Roman legions at any time to stamp out any rebellion against the empire. And the threat of rebellion was very real.

The Jews didn’t like the Romans. The Romans were gentiles, a people who were unclean. And yet an unclean Empire had conquered Judaea, and now the Jews had gentile overlords. As these very events unfolded the Jewish mob that had brought Jesus before Pilate refused to enter the Roman grounds for fear of making themselves ritually unclean before Passover. It was understood that entering the home of a gentile would make a Jew unclean. So imagine the strong feelings they had about being under gentile Roman rule.

It would not be too long after these events that Jewish religious zealots would lead a rebellion which Rome would put down in brutal ferocity. The Jewish rebels lead a massive uprising to overthrow their Roman overlords, which failed miserably. Thousands of their people would be slaughtered. And as Jesus prophesied, The Romans would completely destroy the Jewish temple. The blackened burn marks on the temple grounds are still visible to this day.

Pilate knew two things. First it was his duty to take any claims of Title and Power outside the Roman Empire very seriously. And Pilate very likely knew a second thing. That the Jewish leaders knew all of this, and were playing the system.

You see they knew that as Governor, Pilate alone had the legal authority to sentence a man to death. This is why Jesus had been brought before him. They also knew that Pilate would take any claims of Kingship, of authority outside of the Empire very seriously. Any leader that stood against the Roman Empire would be put to death. But it makes no sense that a rebellious people longing for the freedom of Roman rule would bring a rebel leader before him.

Whether or not the Jewish leaders were trying to manipulate him, as Pilate looked Jesus up and down he knew that it was imperative, it was vitally important, that he take any claims of sedition seriously. If the man standing before him was a rival to the Roman Emperor, a rebel, or a revolutionary, then he was a problem. The only ruler with true power was Caesar, the Roman Emperor. Anyone claiming to be a ruler apart from the Empire, needed to be either put down or brought under its control.

As he heard the accusations against Jesus, one of the greatest charges was that he identified as the King of the Jews. The trouble with this was that Herod the first had already been appointed King of the Jews by the Roman Senate. So who was this man they had brought before him? Was he a rival King?

Pilate was a governor. He had mixed with the aristocracy. He knew what a King looked like. And this man before him. This man of plain clothing and appearance, beaten and humbled, looked nothing like a King.

The High Priest and his followers were using their influence to stir up the crowd even more. The riot outside was growing. The sound would have been deafening. It was Pilate's job to keep the peace.

But standing before him he sees a defeated man, humiliated, quiet, beaten and bleeding before him.

Pilate's question is one of confusion. The words would have had a foul taste in his mouth as he said them. This was almost a bad joke.

He looked Jesus up and down and asked "Are you the King of the Jews?"

³⁴ Jesus answered, "Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?" ³⁵ Pilate 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?" ³⁶ Jesus 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." ³⁷ Pilate 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."

This is a moment of great and profound irony, and sadness. This was a complete and absolute failure of recognition. Pilate had no idea who he was looking at. But we know, because the Bible tells us.

In John 1:1 we read:

¹In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ²He was in the beginning with God. ³All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. ⁴In him was life, and the life was the light of all people.

And in 1:14:

¹⁴And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.

And in Philippians 2

⁶Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; ⁷rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness.

What we're reading here is the truth of Jesus' true identity. Jesus is the Logos, the Living Word of God clothed in flesh. When in Genesis we read that God spoke the universe into creation, it is He himself, His Living Word that goes forth and creates life. [PAUSE] God's speaking is His doing. [STOP]

God said let there be light, and there was light. God said let there be lights in the expanse of the heavens, and it was so. God said let us make humankind in our image, and so humanity was made. God speaks, and creation obeys. It is His Word that goes forth and breathes life into all creation.

The Bible tells us, and we testify that God, the same Living Word that created the heavens and the earth, clothed Himself in the form of His creation. That the Word took on human likeness. He took on human flesh and nature. He was born into a gender. He was born into a race of people. He was born into a culture.

The very Word that spoke the universe into being is standing before Pilate. He alone defines what is good and not good. He alone is king, ruler over the cosmos.

To top it all off the very man standing before Jesus who is about to decide whether he lives or dies is *known* by God. Fully. Completely. In his deepest and most intimate parts. In his darkest secrets and his brightest moments, the good and the bad. The creator God who knows us better than anyone. Who knows the plans He has for us. He who loves us and desires for us to know Him more than anything, is standing before one of His creations, Pilate, and awaiting death.

Pause on that for a second. Let that sink in.

God, clothed in human flesh and nature, is standing before Pilate. And Pilate has no idea who He is.

I wonder if we stood in Pilate's shoes, would we make the same mistake? Would we recognise Jesus in that moment if He stood before us? If a man, plain in dress and appearance, blackened and beaten stood before us, would we think of him as a king? Pilate certainly wouldn't have. In ancient Biblical times there was a very clear idea of what a king looked like.

If you lived at that time it was very likely that you lived under the authority of a king. And Kings had the best of everything. 1 Samuel 8 gives us a good picture of this. A king would take the best the land had to offer, the food, the real-estate, everything. They could rule with an iron fist and kill off anyone in their kingdom that disagreed with them. They controlled the distribution of wealth, the world of trade and the kingdom's economy. Whatever they wanted to build, the people would pay for in taxes and labour. And the king would also conscript your sons into his army to fight against other Kings. Verse seventeen even goes so far as to say that a King's subjects would become His slaves. They were lavished with power, influence and wealth, the finest that such status could afford. Kings got to define good and evil by their own terms.

