

Bennochy church 25th November 2018

I think we can forgive Pilate. He was a fish out of water. After all, what did he really know about the Jews and what they were asking him to do. The reality is this, the religious leaders wanted the death penalty on Jesus, a verdict only Rome could give. As Rome's representative, it fell on his shoulders to make that decision. So enter our story, Pilate the Governor of Judea; his job, to determine what to do with Jesus.

I wonder what he really thought? Who did he think Jesus actually was? It is unclear from the text, as to whether he thought Jesus was a criminal or not, who deserved to be punished. I would come down on the side, that Pilate believed Jesus to be innocent.

One of the other things that Pilate had to contend with was, was Jesus another of these Messiah figures? There were always people claiming to be the chosen one of God. What he had to weigh up was, was Jesus different? Here is the choice he had. In one ear he hears the shouts of the religious authorities talking about blasphemy. A language he did not understand. In the other, rumours that this man was a king. Now that was more serious. So Pilate finds himself stuck in the middle of a political and theological crisis, that had huge implications for him.

He was acutely aware that his masters in Rome would not wish to hear of another King in Judea, only Caesar could hold that

title. For Pilate, these rumours were politically and personally dangerous. On the other hand, this could all get out of hand, if the religious authorities incited the crowd enough. Here is a man under pressure and what was the easiest way out? Well, one possibility was to pass the buck, and wash his hands of the whole affair and say to the religious authorities, deal with it yourself. Well actually, he tried that. They pushed back. We want him killed, only you can authorise that. The alternative? Kill two birds with one cross. Remove the king, and give in to the crowd. We know what happened.

In the midst of all of this, Pilate asks Jesus a question, "*Are you the king of the Jews?*" The question contains all his doubts as he struggles to decide what is the right thing to do? For a moment, hold onto the question.

What do we know about Pilate? Answer, not a lot. What we do know is, he was the 'Prefect' (Governor) of the province of Judea. Part of the Roman empire. His primary function was military, but as representative of the empire, he was also responsible for the collection of imperial taxes. Having said that, he shared power with the Sanhedrin and its president, the High Priest, who was appointed by Pilate; that was the power base of Jesus opponents. They acted as a form of local government, and were the civil administration in Judea. It was these people who wanted Jesus killed.

Pilate was based in Caesarea, which served as Rome's administrative centre, and only visited Jerusalem on special occasions, or in times of unrest. For example, during the Passover, which was a festival of deep national, as well as religious significance for the Jews. Pilate, would have been expected to be in Jerusalem to keep order. He would not ordinarily want to be visible to the throngs of worshippers, because of the Jewish people's deep sensitivity to their status as a Roman province. In other words he wanted to keep a low profile. Well that didn't happen! In truth, he is judged today, by what we know of the biblical story, of his role, in the trial and crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth.

That is the background to our understanding this conversation between Jesus and Pilate.

I think Jesus would have made a great politician. Look at how he answers Pilate's questions. *"Are you the king of the Jews"?* Jesus answers Pilate with another question, and in doing so, turns the conversation from Kingship, to Kingdom. If Pilate is trying to find a way out of sentencing Jesus or, getting to the truth of who Jesus is, Jesus response leaves Pilate wondering, "What is truth?" A question left hanging in the air, for us to answer.

In the cycle of the Christian year, today is known as 'Christ the King' Sunday. If there is a king, there must be a Kingdom, a topic often on Jesus lips. And Jesus made it perfectly clear, that his

reign, this Kingdom had already begun. Things are already in motion. This Kingdom was no aspiration for the future. It is here. To be lived out, now. A king's based on the Kingdom values, of compassion, equality, justice and most of all, God's shalom.

I wonder if the conversation was that short? I hope not. I hope Pilate got some answers to his questions. It did not stop him being complicit in the death of Jesus, but what a way to sign off, that question hanging in the air. "What is truth?"

That is a question we carry with us throughout life. A question Jesus directs to us, as if we are standing in the shoes of Pilate all those years ago. It is an eternal question. It has no simple or easy answer. It confronts us in every decision we make. It is the choice of how we live our lives.

If Jesus speaks of truth, let us listen. If his ways are the ways of truth, let us follow. Jesus Christ, King of the Kingdom, the same yesterday, today and tomorrow. Amen.