

Are You A King, Jesus?

Texts: Maundy Thursday texts from **John's gospel**

Tonight I want to focus on Pontius Pilate and his encounter with Jesus. The gospels tell us of many encounters between people and Jesus: the woman caught in adultery, the Samaritan woman, Jairus the synagogue ruler and his daughter, the family in Bethany to which Lazarus, Mary, and Martha belong, the Jewish leaders, and the Pharisee Nicodemus who comes by night. There are so many. Most end up well, though some do not. But none are quite like this one. Pontius Pilate is the first representative of Rome, of the wider world, who gets to talk to Jesus. First up, who is this guy, and what's he about?

Well, Pontius Pilate was a bit of a jerk. He probably owed his post in Judea to the commander of the Praetorian guard, Sejanus, whose protégé he was. Now, if you ever watched the series *I, Claudius* on PBS, you know that Sejanus was the one who betrayed the Emperor Tiberius and was executed in A.D. 31. That's just a couple of years before Jesus' encounter with Pilate, so Pilate is on shaky ground with the emperor already. He's the protégé of a traitor. That's not good. He can't risk doing anything that would bring his loyalty to the emperor into question. Pilate understands authority, knows that he's under the rule of the emperor. He knows what it is to have a king.

In fact, he's been trying to please that emperor-king in vain for some time. When Pilate was first appointed as procurator of Judea, back in A.D. 26, he thought he could show off his allegiance to the Roman Emperor by bringing the Roman standards into Jerusalem. They were embossed with the figure of the emperor. But there was a problem: the emperor had claimed to be a god! That made the standards grossly offensive to the Jewish people of Jerusalem. Pilate didn't care. He wanted Emperor Tiberius to see that he knew what allegiance was. He refused to remove the standards. For five days the Jews protested. On the sixth day, Pilate sent his soldiers in disguise as civilians into the crowd in Jerusalem, and on his signal they drew their swords out from beneath their cloaks to frighten the Jews out of the streets. The Jews then simply pulled their tunics aside to bare their necks to show that they were ready to die rather than keep images of a false god in Jerusalem. Pilate finally withdrew the standards.

It was an embarrassing defeat for Pilate, and gave him a reputation as a violence-prone and stubborn man who didn't understand the culture of the people he was governing. The emperor must have been displeased. But Pilate had another brilliant plan to show the emperor that he knew how to get things done. He stole funds from the sacred treasury, known as the *Corbonas* called *Corban* in the New Testament) in order to build an aqueduct. The Jews of Jerusalem protested this confiscation of their sacred funds. Pilate dressed his soldiers as civilians again, but this time he outfitted them with clubs instead of swords. On his signal, Pilate's soldiers revealed the clubs and beat the protestors, some of them to death. Pilate must have thought that clubs would work better than swords, since his troops could actually use the clubs to punish the protestors. Once again, his decisions had led to violence and complaints about him.

Then, in A.D. 32, Pilate tried to honor the emperor Tiberius once more by bringing in gold-plated votive shields bearing the name, but not the image, of the divine Tiberius. He probably thought he could do that without objection. He placed them in Herod's old palace in Jerusalem. Why did he try to suck up

to the emperor-king now? Well, this was A.D. 32, and if you remember, his patron Sejanus had been executed the previous year. Pilate was clearly trying to patch things up with Tiberius after Sejanus's execution. But he screwed up again, because again the Jews complained. Pilate refused to listen to them, again. They wrote to Tiberius directly, as Tiberius now had a pro-Semitic policy towards Judea. It was probably in this protest that Pilate used his old ploy of hiding soldiers in with civilians again, and slaughtered some Galileans as they were offering their sacrifices in Jerusalem. The guy was synonymous with bloodshed.

But things didn't work out as Pilate had hoped with the shields. Instead of being pleased with the shields being brought into Jerusalem, Tiberius was enraged that Pilate had caused yet more unrest in his province, and had embarrassed his emperor yet again.

