

Sermon Archive 223

Sunday 25 November, 2018

Knox Church, Christchurch

Lessons: Revelation 1: 4b-8
John 18: 33-37

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



Franco Zeffirelli's film production of "Jesus of Nazareth" presents Pontius Pilate as an extremely impatient, bad tempered person, frustrated by the people he's been given to govern. While he wishes that they'd just shut up, settle down, leave him in peace, they constantly interrupt him with new problems, new issues, new complications. Why won't they just go away! When they present him with the problem of a young Jewish man who's pretending to be a king, his reaction is true to his character: anger and annoyance. Pilate doesn't seem to like his job, and Jesus is just another irritant in his hallway.

If you read the gospel texts with this as your lens, then you see in Pilate's questions to Jesus as nothing much more than a simple list of perfunctory questions, a going through of the motions. I think there's more to it than this, though. In Matthew's version, we have Pilate's wife sending a message to her husband: "whatever you do, be careful with this man - he's been disturbing my dreams" - eerie intrusions onto the pillow, breaking into the conscience and fear. There's Pilate's initial declaration of Jesus' innocence - I have seen him and see no crime. There's the great washing of his hands in anger about the people. If his questioning of Jesus began in a shallow, perfunctory kind of way, somewhere through the engagement, Pilate has become entangled. Who *is* this Jesus? Is he a king? Really? What has he done? Does he have a kingdom? What's he about? What am I to do with him? What are his people prepared to do? The dynamic ceases to be "power questioning powerlessness". It becomes more a clash of kingdoms. Truth is speaking back. Lo, he's coming with clouds descending; every eye will see him, even those who pierced him - truth and wailing. So it is to be - Amen!

-ooOoo-

Who is this Jesus? To begin with, Pilate sees someone who's pretty much like

anyone else. He's been born into a society where there are laws and regulations. He lives under authority, under the expectations of society, like everyone does. And if we do things displeasing of the authority, then we can expect to be called to account. Pilate sees a citizen who is answerable. So servants of the king, like their sovereign, drive at 50 km/h. We pay our taxes. We go to war when conscripted. We sing our national anthems, we do not kneel on one knee as our song-time protest. And if we do, we expect Pilate's kingdom to call us to account. We live in the world. The world is real. Obligation is real. Accountability is real. Who is this Jesus? He's an obliged person answerable to Pilate's world.

Who is this Jesus? To begin with, Pilate sees someone who's upset the people. He's somehow become a word, a rumour, a point of "concerned background conversation" (should we call that "gossip"). He's become someone about whom others are speaking. When Pilate first questions Jesus, Jesus replies "Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?" Controversy. Dividing opinion. Not peace, but a sword. Mother against daughter, father against son; it's complicated when questions about loyalties are asked, and it seems he's been asking them - to the point where some very powerful, very established people have begun to perceive him as a problem. Who does Pilate see? He sees someone who talks about to whom we belong, to whom our loyalties are directed, to whom our knees will bow. Who is Jesus? A fall-out boy, scapegoat for people's greed or insecurity, an anarchist singing "will you come and follow me?" As for the king, so for the servants. Will they follow? Will they sing?

Who is this Jesus? Soon Pilate begins to focus his questions a bit differently. Moving from questions about the charge, the technical charge, the charge he knows now to be really just a trumped up charge, he now simply asks "what have you done?"

Why, what has my Lord done?

What makes this rage and spite?

He made the lame to run,

he gave the blind their sight.

Sweet injuries!

Yet they at these

themselves displease,

and 'gainst him rise. *Samuel Crossman (1624-1684)*

Jesus doesn't go there. Instead he says "my kingdom isn't from here. If it were, all would be fighting and violence. But no, my kingdom isn't like that". So Pilate sees someone who is sourced, who is fed, who drinks from a deep well that isn't from here. He sees someone who's about the relinquishing of fighting. In his kingdom, is there another way of meeting the violence? Perhaps something like taking a seat on a bus (Mrs Parks), like speaking of having a dream (Dr King), like saying "Jesus is Lord" (Professor Bonhoeffer), like addressing the soldiers of El Salvador, with Archbishop Romero saying: *"I would like to make a special call to all men in the military. Brothers, you are killing your own brothers, though we are all from the same country. If you are ordered to kill a man, God's law must prevail, and God's law says 'Do not kill.'"*

Who is this Jesus? Standing before Pontius Pilate, he is the one saying we do not meet violence with violence. As for the king, so for the servants. Will they take on the ways of the kingdom? Will they come and follow him?

Who is this Jesus? As Pilate begins to sense that he is dealing now with a "kingdom", a "reign" that demands acknowledgement, he says "so you **are** a king?" Jesus answers "For this I came into the world, to testify to the truth". Jesus talks about truth. He talks about people responding to the truth, belonging to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice - he says. Standing before Pontius Pilate, within a world that made up charges, that doesn't care much about innocence, Jesus talks about gathering together those who belong to truth. Pilate won't cope well with what Jesus has said. He'll shrug. He'll say "what is truth", as if it doesn't really exist or matter. But it does. It exists. It matters. And kingdoms that fall foul of that shall, in the words of John the Divine, "see him, even those who pierced him, and wail." But not today. Today Pilate has the power. The people calling for crucifixion have power. The corruption has power.

But people are beginning, even Pilate I think is beginning, to look closely at this figure of Jesus. As they give themselves to the question "who are you", the power dynamics are changing. Various emperors are being revealed as having no clothes. Various crown princes, though not losing oil customers, are losing the masks they've worn and are being seen for who they are. Eyes are opening - seeing a great figure coming with the clouds - and saying "to **him** be glory and dominion forever and ever".

-ooOoo-

Reflecting on the kingdom that is emerging, long standing parish minister, turned Bible translator, Eugene Peterson wrote:

“As a pastor, I don’t like being viewed as nice but insignificant. I bristle when a high-energy executive leaves the place of worship with the comment, “This was wonderful, Pastor, but now we have to get back to the real world, don’t we?” I had thought we were in the most-real world, the world revealed as God’s, a world believed to be invaded by God’s grace and turning on the pivot of Christ’s crucifixion and resurrection. The executive’s comment brings me up short: he isn’t taking this seriously. Worshipping God is marginal to making money. Prayer is marginal to the bottom line. Christian salvation is a brand preference. I bristle and want to assert my importance. I want to force the recognition of the key position I hold in the economy of God . . .

Then I remember that I am a subversive. My long-term effectiveness depends on my not being recognised for who I really am. If he realised that I actually believe the [Western] way of life is doomed to destruction, and that another kingdom is right now being formed in secret to take its place, he wouldn’t be at all pleased. If he knew what I was really doing and the difference it was making, he would fire me.

[But] Yes, I believe that. I believe that the kingdoms of this world, American and Venezuelan and Chinese, will become the kingdom of our God and Christ; and I believe this new kingdom is already among us. That is why I am a pastor, to introduce people to the real world and train them to live in it.”

Near the beginning of this sermon, I did indeed say that we’re all born into a society of obligation. We drive to the speed limit. We pay our taxes. But John says that we are being made into another kind of kingdom - one that isn’t from around here. He says that the firstborn from the dead is indeed the firstborn - the first of many others to come who will move from death to life - be freed by love and blood, be made into people of grace and peace. It’s all under construction - and even Pontius Pilate is beginning to notice.

So, grace and peace to you from him who is and who was and who is to come. Look, he is coming with the clouds - and every eye shall see him.

We keep a moment of quiet.

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