

Text: John 18: 28-40
Title: The Criminal King
Date: 11.25.18
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Muhammad was our Uber driver.

A mechanical engineer from India, he's preparing for a master's program. He works days and then drives nights and weekends. He dropped us off at 11:00 saying that he hoped to drive for a few more hours.

I learned all of that with a few questions and then settled back for what I thought would be a quiet ride home. But after a few minutes of silence he asked, "What do you do for a living?"

Sigh....

I usually say something like "writer," "counselor," or "community organizer." All of which are true. If you say "pastor" you're likely to get into the weeds with a story about charlatan preachers, or do I know their awesome mega-church, or a tale of woe and chaos. But, I chirped, "I'm a pastor." And sure enough, he launched into a lesson about what Muslims believe about Jesus.

"Did you know that Jesus is in our writings? We believe that Jesus was a great teacher born of a virgin. Adam and Eve demonstrate that Allah created life out of nothing. But Allah created woman from the rib of a man. The birth of Jesus shows that Allah can give life though a woman untouched by man. Mary was the greatest of all women.... And the Quran teaches that Jesus will come again at the last judgment."

Muhammad peered at me through the rearview mirror, as if looking for affirmation or the encouragement to continue. I took the bait and we began to talk about the divinity of Jesus (he wasn't for it) and the journey of the Prophet Muhammad into heaven to receive the Quran. But, at the core of our conversation was the nature of Jesus....

Who was he?

What was he?

What did he do?

Why would that matter?

When we pulled up to our house Muhammad got out of the car and came around to shake my hand. Sandi thought it was sweet. I thought some 2000 years later we're still wrestling with the same question that Pilate asks in our text. Who is Jesus? "Are you the king of the Jews?"

Pilate was a mid-level bureaucrat, a deep-state-civil-servant, a cog in the machinery of the empire. His loyalty was to Caesar. He was trying to juggle the demands of the Jewish clerics, pacify the rabble-rousers, and play his role for Rome. In front of him stood Jesus.

The Hebrew political-religious establishment described him as a criminal. (The actual word here is “evil-doer”)

Pilate wanted to know whether this ragged “King of the Jews” was a revolutionary who threatened the empire or just one more religious dreamer who riled up the Jews but posed no real problem.

So, Pilate engages Jesus with an inquisitive banter. He asks questions and Jesus responds with elusive answers. But, their exchange boils down to this question: Who are you? And, if you’re a king, where is, or what is, the nature of your kingdom?

And Jesus responds:

My kingdom is not of this world. If it were my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jewish leaders. But now my kingdom is from another place.

What does that mean?

We usually read it to mean that

the kingdom of Jesus is spiritual and not material,
the kingdom of Jesus is heavenly and not earthly,
the kingdom of Jesus is other-worldly and not this-worldly.
And that seems like a good way to understand his response.

This world is passing away but Jesus has come to give us life ~ abundant eternal life. (Thanks be to God.) The strife and suffering of this world are temporary; Jesus has come to save us. And, as followers of Jesus we belong to the kingdom of heaven not the empires of earth.

In the words of a Carrie Underwood song:

*This is our temporary home; it's not where we belong
Windows and rooms that we're passing through
This is just a stop on the way to where we're going
I'm not afraid because I know; this is our temporary home*

But what if there is another way to understand the response of Jesus?

Jesus says that if his kingdom were of this world then he and his followers would use the tools of this world to resist arrest. The kingdoms of this world are established in violence. Jesus says his kingdom is not of this world, so he won’t use violence. As one theologian puts it:

*Jesus will not establish his claims by violence.
Jesus will not usher in God's kingdom by violence.
Jesus will make no followers by violence.*

Now. The words and actions of Jesus may mean more than that but they surely mean no less. Jesus doesn't defend his innocence but accepts the brutality of the state. Jesus accepts violence without responding in violence.

I wonder how differently our formulations of Jesus would be if we gave more attention to this practice of Jesus. I wonder how different our exchange with Muslim neighbors would be if we began with the ethic of Jesus rather than the nature or divinity of Jesus.

