

Today is the day when we celebrate Christ the King. Otherwise known as The Sunday Next Before Advent.

The reading today from John's Gospel is just 8 verses, but very important verses describing the trial of Jesus before his crucifixion.

As someone who has been bought up in the Baptist church, I find the Lectionary confusing. Why are we looking at Jesus' trial which happens on Maundy Thursday on the Sunday Next before Advent? So, I looked it up. Or as our grandson used to say Google it up Grandma.

John Pridmore writing in the Church Times says this: Composers of lectionaries are interpreters. They pick and choose bits from the Bible based on which scriptural passages they think are the most important.

Unfortunately, they sometimes decide what we should read based on the grounds of what they think is good for us. So it is with this Sunday's Gospel reading.

The lectionary stipulates that we break off at verse 37, with Jesus's claim that he is testifying to the truth. That provides a neat and satisfying ending as we come to the close of the church year.

But where we're told to stop isn't where John stops. The last line of this little scene, as John tells the story, is Pilate's famous question: "What is truth?"

So, let's look at this short reading in John's Gospel.

There were several reasons why the Jewish leaders wanted Jesus to put to death:

- He challenged their authority, calling them hypocrites.
- He broke their laws about Sabbath observance. Jesus healed people on the Sabbath, but the Jewish leaders defined this as 'work' which was forbidden.
- He mixed with people the Jewish leaders regarded as 'unclean' – sinners, prostitutes and tax collectors.

- He made claims about himself that the Jewish leaders could not accept – that he was God’s son and the promised saviour.

After Jesus was arrested, those who had arrested him, took him to the house of the high priest Caiaphas and he was put on trial by the Sanhedrin

This was the highest ruling council of the Jews. There were 70 members, mostly made up of Sadducees, Pharisees and priests plus the leader who was the high priest, who when Jesus was on trial, was Caiaphas.

The Sanhedrin was still allowed to exist under Roman rule, but their power was limited.

They could find a person guilty and give the death sentence, but they could not carry it out. Only the Romans could put a person to death.

The Sanhedrin had in place several rules regarding the conduct of their own trials:

- A trial could **not** take place at night or during the time of an important festival.
- The death penalty could not be passed immediately if a person was found guilty, the Sanhedrin had to wait overnight to pass sentence.
- All trials had to take place in the Hall of Hewn Stones, the official place for trials located in the temple.
- Two or three witnesses were needed, and they had to agree on every detail.
- Anyone giving false evidence would receive the same punishment as the person on trial.

The Sanhedrin has found Jesus guilty of the religious offence of blasphemy. This would be of no interest to the Romans, so the Jewish leaders must change the charge against Jesus from claiming to be the Son of God to saying he is the **King of the Jews**.

In doing so they are emphasising the **political** rather than religious implications of claiming to be the Messiah.

The Romans would act for a political offence, particularly something that posed a threat to Roman rule.

<sup>28</sup> Then the Jewish leaders took Jesus from Caiaphas (the high priest) to the palace of the Roman governor. By now it was early morning, and to avoid ceremonial uncleanness they did not enter the palace, because they wanted to be able to eat the Passover.

<sup>29</sup> So Pilate came out to them and asked, “What charges are you bringing against this man?”

<sup>30</sup> “If he were not a criminal,” they replied, “we would not have handed him over to you.”

<sup>31</sup> Pilate said, “Take him yourselves and judge him by your own law.”

“But we have no right to execute anyone,” they objected.

Pilate re-enters his headquarters and summons Jesus to be brought to him for questioning.

So now we have a situation where Pilate and Jesus are inside the Praetorium and the Jews who want him killed are outside.

Incidentally, Jesus expresses no worries about being ritually defiled by being in the praetorium.

The Jewish authorities saw Jesus as extremely dangerous, someone who had to be got rid of as soon as possible.

It is possible that they saw the Cleansing of the Temple as an incitement to revolt. In any case they decided that Jesus should be put to death, the most obvious charge being blasphemy.

In the eyes of the Jewish leaders, when Jesus claimed to be God’s son, he was insulting God. Blasphemy was taken very seriously, and the punishment was death by stoning.

