

# Sermon: Who are you, Jesus? (John 18, 19)

*Rev Dr Jos M Strengholt*

Good Friday is our annual day of great mourning over Jesus; our Lord was killed in an awful manner. We also mourn because we realize that his death was intimately related to us, as we are today. Yes, Jesus was crucified because the Jewish leadership wanted him out of the way and because the Roman governor of Jerusalem, Pontius Pilate, did not want trouble. But in the end, all of humankind must be held accountable.

Pilate did not find any fault in Jesus; there was no legal reason to condemn him to death. But as we see more often, for politicians truth and ethics are not always key criteria for their behaviour. Jesus was innocent, but his death was seen as politically convenient. But in a mysterious way, the will of God was done.

The Gospel of John gives us interesting insight in the discussion between Pontius Pilate and Jesus which shows that what happened on that awful Friday long ago, had to do with you and I, and it was God's grace for us.

Pontius Pilate asks three crucial questions that help us discover the facts. What is truth? Where are you from? Are you the King of the Jews?

## **Are you the King of the Jews?**

Pilate actually starts with this last question: "Are you the king of the Jews?" It is fair to assume that the Jewish leaders, who delivered Jesus to Pilate, had accused Jesus of claiming to be a king. That would be a political crime, as the Roman occupiers only accepted the Herod family as their kings over Israel. Anyone else who claimed to be a king in Israel, would thereby stand up against Roman rule.

"Are you the king of the Jews?" Jesus initially does not give a straight answer. He wants Pilate to think. He wants us to think. Often, instead of giving a straight answer, it is much better to make people think for themselves, as thinking internalizes the issue that occupies your mind.

Eventually Jesus does admit He is a king, and He has a kingdom, but it is a kingdom 'not of this world', and a kingdom where there is no fighting. No weapons. Peter, a good man who followed Jesus all the time, wanted to defend Jesus against his arrest by using his sword, but Jesus told him to not do this.

This week my own country, The Netherlands, got a new king as his mother Beatrix abdicated. Whether I like it or not, he is my King. And if other countries want to attack us, this King will be the head of an army to kill our enemies.

The kingdom of King Jesus is a kingdom "not from this world." This means, you cannot point to any place on earth, not even the Holy Land, that Jesus claims to be His land, His Kingdom. His rule

over people is of a different kind. It is not based on power and might, and being part of this Kingdom of Jesus Christ is a voluntary matter. No one is born into it; we decide to be in it. Or not.

This must have been confusing for Pilate. Jesus claims to be a king and to have a kingdom, but he underlines that it is completely different from this world's view of kings and kingdoms.

But why would Pilate be bothered about Jesus and His kingdom without the power of weapons? That is no particular danger for those in their palaces in this world, is it?

Sometimes you wonder why Jesus and His rule have nothing to do with power and weapons. Would that not be useful? Look at other religions, that freely use weapons and the threat of force to keep people inside the box of their religion. We all remember how one leader here in Egypt accused the churches a few years ago to stockpile weapons in their basements. This may be the method of some religions, but for us Christians, we know that this would betray our Lord.

His kingdom is not of this world. Jesus defines his rule, his kingdom, a bit further to Pilate:

"You say that I am a king. For this purpose I was born and for this purpose I have come into the world—to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice." Pilate said to him, "What is truth?"

## **What is truth?**

Jesus defines his rule and his Kingdom as being a testimony to the truth. Not weapons, not worldly might is his method, but truth. "Ah", Pilate sighs... "what is truth..."

What is truth? Again, Jesus does not give an answer. For Pilate, truth is certainly not very important. He has Jesus crucified even though he admitted that he found no fault in Him. He admitted that the truth was that Jesus was innocent: Jesus was not planning to overthrow the Roman rule over Israel by the use of force.

So when Pilate said, 'what is truth' this was not a postmodern statement that there is no truth. Pilate knew there was truth, but it did not mean much to him. He preferred to do what was practical and to do anything necessary to maintain his rule over Israel, even at the expense of truth and morality.

His question 'what is truth' therefore meant, 'who can know the truth.' We all have our viewpoints, we all think we are right, but in the end, how do we know!