Some even went so far as to call themselves gods, have images made of themselves and demand the worship of their subjects. In fact at the time of these events there was a Roman cult of the Emperor. The Roman Emperor would be worshipped by parts of Roman society, and doing so afforded special privileges. A city that worshipped the Emperor as god would be recognised as special, and given reductions in tax or benefits like new roads and structures.

Can you imagine that? If worshipping our Prime Minister afforded a city political benefits?

The thing about Jesus though, is that he radically redefined what it meant to be a king. Jesus was a revolutionary. But not in the way that people expected.

Jesus tells Pilate "My Kingdom is not from this world". - Emphasis on the word from.

Jesus' Kingdom does not come out of a worldly model. It doesn't follow the recognised pattern that we see in human society. When He answers Pilate, He's not denying that He is a king. But His kingdom, and worldly kingdoms are vastly different. His kingdom is not derived from this world. Because Jesus' kingdom has a radically different value system. Jesus' Kingdom is defined by the servitude of a King to his people, not the other way around.

In ancient times a King would offer safety through laws, regulations, and conscripted armies that protected the people of their kingdom. But they also took the highest position of privilege in society. Remember that they took the best that society has to offer, and a King's subjects were His servants. They were bound to serve him.

Jesus' Kingdom is radically different. It redefines greatness and power, and it is completely apart from kingdoms of the world. Instead of being defined by the world. Jesus' Kingdom is defined by God's character, that Jesus has revealed.

Rather than being a king who showed up and conquered the Roman armies, who took the best from his people, who mixed exclusively with the hodgepodge and well to do, and demanded that he servants waited on him hand and foot. Rather than all this. Jesus ministry on earth was defined by acts of humble servitude.

He kept the company of those hated and rejected by society. He befriended tax collectors, prostitutes, the unclean, the sick and the poor. He, King of the universe, treated them with honour, respect and love.

He gave sight to the blind. He made the lame walk. He fed the thousands. He shared the message of God's overwhelming living love for them. He gave. He fought for the cause of the poor.

On his knees he washed the feet of those who sought to serve him.

He, Jesus, is the Servant King.

The night before He stood before Pilate, he faced the guards that the Jewish leaders sent to arrest him in the Garden of Gethsemane. Surrounded by armed and hostile soldiers when they ask Him if he is Jesus, he declares "I Am", and they all fall over backward.

In the Gospel of John these words 'I Am' are the Greek translation of the Hebrew personal covenant name of God. God's name "I Am" is revealed to Moses in Exodus 3:14 and repeated many times in Isaiah (43:10, 46:9). Jesus uses

the name "I Am" in seven key moments in the Gospel of John (4:26, 6:20, 8:24, 8:28, 8:58, 13:19, 18:5) echoing His divine name. At the Garden of Gethsemane, as He is arrested He reveals his divine name one last time, at the moment that He gives up his life.

When Jesus stood before Pilate, and Pilate asked who He was, Jesus' reply was carefully worded.

Pilate did not recognise Him, because he did not know him. Jesus chose not to reveal himself fully to him.

This was the final moment at which He could have revealed His true identity.

This was the moment that Jesus could have replied: "I Am.", "I am He, the Living Word, creator of the universe, King of Kings and Lord of Lords, Son of the Living God. All things come from me and I am ruler over all."

He doesn't. In an act of servitude to all humanity, like a lamb to the slaughter, he conceals himself. He accepts death.

"For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth."

- That a sinful humanity could not save itself from eternal separation from God.

- That God, in His love, clothed Himself in flesh as the means to bring humanity back into fellowship with Him"

- That God so loved the world that He gave his only Son. That whosoever believes would not perish, but have eternal life.

Jesus tells Pilate "My Kingdom is not from this world". And it's true. His Kingdom is not from this world, but it is for this world.

His kingdom is one of servitude. Servitude epitomised by the cross, where the worlds true King conquers sin and death. In Jesus' Kingdom, He himself as King offers the ultimate act of servitude.

He is lead willingly to His own death. It is an act of free will. He is obedient to death on the cross.

He dies for the sins of humanity. Gains victory over it through an act of servitude, of self-giving love.

He dies to bring humanity back into fellowship with God, if only they would believe and love Him.

If you are a believer, we are called to live under Jesus' Kingdom. We are called to live as servants to one another.

In John 13:34-35 Jesus says this: ³⁴ "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. ³⁵ By this everyone will know that you are my disciples...."

And in Mark 10:42-45: "You know that those who are recognized as rulers over the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones make their authority over them felt. But it shall not be so among you. Rather, whoever wishes to become great among you will be your servant; whoever wishes to be first among you will be the slave of all. For the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

Christ radically redefined what it meant to be a King. And as believers we are called to live by his Word and example with our very lives.

As we move into advent in the weeks ahead, remember the fullness of God in Jesus.

- He who created the universe, who spoke the very cosmos into being, clothed himself in human flesh and nature.

- He who knows you intimately, who knows your purpose and very being, walked among us.

- He who holds authority over all things, the King of Kings, and Lord of Lords, stood before his creation humbly, choosing death on the cross.

[Closing Prayer]