The charge of kingship is the central question of Jesus’ trial before Pilate.

<sup>33</sup> Pilate summoned Jesus and asked him, “Are you the king of the Jews?”

### **What kind of King?**

It’s a simple question and Pilate wants a simple answer, a simple truth. Yes or no. You either are or you aren’t. Which is it?

Pilate wants to know. He needs to know because "king" is a political term, and Pilate is a political person.

In this chapter, he keeps going back and forth between the Praetorium and the crowds outside. He moves from questioning Jesus inside to appeasing Jesus' accusers outside.

Pilate has only one legitimate concern, and that is whether Jesus poses a threat to Rome. If Jesus is assuming the role of king, that is treason—punishable by death.

However, Pilate can hardly imagine that this ordinary looking man would be trying to pass himself off as a king—so he asks, “Are you the King of the Jews?” He must anticipate that Jesus will deny the charge, given the terrible penalty associated with a guilty verdict.

The irony is that Jesus is, indeed, a king, but one who poses no threat to Rome.

<sup>34</sup> “Is that your own idea,” Jesus asked, “or did others talk to you about me?”

<sup>35</sup> “Am I a Jew?” Pilate replied. “Your own people and chief priests handed you over to me. What is it you have done?”

Jesus refuses to answer Pilate’s charge of kingship directly.

He states **that his kingdom is “not from here”** (John 18:36), which Pilate interprets to be an affirmation that Jesus is a king.

<sup>37</sup> “You are a king, then!” said Pilate.

Jesus answered, “you say that I am a king. In fact, the reason I was born and came into the world is to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me.”

<sup>38</sup> “What is truth?” retorted Pilate. **With this he went out again** to the Jews gathered there and said, “I find no basis for a charge against him. <sup>39</sup> But it is your custom for me to release to you one prisoner at the time of the Passover.

Pilate attempts to use this custom by offering Jesus or Barabbas.

Matthew describes Barabbas as a “notorious prisoner”, so he was probably a murderer.

Pilate attempts to ask the crowd what crime Jesus has committed, but they shout, “Crucify him!”

Pilate’s mockery of Jesus’ kingship is seen in John 19:1-7, where he has Jesus dressed in a purple robe and crown of thorns (19:2).

He is beaten and then displayed to the Jews. The chief priests and police, seeking Jesus’ death, demand Jesus’ crucifixion. Pilate has put them in the position of demanding the death of their own king.

### **Where will we find this King?**

We see Jesus engaging in deep theological conversation with a Samaritan woman who had had five husbands and was living with a man who wasn't her husband!

We see Jesus bending down on the ground to be with a woman accused of adultery. He leans in close to hear her voice when nobody else bothered to listen.

We see Jesus putting a towel around his waist and then kneeling on the floor to wash his disciples' dirty feet.

Jesus is a king who never rose so high that he couldn't see those who were down low.

Even today, we see Jesus in Women’s Refuges, in hospital on Covid wards, in care homes, in housing estates where people are still waiting for the power to come on after the storm.

If we would see Jesus, we shall look in places kings seldom go.

An Anglican priest from South Africa shared a story about what it was like to believe Jesus was King during the days of apartheid.

"Our whole congregation was arrested," he said, "for refusing to obey the government." All 240 members of the congregation were arrested and put in jail from babies to a 90-year-old man. The pastor himself was imprisoned for a year.

When we first visited South Africa apartheid was still in evidence and my brother's congregation in the Methodist church in Benoni had a similar number in their congregation. On Christmas Day when we were there, they had to have 3 morning services to fit everyone in. It could so easily have happened there.

To claim that Jesus is King can be dangerous.

Throughout chapters 18-19, Jesus is "handed over" through a chain of command that implicates several characters as responsible for Jesus' death. Although Judas Iscariot is widely recognized as the one who "betrayed" Jesus, the Greek word translated "betray" also describes the actions of the Jews and Pilate.

<sup>38</sup> "What is truth?" retorted Pilate. This is a question he leaves hanging and he went back out again to the Jews.

There, in front of them he washed his hands of the blame for Jesus' death, saying I find no fault in Him.