

THE TRUTH OF THE MATTER

John 18:28-38 Acts 17:1-9

November 22, 2009 J. S. O'Neill

John 18:33 - 19:1 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." ³⁸ Pilate asked him, "What is truth?" After he had said this, he went out to the Jews again and told them, "I find no case against him. ³⁹ But you have a custom that I release someone for you at the Passover. Do you want me to release for you the King of the Jews?" ⁴⁰ They shouted in reply, "Not this man, but Barabbas!" Now Barabbas was a bandit.

Acts 17:1-9 After Paul and Silas had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a synagogue of the Jews. ² And Paul went in, as was his custom, and on three sabbath days argued with them from the scriptures, ³ explaining and proving that it was necessary for the Messiah¹ to suffer and to rise from the dead, and saying, "This is the Messiah,² Jesus whom I am proclaiming to you." ⁴ Some of them were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a great many of the devout Greeks and not a few of the leading women. ⁵ But the Jews became jealous, and with the help of some ruffians in the marketplaces they formed a mob and set the city in an uproar. While they were searching for Paul and Silas to bring them out to the assembly, they attacked Jason's house. ⁶ When they could not find them, they dragged Jason and some believers before the city authorities, shouting, "These people who have been turning the world upside down have come here also, ⁷ and Jason has entertained them as guests. They are all acting contrary to the decrees of the emperor, saying that there is another king named Jesus." ⁸ The people and the city officials were disturbed when they heard this, ⁹ and after they had taken bail from Jason and the others, they let them go.

Scripture is noted as much for the questions it asks as for the answers it gives. "What are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?" asks Psalm 8. There is Paul's rhetorical question in his letter to the Romans: "In the face of all this, what is there left to say, but if God is for us, who can be against us?" "Who do you say that I am?" asks Jesus of Peter, and faith asks of us all.

Pilate's question to Jesus is in a class all its own. We can picture him, a cynical, world-weary politician, and Rome's representative in a far-flung, third-tier region of the empire: Pilate's menacing eyes are like slits as he leans forward in his chair, elbows bearing his weight on the desktop, fingers drumming on the wood. "Are you the king of the Jews?" he asked quietly, his words barely heard over the background noise of the crowd crying for crucifixion.

It's a form of kangaroo court being played out whose outcome is not in doubt. It was to Rome's and the Temple's interest to get rid of Jesus. Nothing and no one could be allowed to threaten their power and distract the people's fear. The whole scene is disconcerting to our modern ears, we who have had to learn too much about summary justice, rendition, black ops, secret prisons, torture, and the slanted, corrupted language used to justify abuse of power.

It's disconcerting, too, because this unpleasant story is intruding upon one of the year's most pleasant seasons. Here we are days from Thanksgiving, a week away from Advent, and just a month from Christmas, and the lectionary has us reading a Good Friday passage! Here is Jesus on trial for his life, and the inquiry is all about the preposterous charge that Jesus somehow wants to be king. This conversation between Pilate, the local official of the most powerful nation on earth, and Jesus, a poor, itinerant preacher and healer, has nowhere to go but down. Pilate's questions are dishonest and cynical. He knows that Jesus is not king of anything he needs to worry about, and as far as Pilate was concerned, it wouldn't matter to him if every religious nut in town went around claiming to be a potentate of something or other. As the Roman governor, Pilate had legions of soldiers at his disposal! Now, that is power!

No, Jesus was but the latest pawn in the cynical political gamesmanship that constantly tested Roman nerve against the second-rate authority of the chief priests. In that game Rome held most all the cards, except the one labeled "peace and quiet." The chief priest could rouse the rabble quickly, and although that in itself was nothing Rome couldn't handle, it was better to have no fuss at all.

Pilate covered himself well. For the record, he had interrogated the prisoner and determined Jesus posed no threat to Rome. For the life of him he couldn't figure out how the man had managed to put the Jewish authorities in such a stew, but then he never had managed to fathom the religious preoccupations of the Palestinian backwater to which he had been assigned. He longed for Rome and real civilization again!

