

Pilate wasn't interested in the truth. Not really. He wasn't interested in who this man was standing before him. Maybe out of curiosity or a vague feeling of threat, based on what he heard, this rumour of Jesus as king. But to see this carpenter's son standing before him, Pilate wasn't interested in any truth that Jesus could tell him because he didn't need to be interested. On the relative top of the status pile, Pilate held the power in this equation, sanctioned through the Roman state and its violence. Jesus stood vulnerable before him and the power he held. So the questions asked were pro forma, standard questions for this type of situation. Nothing Jesus could have said would have changed Pilate's mind. Jesus knew it. Pilate, the Roman governor of Judea, knew it. Pilate was doing what he needed to do to protect the status quo, the existing state of affairs. Jesus was doing what he needed to do to usher in God's kingdom.

On this last Sunday in our church year, we are given this gospel text from John's account to hear, to discern, on this Sunday which assigns the title "king" to Jesus, a title we remember was first given to him derisively, ultimately inscribed over the cross on which he dies.

John's account today is the beginning of the showdown between worlds as Jesus makes his way into the halls of power, not as a welcome guest, but as an outsider, a possible criminal. As Pilate and Jesus stand together, those worlds collide as we hear the beginning verses of Jesus' crucifixion story. The truth, the *this* that Jesus refers to when speaking to Pilate, is the cross. God's inbreaking reign, or kingdom, and the cross cannot be separated and it is *this way, this cross*, which redefines power. A power not displayed by swords and fighting, as Jesus tells Pilate, but a power which manifests itself instead in love, in love that gives away, in love that sacrifices for the sake of the other.

To long for a king that protects, that cares, that is just, these are not simply the longings of the people of Israel, but of all people. However, specifically as understood within the history of the people of Israel, Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann writes, "In general, the king is to perform the role of God in society as a regent or surrogate for God. The king is charged with the duty of pastoral justice toward the poor and the needy." ¹

¹ Walter Brueggemann, *Names For the Messiah*, p. 39, 2016

But within that same history, and that same longing, the biblical record illustrates the shepherd kings have not been protective, caring or just. As human agents, as surrogates for God, they have failed. In Ezekiel, chapter 34, the prophet writes:

Ah, you shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep? You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with wool, you slaughter the fatlings; but you do not feed the sheep. You have not strengthened the weak, you have not healed the sick, you have not bound up the injured, you have not brought back the strayed, you have not sought the lost, but with force and harshness you have ruled them. So they were scattered, because there was no shepherd; and scattered, they became food for all the wild animals. My sheep were scattered, they wandered over all the mountains and on every high hill; my sheep were scattered over all the face of the earth, with no one to search or seek for them.

In Jesus' own time, the Jewish people knew all about bad rulers, both pagan and Jewish. Living under the violence of occupation, they longed, as many did, for God alone to become king. This vision, grounded as it was in the great biblical kingdom texts, gave them hope and faith in God's steadfast faith toward God's own people. That hope and faith rooted in Jesus who comes to bridge heaven and earth, Jesus who would be called Immanuel, a king that would shepherd his people, a king who would search for and find the lost, who would bind up the sick, and who would save them.

But this king ushering in God's kingdom can never be separated from the cross. The gospel today casts its shadow and its light on the cross and points us and our desires away from the king we might imagine we need toward a king we are given: a crucified one. That's the truth Pilate had no ear for as one who held power over another. Much like Pharaoh and all the pharaohs before him; hardened hearts making the most impenetrable of fortresses.

As the church, as followers of this crucified king, we continue to learn what it means to live in and participate in God's kingdom, even as we know we live in a world of Pilates. There was a poem which came across my Zoom screen this past week which reminded me of these two worlds where we hold up and hope for and proclaim a vision of God who will shepherd

the world through love, not violence. The poem is written by Laura Jean Truman and it describes the *this* that Jesus points us to:

She prays:

God,

We're so tired.

We want to do justice, but the work feels endless, and the results look so small in our exhausted hands.

We want to love mercy, but our enemies are relentless, and it feels like foolishness to prioritize gentleness in this unbelievably cruel world.

We want to walk humbly, but self-promotion is seductive, and we are afraid that if we don't look after ourselves, no one else will.

We want to be kind, but our anger feels insatiable.

Jesus, in this never-ending wilderness, come to us and grant us grace.

Grant us the courage to keep showing up to impossible battles, trusting that it is our commitment to faithfulness, and not our obsession with results, that will bring your shalom.

Grant us the vulnerability to risk loving our difficult and complicated neighbour, rejecting the lie that some people are made more in the image of God than others.

Grant us the humility of a decentered but Beloved self.

As we continue to take the single step that is in front of us, Jesus, keep us from becoming what we are called to transform. Protect us from using the empire's violence - in our words, in our theology, in our activism, and in our politics - for your kingdom of peace.

Keep our anger from becoming meanness.

Keep our sorrow from collapsing into self-pity.

Keep our hearts soft enough to keep breaking.

Keep our outrage turned toward justice, not cruelty.

Remind us that all of this, every bit of it, is for love.

Keep us fiercely kind.

Amen. ²

This is the hope - that the gentle rule of Christ comes in every prayer we pray, in the songs we sing, in our rituals and worship, and in our daily living. We hope that this peaceable kingdom comes to us, that we might be

² *A Rhythm of Prayer*, Laura Jean Truman, "A Prayer for the Tired, Angry Ones" p. 73, 2021

a part of it, that it be made known in us, that we can share it with others and experience the joy that comes from being situated within the purposes and promises of God, knowing and trusting that every single bit of *this* is for love.

Amen.