The way of this world is one of coercion and violence.

Whether exercised by cop or criminal,
whether used by the state or the revolutionary,
whether military hero or terrorist, the way of this world is violence.

And Jesus asserts that power in his kingdom is something other than violence. The cross is a symbol not of victory through violence but rather the defeat of violence.

N.T. Wright, in reflecting on this text offers this insight:

We have often read John 18 to be saying, my kingdom is not of this world meaning my kingdom simply belongs to somewhere else called heaven. It's not what the Greek says, actually. It says, my kingdom is not from, or out of, this world. It is not characterized by the mechanisms and the power plays of this world. But, my goodness, my kingdom is for this world....Jesus' kingship is all about a different way of power, a different way of life, within this present world.

The kingship of Jesus is about a different way of power, a different way of life, within this present world....

In 1925 Pope Pius XI was concerned about a growing secularism among the followers of Jesus. In the wake of World War I there was a rise of hyper-nationalism being stoked by populist dictators and the Pope wanted to remind the church that their primary allegiance was to Jesus Christ and not to powers of this world. His response was a papal encyclical (a letter to the bishops) establishing a new mass, the Feast of Christ the King. He wanted the church to consider the implications of living under the reign of Jesus rather than living by the ways of the world. So, he instituted a new liturgical feast day.

Protestants have followed suit with "Christ the King Sunday." Today is more than a post-Thanksgiving pre-Christmas Sunday punctuated by turkey leftovers and getting out the Christmas decorations. Instead, before we start Advent we consider the reign of God. Before we turn our attention to the coming of Jesus, we join Pilate and Mohammad in asking: Who is Jesus and what is the nature of his kingdom?

And, dear friends, in that spirit it seems to me that the way of God as embodied by Jesus is one of non-violence – in all of its forms. The implications of that are complicated and difficult. And in our company now there would be great disagreement about how that is lived out. But, the way of God, as proclaimed in the gospels, isn't victory through

violence but victory through death. The King of the Jews isn't a warrior but a crucified criminal. God bore the fear, terror, and violence of this world in a self-emptying expression of love.

Sacrifice over violence,
powerlessness over power,
love over fear;
and ultimately life over death...

And just as that might make little sense to us, it made less sense to Pilate.

Pilate responds, "So you are a king?" And Jesus answers, that he came into the world to testify to the truth, and anyone who belongs to the truth listens to his voice....

To which Pilate asks, "What is truth?" And by the way, there is no indication whether Pilate responded with a cynical sneer, weary resignation, or an earnest curiosity.

There is a poetic philosophical quality to the Gospel of John. The categories of truth, word, freedom, and light are used to tell the story of Jesus. Like waves those themes rise and fall throughout the gospel. And here, at the sentencing of Jesus, truth surfaces again.

But, truth here is not a transcendent idea. Truth is not a proposition or a spiritual reality. Truth is embodied. Truth is a person. Truth is Jesus.

Pilate is completely buffaloed. He sees no reason to charge Jesus but he goes with the wishes of the crowd and releases Barabbas. In the next scene Jesus is whipped, beaten, and mocked...

And on this last Sunday of the liturgical year we are left with this: The way of God is through the cross. Truth is embodied in a criminal king nailed to the torture apparatus of the empire. Therefore, William Willimon writes:

And my truth, the truth which is Jesus of Nazareth, cannot be proved, dismissed, or discussed without reference to the concrete community he forms.... Christianity is not another philosophy or some primitive system of belief; it is a community of people who worship the Jew whom Pilate sent to the cross.... The truthfulness of my faith must be judged on how well it teaches me live without murderous fear or nihilistic despair. Without the resources of the Christian story I simply don't have the resources to live peacefully in this violent world.

Dear friends, as Jesus is our King may our lives bear some resemblance to the way of God revealed in Jesus. Including non-violence. And as Jesus is truth may our lives be shaped by that truth. May we bear witness to the way of God ~ a way not of this world, but a way for this world. May we have the courage to follow Christ our King in self-emptying love for our neighbors and our enemies.

Even so, come Lord Jesus.
Amen.