

A Storytelling Commentary on John 18:33-38

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This is the story for the celebration of the Sunday of Christ the King. The story from John stands in contrast to the stories in the synoptic gospels. In Mark for example, the chief priests accuse Jesus of having claimed to be the king of the Jews. In effect Jesus denies it and Mark clearly describes the sign over Jesus' head which read, "the King of the Jews" as being ironic and a false charge.

John, on the other hand, presents Jesus positively as the king of the Jews. In his responses to Pilate, Jesus clearly implies that he is a king but that his kingdom is not of this world. Later in the story, John also has Pilate recognize and affirm that Jesus is the king of the Jews. Pilate writes a sign in three languages with the title, "The King of the Jews." When the chief priests come back and ask him to change the sign to read, "This man said 'I am the king of the Jews'," Pilate refused. The implication is that Jesus' presence convinced Pilate that he was a king.

Pilate is the only Gentile who speaks in the entire Gospel of John. This is an indication that John is an overwhelmingly Jewish Gospel addressed to Jews at the end of the first century. The dynamic of the conversation between Pilate and Jesus is therefore the dynamic of a conversation between a Jew and a Gentile who are at some fundamental level enemies. Pilate's tone in his questions is hostile. That probably changes in the course of his interrogation of Jesus. But this is the beginning of the conversation and Pilate's tone here is both hostile, perhaps cynical, and confrontational.

Jesus' first response to Pilate is to ask him another question. The tone of Jesus' response implies no subordination, no begging, and no pleading for his life. Instead Jesus interrogates Pilate. Pilate does not respond to his interrogation except indirectly: "Well, I'm not a Jew." Jesus acts like a king throughout this conversation. It is important to present his words in a regal, royal manner. Jesus redefines his kingdom. His kingdom is not from this world; it is not a political kingdom. Pilate's question is about whether or not he really is a king. Jesus' response is a continuation of the tradition of Jesus' first response to Pilate. In Mark, when Pilate asks him if he is the king of the Jews, Jesus responds, "You are saying it." In John, Jesus defines the sense in which he is a king. He came into the world in order to testify to the truth and, "Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice."

What is "the truth" in the Gospel of John? This question resonates back through the Gospel: "I am the way the truth and the life." "The law came through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ." The truth is the truth about Jesus, about who he is. It is also the truth about the kingdom of God. And it is the truth about this world and its subjection to the powers of evil. It is the truth about how people will be saved from the

violence of this world by a transformation of their spirit, by believing in the power of the Spirit.

Jesus' kingdom is a spiritual kingdom that transcends and cuts across the political kingdoms of this world. That has happened for the past 2000 years. Jesus' kingdom has continued to be present in the midst of all the changes in styles of government, in characters of government, in the nature of political states. Jesus' kingdom has been present in tension with the kingdoms of the world. This story is a foundational story for the identification of Jesus' identity as a king.