

Are you the king of the Jews? (John 18:28-19:16a) – Encounters with Jesus 7: Pilate

Jesus is brought to Pilate, the Roman governor, the most powerful person in Judea, the only one who can officially condemn Jesus to death. The Jewish leaders demand that Jesus be executed. Who has the real power here? What is the truth about what is happening? What kind of king is Jesus?

Triumphal Entry

It's palm Sunday and we celebrate Jesus coming into Jerusalem on a donkey. As he does so the crowds cheer and shout,

"Hosanna!"

"Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!"

"Blessed is the king of Israel!"

This is often called the triumphal entry, because Jesus is being welcomed to the capital of Israel as its king.

Yet, when you consider the reality of the political situation of the time, the idea that Jesus was coming as a king to his capital city was absurd!

If I were to ride up Whitehall towards Downing Street with a crowd around me shouting, Paul Worledge for Prime Minister, then no-one would take it seriously. The police wouldn't let me pass the gates of Downing Street let alone let me become Prime Minister!

All Jesus had was an enthusiastic group of followers. He had no army, he even had to borrow the donkey and in order to be installed as king of Israel he would have to overthrow the might of Rome, something the Jews tried 40 years later with disastrous results for the city and the temple.

In terms of human power, it was laughable to proclaim Jesus as king!

Pilate: A Powerful Man

The person who had the real power in Jerusalem was Pontius Pilate. The man appointed as governor by the emperor Tiberius a few years earlier in AD26.

He had military power. The army of occupation had 120 cavalry and 2,000-5,000 infantry. And these were trained and properly equipped soldiers.

He decided on justice:

He had full powers of life and death. No one could be officially executed without his say so.

He had political power:

Although, the Jewish council, the Sanhedrin was allowed a fair amount of power, its leader the High Priest was Pontius Pilate's appointment.

He had financial power:

He had control of the temple funds and finances.

Jesus had none of these forms of human power. If Jesus was coming into Jerusalem to take on Pilate to become the king of Israel, it looked like the encounter would go only one way.

In fact Jesus did encounter Pilate and in John's gospel we are given a lot of detail about the encounter. At first glance it looks like a story of human power triumphing.

A story of Human Power Triumphing?

Let's do a very quick overview of the story.

In the first scene we see Jesus brought to Pilate by the Jewish leaders. Jesus had made no attempt to seize political power or organise a military rebellion, but the Chief Priests were worried about his popularity and stung by his criticism of them. They wanted him dead. So they had Jesus arrested and brought him to Pilate to have Jesus executed.

So, Pilate takes Jesus inside and asks him if he is the king of the Jews.

Bemused by Jesus's response, Pilate goes back out to the Jewish leaders and claims there is no basis to have Jesus executed. He tries to have Jesus released through a tradition of pardon at Passover, but the crowds demand that Barabbas is released instead.

Then, in the central scene of the whole account. Pilate makes the point that he has absolute power and that the idea of Jesus being king could be a threat to that power is absurd. The guards flog Jesus, then dress him up with a crown of thorns and mockingly hail him as the king of the Jews.

Once again Pilate brings the now humiliated Jesus out to the Jewish leaders. Declares here is the man you claim to be king, there is clearly no basis that he is a threat to the human power of Rome. But the crowds call for Jesus's crucifixion.

Then Pilate goes back into Jesus to talk to him again, but when Jesus refuses to answer, Pilate points out to Jesus that he has power to free or crucify Jesus. He once again asserts the reality of his human power over Jesus.

Finally, he comes out to the crowds, bows to the pressure and orders Jesus to be crucified as the king of the Jews. Pilate may not believe Jesus deserves to die, but he is happy to use the opportunity to show that the Romans hold the power to crush any pretense at rebellion by the Jews.

At first glance, this seems to be very much the story of human power triumphing. Surely, Pilate as the most powerful man in Jerusalem is in control and in charge.

A story of the Illusion of Power?

Or is he? Actually when you look more closely the story is written in a way that draws out the illusion of human power. Pilate is not really free, he is not really in control.

Outside: His hand is forced

In scene 1, we are told that the Jews refused to enter Pilate's palace for fear of ceremonial uncleanness. So Pilate is forced to go out to them. And throughout the telling of the story, we are told that Pilate is forced to keep moving from outside with the Jewish Leaders to inside with Jesus.

Outside the Praetorium Pilate is exposed to the pressure, manipulation and threats of the Jewish leaders and crowds.