Meanwhile, though, he had a problem: what to do with the prisoner? A fleeting thought passed seamlessly through his mind: what about justice? But, this was hardly the time for such philosophical abstractions. He had a bad scene developing here, and it could turn ugly quickly. He suspected it was one of those situations which could only be appeased with a sacrificial victim, and there was one standing right in front of him ready at hand. Give the priests – Rome's puppets, after all – what they want and later they'll be obliged to dance when Rome needs to yank their strings.

Jesus interrupted Pilate's reverie with some chatter about purpose in life, reason for being, about truth. Truth? Now, there was a quaint word for you! Justice, purpose, and truth... these religious nuts could go on all year with that stuff! Truth... well, the truth of the matter was Jesus was going to die and he, Pilate, was going to go on living well, procurator of only a little watering hole in Palestine, maybe, but alive and in control, Roman centurions at his beck and call. That was the truth of things!

He snapped his fingers to get the guard's attention to come and fetch the "king." The interview had begun to bore him. "Truth?" he said, as if he had just suddenly heard a familiar word. "What is truth?" He leaned back in his chair, a weary sneer on his face.

Pilate governed Judea for ten years, history tells us. First century historians characterize him as a cruel and ruthless man. He was obedient and always did the

prudent thing to protect Rome's position and keep the locals down. He flourished in a realm where power and privilege -- not justice or truth -- was all that mattered.

Why are we reading this section of scripture at this time of year? Well, because it's the Sunday we celebrate *Christ the King*. It is the last Sunday of the year. The biblical stories of the previous fifty-one weeks have told the story of Jesus, and today -- at the culmination of the year's review -- we acknowledge him King and Lord. Next Sunday is New Year's Day liturgically speaking -- the first Sunday of Advent, where the cycle begins all over again.

It is customary as each regular calendar year draws to a close to reflect on events of the previous months, to review the state of things. This day is a good day to do that from a spiritual perspective. This day asks a fundamental question: to whom do we belong? to whom do we owe allegiance. Today has its quaint side, what with its antique language about royalty. We are not monarchists, after all. American democracy was founded on the basis of getting rid of a king, not adopting one. We know nothing practical about being a king's subjects. Our sense of nationhood has neither royal person at its center nor any court of privilege at its heart. It's an entirely foreign and antique concept. Christ as king? It would mean as much to call Christ a pharaoh, and perhaps Jesus thought so, too. He did what he could, in a rather diffident way, to renounce any such claim, though that hardly spared him the fate of anyone convicted by Rome of sedition against the empire.

Though *king* and *lord* are foreign titles unfamiliar and without much content for us, this day yet holds meaning as a point of review. As the story of Jesus presents us with Jesus as a victim of government processes that are corrupt, venal, and unjust, it is an occasion to lament the injustices and corruptions and venalities that continue in our own politics and in governments across the world. As the story of Jesus' arrest reveals an exchange of money and a betrayal by a close confidant, we remember how greed has undermined our economic health and corrupted the systems that are supposed to sustain us. As the story of Jesus' last days shows us the hysteria of mob mentality overrunning good sense and succumbing to the base instincts of murderous rage, we remember the demagoguery of politicians and the manipulation of catch-phrase and lie.

Unfortunately, this story of Jesus could hardly be more familiar and contemporary. The machinations of power-plays in our politics which produce cynical, destructive, and even murderous combinations have, if anything, become more harmful. "What is truth?" Pilate asked with a sneer. Well, without truth in our civil life, Pilate is what we get -- a politics heartless and hollow, destructive and cruel, which will ever be more devoted to preserving its own privilege than building unity and caring for all and pursuing the well-being of community.

Religious faith is all about ideals -- envisioning them, holding to them, employing them in the living of life. Religious faith integrates difference, incorporates diversity, and hallows relationships in an attempt to discover the unity that is God. In the process religious faith perceives justice and love as both the means and the end of life under God, for otherwise there is only disunity and despair and a continual unraveling of the web of relationship God has woven in creation.

