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"Jesus Before Pilate, First Interview" (1886-94, detail) by James Tissot (Brooklyn Museum)



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November 20, 2021

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"Are you the King of the Jews?" That is one way to ask the central question of the Gospel.

All four of our Gospels quote Pilate as asking that question and none of them tell us in what language Pilate asked it.

Pilate was probably bilingual, speaking Latin and Greek. Jesus, too, was probably bilingual, speaking Aramaic and biblical Hebrew. The Gospel writers don't tell us if Jesus and Pilate had a common tongue or spoke through interpreters, but it's clear that in the scene described in today's Gospel they were not speaking the same language.

Solemnity of Our Lord Jesus Christ, King of the Universe

[November 21, 2021](#)

Daniel 7:13-14

Psalm 93

Revelation 1:5-8

John 18:33b-37

While the nearness/coming of the kingdom of God was the core of Jesus' message, he was seldom identified as kingly, and when it happened, the context was not positive. The Magi were the first to refer to Jesus as a king, and that led Herod to slaughter every child he thought might threaten his power.

After that, when Nathanael realized that Jesus knew his depths, he called Jesus the Son of God and king of Israel. Jesus replied that Nathanael had no idea what he was talking about ([John 1:45-50](#)).

Again, in the Gospel of John ([Chapter 6](#)), we hear that when the people who participated in the miraculous sharing of bread decided to make Jesus king, he fled from them.

Beyond these, most mentions of Jesus' kingship are connected to his condemnation and crucifixion. In the Gospel we hear today, Jesus comes close to calling himself a king, but stops with the affirmation, "My kingdom does not belong to this world."

We might wonder why the church should celebrate a solemn feast day honoring Jesus with a title that he avoided using for himself and that was the ultimate pretext for executing him as a seditionist. What might we understand about the distinction between what Jesus preached as the kingdom of God and the title Pilate used to describe him and his crime?

Daniel's vision hints at an answer. Daniel tells us that he saw one like a son of man coming on the clouds to receive dominion, glory and kingship from the ancient one. "Son of man," the key term for Daniel, is one Jesus often used for himself.

We may think of the title "son of man" as so solemn and powerful that only someone with a voice like James Earl Jones' could possibly pronounce it appropriately. In reality, the phrase simply refers to a human being, a descendant of Adam, someone who started out not on the clouds of heaven, but in swaddling clothes that his parents had to change like diapers. Daniel's vision describes the potential of the human race. All of us.

Pilate's second question, "What have you done?" leads to the heart of the matter.

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This question invites us to recall the whole of the Gospel story. Like the disciples walking to Emmaus or Peter preaching to Cornelius, we need to remember how God was with Jesus as he walked among the people doing good and healing all those oppressed by the devil.

It was just that simple. What had he done? He had gone about doing good. The only way Jesus could explain it to Pilate was to say, "My kingdom is not of this world."

Did Jesus try to get Pilate to understand what it meant to have a kingdom like a mustard seed, a treasure hidden in a field, the finest pearl, a net with every type of fish, a master who hands his fortune over to the care of his servants, a farmer plagued by enemies so jealous they sow weeds midst his wheat? Was there anything

in Pilate capable of comprehending the idea of a kingdom that costs everything one has and is?

The kingdom of God, and therefore the kingship of Christ, is first and foremost perplexing. Its driving power is metanoia, the force that leads people to let themselves be turned inside out and to believe that service is the highest vocation they could ever fulfill.

In the kingdom of God, people trust the insight of widowed mothers and beggars to explain how the financial system really works. In the kingdom of God, people look to migrants and refugees to understand the true character of nations. They watch those who serve the wounded and outcast to understand what true religion is.

The language of the kingdom of God is universal, but unintelligible to those who do not share the values it expresses.

The reason the church should celebrate the solemnity of Our Lord, Jesus Christ, the King of the Universe, is to call ourselves to account. Today's feast calls us to look at Christ the crucified servant and to ask not "Are you a king?", but "Are you my king, or have I chosen others?"