In scene 1, we see the Jewish demand Jesus's execution, a demand that Pilate clearly does not think is justified and does not want to carry out as is made clear in scenes 3 and 4.

Yet, the Jewish leaders and crowds keep up the pressure. Whatever tricks Pilate tries to have Jesus released, offering a pardon, humiliating and mocking him to show he is not really a king, the pressure from the leaders and crowds is relentless.

Then in scene 5, they pull their trump card and threaten to go to Caesar with the claim that if Pilate releases Jesus, he would be seen to be supporting an enemy of the emperor. Pilate cannot risk upsetting the emperor, that's where his power stems from. So he is forced to go against what he thinks is right and have Jesus executed.

The pressure from outside, the fact that Pilate is forced to yo-yo from inside and outside show that he is not in control, he is not free.

Inside: Jesus speaks truth

Outside he is exposed to pressure from the Jews. Inside he is exposed to the truth of Jesus. A truth that he dismisses with the question, "What is truth?" in scene 2, but a truth that even in this story is being borne out.

In scene 6, Pilate says to Jesus,

"Don't you realise I have power either to free you or to crucify you?"

Jesus responds:

"You would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above.

Therefore the one who handed me over to you is guilty of a greater sin.'" (John 19:11)

Jesus is making two points. In saying that those who handed Jesus over to Pilate have the greater guilt, he is pointing out that Pilate has less power in this than them. He as we have seen is not free, he has to bow to their demands to have Jesus crucified.

And even his authority to order crucifixion comes from above. Jesus could be referring to Caesar, but probably the point he is making is that all human power is only held, because God has granted it. God is the one who is really in control. This is the truth that Pilate needs to hear!

Jesus exposes Pilate to the truth that although he appears to have great human power, the truth is it is an illusion.

A story of a clash of kingdoms

Actually, this story is about a clash of kingdoms.

King of the Jews?

Pilate keeps referring to Jesus as 'the King of the Jews' ,

In scene 2, he asks Jesus are 'You the King of the Jews'.

In scene 3, he asks the Jewish leaders, "Do you want me to release 'the king of the Jews'?" In scene 4, they mock Jesus by hailing him, 'King of the Jews'. In scenes 5 and 6 in speaking to the Jews he calls Jesus, 'Your king.'

When it comes to the crucifixion, the sign he puts up is Jesus, 'King of the Jews.'

And yet, Pilate can also see that the idea of Jesus being a king in human terms of power is absurd.

Jesus: A different kingdom

In scene 2, when Pilate asks Jesus, ""Are you the king of the Jews?"

Jesus responds that his kingdom is from another place. It is not a kingdom rooted in human power enforced by violence, but it is a kingdom rooted in God's power and the proclamation of his truth. This is a very different kind of kingdom. So what is the truth that is proclaimed.

Jesus is the Son of God

Firstly, Jesus we are told by the Jewish leaders claims to be the Son of God. At the start of John's gospel we are told.

"The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth." (John 1:14)

The truth Jesus brings is a wholly different kind of truth. It is not a means to human power or enforced by human power. Rather it points beyond human power to the ultimate source of power and authority. God himself.

Jesus brings freedom

Secondly, this is a kingdom of true freedom. Pilate's freedom was an illusion, whilst Jesus who seems powerless has total freedom. Jesus was crucified because of his free choice. As he said in John 10:

"I am the good shepherd; ...and I lay down my life for the sheep.... No-one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again..." (John 10:14-18)

In a similar way, when we choose to follow Jesus, we find a truth that sets us free. As Jesus said in John 8:

"To the Jews who had believed him, Jesus said, "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." (John 8:31-32)

When we know the truth of God's salvation even through death, then we are released from the fear of what other human beings might do to us, even the fear of death. We are free indeed.

Jesus brings transformation

Thirdly, this is a kingdom of truth and light. That transforms us to be children of light, who live for God and act for God .

As Jesus said in John 3:

"But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what he has done has been done through God." (John 3:21)

Will you join Jesus's Kingdom?

This encounter between Pilate and Jesus is the story of a clash of kingdoms. At first glance it looks like Pilate is in control, that Jesus is a pathetic and powerless victim.

But Jesus offers a different kingdom. One not based on human power, but rooted in the truth from God.

Our choice is simple. Will we live seeking human power and out of fear of those who wield human power or will we embrace a different kingdom. God's kingdom, based on the truth brought by Jesus that sets us free and transforms us into children of light?