With this question Pilate directly contradicted the claim of Jesus. Jesus said He had come into this world of ours to testify to the truth. He came from

the world of God into our human existence to speak of the unknowable: of God. He came to present eternal truth to us.

This focus on truth, eternal truth, was the reason why Jesus was born, and it was the reason why He gave his Holy Spirit to his Church. Days before Jesus was questioned by Pilate, he spoke to his followers these words:

“I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth, for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak. (John 16:12-13)

Meaning, that even the followers of Jesus had difficulty understanding all of what He said, but He promised that after He would be gone, the Church would receive the Holy Spirit. And the Holy Spirit is, just as much as King Jesus, marked by speaking real truth about God. The Spirit of God takes what He knows of God – again, that is inside information – and make it known to us.

This truth is not just a load of facts about God – it is relational knowledge of God as well. And this truth of God himself - is an incredibly powerful weapon, stronger than prison, stronger than the threat of death, stronger than any weapons, stronger than any worldly kings or presidents in their palaces.

Because this truth that Jesus presents, is the truth about God, and more than that, it is the truth that comes straight from God.

Jesus knew where he had come from, He knew God inside out, and this knowledge made Him prepared to die at the hands of evildoers. Because He also knew that God, who Himself is the ultimate truth, is stronger than any enemy, stronger than death even.

Jesus made some amazing claims about himself in his interrogation by Pilate. He claims to have come from God; He claims to know the truth about God; He says that all people who belong to the truth – who are in a relationship with God – listen to him.

When Pilate was still not prepared to crucify Jesus, the Jewish leaders told him that He should die because He claimed that He is the Son of God. This made Pilate truly afraid to act against Jesus. It made him ask his third crucial question:

### **Where are you from?**

“Where are you from?” Again, Jesus decided to not give a direct answer. He was silent. What do you think, Pilate? What do we think, today? Where is Jesus from?

Pilate seems to get irritated. “Do you not realize Jesus, that your life is in my hands?” That is often what people think when they have the weapons in their hands. The rulers in their palaces with the tanks to defend them, truly believe they are powerful.

What religion, what political system is it that depends on the use of force to keep people in line?

Jesus comes with truth only. The church of Christ has its Gospel message only. But because Jesus Christ our Lord has come from God – because He is God from God, light from light – his truth is incredibly powerful. It is the truth about the Creator of the Universe. With that truth, God himself comes. The word of truth, the word of the Gospel, is God himself speaking; it is God himself coming.

So Jesus laughs at Pilate and his misguided ideas about his authority. “You would have no authority over me at all unless it had been given to you from above.” (John 19:11)

No one on earth, no government, no political movement, no religion, has any authority or power from itself. Our God reigns. Even in the death of Jesus Christ, He reigned. Because those Jewish leaders and Pontius Pilate, those people set against Jesus, were very perfectly fulfilling the will of God.

Jesus knew He had to become the sacrificial lamb to take away the sins of the world. His crucifixion was not an accident, not just a bad alignment of the stars, not just a plan of some evil people. It was the will of God.

At the beginning, when Jesus was arrested, the soldiers fell to the ground when they saw Jesus. He could have walked away. He knew he had been born for the purpose to witness to the truth, and his moment had now come. And only because God wanted this to happen, Pontius Pilate could have Jesus crucified.

### **Conclusion**

Jesus is King – He rules in the Spiritual realms. His kingdom is the kingdom of God where the weapons are not carnal, not the guns or the tear gas of the rulers of this world.

Is it not amazing that the Christian faith continues to spread all over the world, without governments supporting it, without governments forcing people to follow the Christian faith? All over the world people are free to leave the Christian faith, there is not force in our religion.

And in spite of this, even though we follow a crucified Lord, people come to Jesus Christ in large numbers. Because of the force of truth. Read about his life, study his life. Ask all the critical questions that might be asked. Look at the churches and all their weaknesses and problems. But the truth is marching on.

Jesus obeyed God till his hour of death. This obedience on the cross was possible because He knew that he was serving the truth, that is, God himself. And this same truth, the knowledge of God who is with us, enables us also to follow Him even in dark hours. Because we know that in the end, the truth of our King is always mightier than any darkness around us or in us. AMEN