Our faith insists that the purpose of politics and government is to establish, as best as humanly possible, structures of justice and the care and security of the people. Author Glenn Tinder writes, "We are so used to thinking of spirituality as withdrawal from the

world and human affairs that it is hard to think of it as political. Spirituality is personal and private, we assume, while politics is public. But such a dichotomy drastically diminishes spirituality... The notion that we can be related to God and not to the world -- that we can practice a spirituality that is not political -- is in conflict with the Christian understanding of God."

It is shocking and dismaying to look upon our contemporary political scene with eyes clear and undimmed by ideology or campaign fervor. The same cynicism that led Pilate to countenance whatever was expedient encourages us to quietly accept the lie that how laws are made, how decisions are influenced, and how legal restrictions on everything from black ops and rendition to campaign funding are circumvented should be judged solely on the basis of whether the tactic worked, as opposed to whether or not it was right. When it matters not what is good, only who gains, truth is dismissed with a sneer.

There is an intimate connection between this place of worship and the place of government down the street, between here and your senators' and representatives' offices, between faith that knows God's justice and Washington, DC, London, Beijing, Baghdad, Kabul, Islamabad.... If we are not making that connection and acting upon it, those in positions of power won't either.

A nation's politics should, among other things, be a process of memory, not only to know the "stern, impassioned stress" of our forefathers and mothers, but to also remember and repent of their mistakes. A politics founded only upon glory will finally founder upon pride and prejudice. A politics which only points to national splendor and conveniently forgets national sin treats as nothing the devastation it has wreaked in its wars, the lives it has willingly sacrificed on both sides of its conflicts for impure causes, and the erosion of basic values of freedom and responsibility upon which it has been founded. A politics without humility is a politics without hope.

In his book *The Return of Ansel Gibbs*, Frederick Buechner places these words in the mouth of a seminary professor addressing his students: "Every morning you should wake in your beds and ask yourself: 'Can I believe it all again today?' No, better still, don't ask it till after you've read *The New York Times*, till after you've studied that daily record of the world's brokenness and corruption, which should always stand side by side with your Bible. Then ask yourself if you can believe in the Gospel of Jesus Christ again for that particular day. If some morning the answer happens to be really 'Yes,' it should be a Yes that's choked back with confession and tears and great laughter. Not a beatific smile, but the laughter of wonderful incredulity."

Our faith calls us to keep holy the political processes of our nation, to guard that process against the erosions of selfishness, demagoguery, and falsehood. It calls us to hallow politics by seeing it as a process by which truth is discerned, not despised, by which paths of justice are cleared, through which peace is established. As Christians in a democracy, if our political process and its language are debased, it is that we have allowed it to happen. It is our responsibility to call it back to its true place and guard it as a holy process. We will have the politics we deserve. Must our politics merely be a reflection of our hopelessness, where, when asked, "What is truth?" we can only answer, "Whatever wins?"

Back in Palestine, so long ago, Pilate pushes back from his desk with a heavy sigh. "Take 'King' here and give him Barrabas' cell," he says to the guard.

These things were always sticky, messy things, Pilate thought. He heard a cheer go up outside; someone had caught sight of Barrabas leaving the guard house. That bandit will probably have picked five pockets before he's out of the courtyard, Pilate chuckled to himself. Well, why should he care? They want him arrested again, it'll be something to bargain with. A little crime wave always sends them scurrying back. Good time to bring up the tax hike.

Pilate pours himself a cup of wine – good stuff, brought in from Rome last month. He sits down, and puts his feet up on his desk, swirling the thick redness around in the cup and inhaling deeply. Who will ever understand the passions of these people, he wonders. They'll take a thief over a preacher any day, I guess. Maybe there's no difference; who knows?

He takes a sip, then another. The truth of the matter is, he thought, that Barrabas and that crowd probably deserve each other.