

QUESTIONS PILATE ASKED
1. Are you the King of the Jews?

John 18:33-38

John 6:1-15

As John's gospel tells the story of Jesus' trial, Pilate asks four questions. The first one which we will consider today was obviously the most important because it is the only one reported in all four gospels: **"Are you the king of the Jews?"**

It was a critically important question for the Roman authorities who were more than a little threatened by the designation. A little threatened? Remember the tail spin King Herod went into when he learned that a little babe born in Bethlehem was called the King of the Jews? But the question is also a critical one for us as well. Is Jesus Christ really the sovereign over our lives? Do we bow before him or is our confession that he is Lord and Savior only a bunch of words? The secondary question, **"So you are a king?"** indicates that the answer has implications far beyond the religion of Israel and far beyond those of us who claim to be his followers.

When pushed by Pilate, Jesus gives a reluctant answer, **"You say that I am a king."** Jesus never warmed up to the title as one that would describe who he is and what he is all about. *King* was a very loaded word, as it is today for we who cherish democracy. So, too, *Messiah* or *Christ*. There were those in Jesus' day, similar to the Zionists of our day, who were waiting for the right word from the right person to signify the beginning of a revolt against Roman oppression.

That explains why so much of Jesus' ministry was conducted in secrecy. He downplays the miraculous lest people get the wrong idea of what he was about. Healings were often accompanied with the command, "Don't tell anyone about this."¹ Feeding the 5000 people in the story we read today was hardly a private event, but Jesus did withdraw from the crowd because he knew the people would try to seize him to be king.²

Perhaps we also are a bit reluctant to use the title *king* for Jesus. We are so relieved when Jesus says to Pilate, **"My kingdom is not from this world."** Some commentators are quick to say, "such a definition of kingship removes it from the sphere of sedition and rebellion."³ That is, "Relax, Pilate. His kingship is no threat to you or to Caesar." We think we can relax, too. "Surely his kingship has no claim for us in this world and means nothing about how the nations of the world are to live with each other. It must be all about heaven, some far away world beyond time and space."

When John Calvin wrote in the *Institutes of the Christian Religion* about the kingship of Jesus, he warns, "It is spiritual in nature ... Christ's kingdom lies in the Spirit, not in earthly pleasures or pomp. Hence we must forsake the world if we are to share in the kingdom."⁴ Who am I to argue with brother John, the spiritual forefather of the Reformed tradition, but it seems to me that the Biblical witness is not to forsake the world in order to share in the kingdom, but seek first God's kingdom and God's righteousness above all else⁵ so that the world might be transformed. After all,

“God loved the world so much that he sent his only Son...”⁶ Why would the followers of Jesus be encouraged to forsake the world?

Our “religious or sacred” life is not meant to be detached from “the real world of everyday living.” Yes, it’s easier to isolate our political, business, social and family lives from the claims of our faith, but it is heresy to believe “there are areas of our life which do not belong to Jesus Christ, but to other Lords.”⁷

The kingdom about which Jesus preached is not a *place* where we will live in the future, but a *way* in which we can live right now. To live in the kingdom of God is to live under the rule or reign of God. God’s reign is already present in the world whenever and wherever people seek to do God’s will.

Let’s not ignore the Revelation to St. John, the last book of the Bible. It proclaims Jesus as the **“ruler of kings of the earth.”**⁸ Indeed, Jesus is **“Lord of lords and King of kings.”**⁹ You don’t have to be a rocket scientist or a Biblical scholar to unlock the meaning of this mysterious book to appreciate the power and authority of those words.

So, Jesus, are you or aren’t you the king of the Jews? Yes and no! No, because he is not king of just the Jews. He has no interest in the tribal claims of one people over and against another people. He is King over all. He calls all people to live under his rule so that they might live together in peace. He is King even of those who do not acknowledge him.

Yes, he is King, if by that we mean he is the ultimate claim upon our lives. Their allegiance to Christ the King emboldened the early apostles to say to the authorities: **“We must obey God rather than any human authority.”**¹⁰ When the crowd that drove Jesus to the cross shouted, **“We have no king but Caesar,”**¹¹ we must counter by shouting, “we have no King but Jesus.”

When Jesus says, **“My kingdom is not from this world”** he doesn’t mean his kingship has nothing to do with this world. It means his kingship is different from any the world has ever seen before or since – different in origin, content and style.

The point of origin is different. He didn’t succeed to some throne. Nor did he stage some coup to take over. His kingship is given to him by the God of all creation. **“All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.”**¹²

The content of his reign is different. Kings and other leaders of this world fight for supremacy, not so for Jesus. **“If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over.”** He refuses to fight violence with violence, to fight evil with evil. He came to show us a more excellent way – to overcome evil with good.¹³

The style of his reign is different as well. He does not delight in earthly pomp. Calvin is on target at that point. Our king is not one who grasps at the trappings of royalty. He made that clear by riding a donkey into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday instead of a war-horse.

Indeed, his kingship is not *from* this world but it is meant to be lived out *in* this world. So, to all the Caesars and Pilates of this world, the dictators, premieres, prime ministers, presidents, those present and those yet to come, watch out. They don't have the final word.

Our King has **“heaven as a throne and earth as a footstool.”**¹⁴ Our King frustrates the plans of the nations.¹⁵ Our King calls us to love him more than anything else and to follow him whatever the cost. Our King values those whom we often consider the least and the unimportant. Our King calls us to worship the only God who is worthy of worship and to let the consequences fall where they may. Let them all take note: **“The kingdoms of this world are become the kingdoms of our Lord, and of his Christ; and he shall reign for ever and ever.”**¹⁶

1. See Mark 7:36 for one example.
2. John 6:15
3. C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to St. John*, (London: S.P.C.K., 1965) p. 447
4. Book II. XV:3-5
5. Matthew 6:33
6. John 3:16
7. *Theological Declaration of Barmen*, Book of Confessions, 8.15
8. Revelation 1:5
9. Revelation 17:14
10. Acts 5:29
11. John 19:15
12. Matthew 28:18
13. See Romans 12:21
14. Acts 7:49; Isaiah 66:1-2
15. Psalm 33:10
16. Revelation 11:15, *King James Version*