And so it was to this man, Pontius Pilate, suspected traitor and definite violence-prone screw-up, that Jesus is brought on that first Friday morning of passion week. Pilate is in a hard place. He doesn't want to cause more trouble with the Jews of Jerusalem. The city is full to bursting with people there to celebrate the Passover. It would be a terrible time for a riot to break out. He probably didn't have enough soldiers to deal with a Jewish revolt. But he has to make sure that his loyalty to Tiberius isn't brought into question, either, and if Jesus is claiming to be the king of the Jews, then that's a threat to Tiberius' authority. So Pilate asks Jesus if he is a king. He wants to know if there's anyone who owes allegiance to Jesus, anyone who is following him as he has to follow the Emperor.

Now Jesus is a king, and there are people who follow him, who owe their allegiance to him, but not in the way that Pilate thinks. Jesus had once explained it this way in talking to his disciples: "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and are tyrants over them. But it will not be so with you. Whoever wants to be great must be a servant, just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." When Pilate asks Jesus if he is a king, he's thinking of the emperor, one of the rulers of the Gentiles, lording it over people. When Jesus answers that his kingship is not of this world, he means that he is a king who has come to serve and to give his life for his people.

As soon as Pilate hears that Jesus is a king, he ought to set about executing him immediately. But the strange thing is that he doesn't. Why doesn't this brutal man, this man so prone to violence, just have Jesus taken out to the cross immediately? Could it be that something about Jesus has intrigued him? I think maybe it has. What else could it mean that he's suddenly asking a philosophical question: What is truth? That's a very strange line to come out of the mouth of a man like Pilate.

Pilate goes out of his way to try to save Jesus: He goes out to the Jewish leaders and says he can find no case against him, after Jesus has confessed to being a king. He tries to get Jesus changed out for Barabbas as someone who could be released. He takes Jesus out in front of the crowd by the judgement seat and announces that Jesus is their king. He asks whether he should crucify Jesus, and seems prepared to accept the answer, "No!" The text tells us he goes back to Jesus with more questions: where do you come from? Don't you know I have power over you? (Apparently Jesus is acting as if Pilate doesn't have power over him.) Jesus says that he is such a great king that Pilate would have no power over him unless it had been given to him as part of God's plan. After that, the text tells us, Pilate tried to release Jesus even more. Is there some glimmer of faith here, some willingness to recognize that Jesus really is a king? The soldiers pick up on it, that's for sure. They cloth Jesus in a purple robe, put a crown of thorns on his head and keep saying to him, "Hail, king of the Jews."

But Pilate is still Pilate, so he keeps having Jesus flogged with a whip, perhaps to see if he will use his kingly power in some convincing way that will help Pilate decide what to do with him. It's only when the Jewish leaders say to him, "If you release this man, you are no friend of the emperor. Everyone who claims to be a king sets himself against the emperor," that Pilate's fear of the emperor overwhelms him. He hands Jesus over to be crucified, but not before having an inscription written out for the cross: The King of the Jews. Pilate recognizes a king when he sees him. For all that Pilate seemed intrigued, for all that he tried to avoid executing Jesus, for all that he recognized something authoritative and kingly about Jesus, in the end, his allegiance was to saving his own skin.

Tonight, Jesus asks us for our allegiance once again. Are we ready to recognize him as the king of our lives, the one to whom we give our allegiance, over and above every earthly power and authority? Or will we be overcome by fear, as Pilate was in the end, and turn our backs on Jesus? Allegiance to Jesus is not like allegiance to Tiberius Caesar. Allegiance to Jesus is loyalty to one who came to serve, and it involves following Jesus into sacrificial service for others. It doesn't involve ruling over others with violence. Instead, it involves taking care of others with love. It was too great a challenge for a man like Pontius Pilate, even if he did briefly consider it. And who knows, maybe he did and maybe he didn't. Perhaps there's some other explanation for his unwillingness to execute Jesus straightaway.

But Jesus isn't concerned about Pilate tonight. Tonight, he's concerned about us. What will we do? Jesus, are you a king? For many, he already is. But in your life, the answer depends on you. If you are ready to say yes to Jesus, he invites you to share in the bread and the wine which are his body and blood, given for you.

Amen