

The Kingdom, the Power and the Procurator

John 18:33-37

Feast of Christ the King/ Year B

November 22, 2009

O Lord, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight. AMEN.

High above the city of Lucerne, in a remote section of the Swiss Alps, there is a small unassuming lake known as the *Lago di Pilato*. According to local custom, this frigid body of water is the final resting place of the most infamous bureaucrat in all of history, a man known to posterity as Pontius Pilate. Legend says that Pilate, upon finishing his tenure as Rome's man in Judea, spent the remainder of his life wandering the great highways of the Empire, wringing his hands like a man possessed of some inner demon. One day he came upon this pristine mountain lake, saw his own haggard reflection in the water and promptly threw himself in. His body was never recovered. One would expect the story to end here, but in good medieval fashion, it doesn't. Every Good Friday, so the tale goes, Pontius Pilate emerges from the waters of the Lago di Pilato, props himself against the surrounding rocks and stares off into the distance, as if waiting for a forgiveness which will not come. The locals, they say, can always tell it's him, for just like the notorious Lady MacBeth of Shakespearean fame, he forever washes his hands trying to remove a spot only he can see, his wild mumblings rippling across the surface of the water.

If there were an international contest for double-talk, our Lord would surely win the title of grand master and Pilate would come in a close second! This Sunday's gospel is one long verbal sparring match; questions are asked (four by Pilate and one by Jesus) but none directly answered. On this, the Festival of Christ the King, very little seems to be accomplished between Pilate and Jesus. And yet everything is revealed and saving events are inexorably set in motion. We come to the end of our church's liturgical year. This day both reveals and celebrates what our journey all these long months has really been about: now we know who Jesus really is. He is the one who by his being lifted up on the cross is enthroned in glory; and now we celebrate in full the journey of our own discipleship; of dying to self and rising to eternal glory.

Of all the gospels, the gospel of John is certainly the most perplexing. While Matthew, Mark and Luke seem to agree on most aspects of Jesus ministry, John enjoys charting his own course and making his own point about God. Today, we enter the corridors of power, the palace of the Roman governor of Judea, the much-maligned Pontius Pilate. Pilate is not having the best of days. Then again, most of his days in this imperial backwater were never terribly great. His Judean subjects were anything if not irritating. As a governing official, Pilate had a fairly decent record at least as far as Rome was concerned. Though, he did seem to have a penchant for carelessly antagonizing the locals. When he had first taken office in Jerusalem he thoughtlessly erected images of the so-called divine Emperor, Tiberius, around the city. How was he supposed to know that the Jews would become irate? He never could grasp their problem with graven

images. They were so touchy! If it wasn't one thing, it was another. No wonder he always had trouble sleeping. And this night was no exception. Long before even the first cockcrow, a disturbance developed in his palace. He could hear his officials and aides pacing the hallways. And he knew, he just knew, that sooner or later, they would come in to wake him. So Pilate pulled his covers back and exchanged his pajamas and sleeping cap for a perfectly tailored toga. He put on his gold signet ring, coiffed his hair and strolled out into the dimly lit corridor. His sandaled feet echoed ominously through the cavernous hallways. His weary face, lined with strain, was illumined every four feet or so by the flicker of torches as he headed in the direction of the commotion

The sight that greeted him, upon his arrival, in his audience chamber was something to behold- A half-naked man, beaten, bleeding and mockingly crowned with painful-looking briars. This certainly didn't happen too often. Pilate recognized the man immediately (mainly from the national security reports provided by the Roman CIA, whose agents were posted throughout the city). Jesus of Nazareth, the troublemaker, who had overturned the tables of the moneychangers at the Temple. The Jews had, as usual, been angry. Pilate on the other hand couldn't help but be slightly amused by the incident. Pilate, looking around the room, is slightly puzzled by the fact that the accusers of this Jesus are nowhere to be seen. Only then does he realize that they are actually outside his palace, refusing to come in. You see, it is the Passover, and the Jewish religious authorities have no intention of stepping foot into Pilate's headquarters. To do so, would mean defilement, the dirtying of their hands. And they certainly couldn't have dirty hands when they approach their God throughout the coming religious festival. They didn't even seem to notice the flecks of blood on their knuckles, blood undoubtedly from the tortured man in front of him.

Poor Pilate is left in a terribly awkward position. The crowd's refusal to enter the palace, forces the governor to run back and forth, between his audience hall and the porch. To the average passer-by, he undoubtedly looks like chicken unceremoniously parted from its head. "What charge do you bring against this man?" he says to the gathered throngs. "Are you the King of the Jews?" he says to Jesus. Back and forth, he goes- the greatness of imperial Rome teetering into a borderline fiasco.

The governor desperately wishes to wash his hands of the matter as quickly as possible. His first inclination is to let this bloodied clown of a man go, but the Jewish leaders keep insisting that he must do something. "We wouldn't be bothering you," they say, "unless this man hadn't been doing something evil." Pilate, growing irritated, tells them, in his most authoritative voice, to deal with the matter themselves. "You take him, judge him by your law." "Your excellency," they reply "we are not allowed to kill anyone." Pilate seems to miss the irony, in that the crowds have already decided on a sentence when the verdict has yet to be rendered. As far as they are concerned no trial is necessary, no evidence is needed. The decision is made and the execution is set. Their will be done, whether Pilate necessarily likes it or not.

Then Jesus, without missing so much as a beat, takes the matter into his own hands. While the crowds are screaming in the portico, whittling away at Pilate's resolve

and authority, Jesus, in good matter-of-fact style, draws the overwrought procurator into a seemingly odd discussion about kingship and the question of truth. Unbeknownst to anyone, save those of us with the benefit of hindsight, it is ultimately a discussion about Jesus' identity. He says to Pilate: "Are you saying that I am King of the Jews or have others told you this?" Pilate, is quite naturally a little taken aback and perhaps not a little insulted. He declares, with as much pomp as he can muster: "I am not a Jew". But notice, my friends, that on the end of his statement he tacks a question: "Am I?" The answer seems obvious to us. Of course Pilate is not a Jew, he is a Roman governor, an official of the state, a person of power. And yet at some level, Pilate is beginning to realize the limits of his own power. He is wondering: "Am I, one of them? Am I, going to do their bidding? Am I, in control or are they? None of us like to feel as if we are losing control, as if power has been taken from us, as if we are being manipulated. So Pilate, tries to do the only thing he can, he tries to separate himself from what is happening, he tries to stand apart. He does not want to participate in mob justice. Looking at Jesus, he shouts: "Your people and your priests turned you over to me, what did you do?" It is almost as if Pilate knows that we are listening in. He wants us to know that it wasn't his idea to arrest this Jesus. He lays the blame for this confrontation squarely on the pious people in the plaza below his window and on Jesus himself. Pilate, without even realizing it, admits that the situation is beyond his control. The power that he claims as Rome's governor of Judea is starting to be revealed as little more than a chasing of wind. He is being driven by petty politics and prejudice. He may shout his own authority but he performs in confusion and fear. All the while, Jesus calmly sits before him radiating the very authority for which Pilate is grasping. Pilate may say he's in charge (even weakly believe it), but it is Jesus who is most obviously in control.

In good cryptic fashion, our Lord refocuses Pilate: "My kingdom does not consist of what you see around you. If it did, my followers would fight so that I wouldn't be handed over to the Jews. But, I am not that kind of king. I am not the world's kind of king. Now this is puzzling. What is Jesus talking about? He claims to be king, but not a king like the Emperor. Well, what other kind of king is there? Poor harassed Pilate is thoroughly frustrated and confused. Jesus is not making sense. Pilate's notion of kingdom and power, our own notions of kingdom and power are understandable. Jesus' kingdom is a bit more challenging. Our kingdoms are comfortable even if they happen to be places where justice and peace are too often denied, where exploitation, domination and violence hold sway. Jesus' kingdom, on the other hand, is uncomfortable for what it demands. His kingdom is not otherworldly, but simply refuses to participate in the values and strategies of the world. There is no place for war, let alone preemptive war, in his kingdom. There is no place for abuse, for the degradation of women, for bigotry and racism, for any of those "isms" or acts, which make both perpetrator and victim less than human.

In Pilate's next question, we can hear his growing level of exasperation: "So are you king or not." Jesus response is almost cheeky. "You tell me" he says, and then begins to rattle on about truth. But what does Pilate care about truth? In his line of work, it pays not to care about it. He doesn't want to know the truth, the truth about who he is, the truth about power and who really has it, the truth about this Jesus. We feel for Pilate.

We don't always want to know the truth either. But that doesn't stop Jesus from barreling on ahead, showing us the very truth we fear, the truth we need. That doesn't stop Jesus from just standing there as the answer in the flesh, when Pilate sadly asks "What is truth?" For Pilate knows in the depth of his heart the truth upon which he should act, but in the end, he simply can not bring himself to do it. He is unable to save himself from the demands of the crowd, from his own ego, and from his sense of duty and growing powerlessness. He hands Jesus over to be crucified. The irony of course being that Jesus' kingship and his kingdom is most truly revealed in his cross, in his willingness to die and rise to eternal glory.

This festival day, not only makes a statement about who Christ is, but also about who we are as Church. He has made us into a kingdom. Jesus was born to be king and "to testify to the truth." The truth of his earthly existence led to a cross. The truth of our existence, as His subjects, also leads to the cross. Only through the cross is Jesus brought to glory, only through the cross are we brought to glory. Pilate can ask "so you are a king", and not understand the answer. But the church does understand the answer. Where is Jesus' kingdom? It exists wherever people embody Jesus' manner of acting and relating. It exists wherever the spirit of Jesus is the rule of life. The kingdom does not belong to this world, but it is meant to transform this world.

In his intriguing book, *Torture and Eucharist*, William Cavanaugh tells the story of the Church in the nation of Chile under the regime of Gen. Augusto Pinochet. For years the Chilean church saw its duty as simply the care of souls, it never meddled in politics, and allowed the military government to care for the people's physical well-being, to care for their bodies. That was until the people's bodies started showing up at the church's doorsteps beaten, raped and burned with electrodes. The government called these people unpatriotic. They would disappear into prisons, from which only their mangled remains would emerge. These victims of torture reminded a church grown complacent of another who had been tortured by the authorities some 2000 years ago. And so the church, reclaimed her identity and bore witness to the kingdom. She stood before the state and testified to the truth, to the evil and wrongness of the government's actions. The followers of Christ refused to obey the government's orders, despite what would happen to them. The church stood and continues to stand in all times and place before powers and authorities, being interrogated. And in those hours of trial, we cannot help but recall the scene in Pilate's audience hall. "So you are the King?" Yes, but not because of the world's authorities or even in spite of them. You see, human hands did not place the crown on Christ's head, therefore human hands cannot remove it. Ultimately, brothers and sisters, the only choice, our hands have left, is whether to wring themselves incessantly in a vain attempt to cleanse a sin already forgiven for which we cannot forgive ourselves or simply to stretch themselves out upon a beam, open to the sky and receive the nails and the crown for which God in his good grace has destined us.