

We're going to look at Scripture together, and we have got quite a long reading there so we're not going to read the whole of that, instead we're going to just look at Chapter 18, we won't read chapter 19 [now]:

[Reading John 18:28-40]

Ok, so we're going to look at scripture together. I've got four questions that I wanted to pick up on that Pilate asks of Jesus in this passage and on into chapter 19.

The first question was: Are you the king of the Jews?

Pilate was a military man and he was also a civil servant, as it were within the Roman empire. He wasn't interested in religious questions, but this claim to political power was of great importance to him. That's why he gets to the nub of it: Are you at threat to the Roman Empire? Because if you are I need to deal with it. But if this is just something between you and the rest of the Jewish people, then I'm not interested.

Jesus' answer of course was: "Is that your own idea or did others talk to you about me?" This response of Jesus invites Pilate to realise that the ideas that Jesus and Pilate had about the nature of kingship – what it meant to be a king – were very different. Christ's kingship had at its heart a cross of service and sacrifice; but for Pilate, well he would never recognise any sort of kingship of service, rather he would see it as rule, and domination, and obedience by the people to the will of Caesar.

Are you the king of the Jews?

The second question in verse 35: What is it you have done?

What is it you have done?

Jesus had taught his followers to love rather than to fight. And we know this must have been a major change for some of them: one of them was called "Simon the Zealot" and from the word "Zealot" we get the word "zeal", and a Zealot was a freedom fighter of New Testament times.

So we have this group of people together here who were very ready: I mean we have the brothers Andrew and Peter whose name, Boanerges, means "Sons of thunder" (it's the sort of thing you'd expect to find on a leather jacket, you know: Bikers and that where you'd expect to find these things) – these men were not your meek quiet followers of a Jewish Rabbi, they were hardened fisherman; they were people who'd fought for freedom against the Roman empire; on the other hand they were people who had collaborated with the Romans – Matthew taking taxes, and no tax collector back then didn't take a little backhand for himself, it's how you kept yourself and your family.

Jesus brought together this disparate group, and he was teaching them not to fight, not to see who was the greatest (even though he was sometimes so disappointed in his disciples when they would wanted to say – remember that argument when they were arguing who was going sit at the right hand of the father, and then Jesus, you can almost imagine him lifting his eyes and, saying "How many times do I need to tell you: it's not about who is the greatest; if you want to be my follower you have to serve.").

Jesus had taught his followers to love rather than to fight, to serve rather than to seek to rule. So Jesus' answer to this question, "What is it you have done?" was "My kingdom is not of this world. If it were my servants would fight and prevent my arrest."

This shows that Jesus' kind of power and authority did not need the support of armies. His kind of power brings freedom with it: freedom from oppression, freedom from the need to force other people to do what we want them to do.

The disciples, of course, had misunderstood Jesus' power time and again during the three years of Jesus' public ministry. They'd even misused this freedom that Jesus gave them: when Jesus was arrested we're told they disappeared, ran away in fear. And that's why Jesus is now standing alone before Pilate because although every one of them said "I'll never leave you" even Peter, who promised to stand with Jesus, denied him.

"What is it you have done?" said Pilate

And this third question: What is truth?

Don't you sometimes find the Bible can be so current in the way that deals with issues? We live in a world where a leader can control the media in their country so that's what they say becomes truth. For the majority of the people in Russia, the truth is what Putin tells them is the truth. And so here's this hardened political leader.

We don't know the way in which he said it. We don't know how he asked this question: was he saying it in despair? Was he saying it in scorn? Was he saying these words in a sense of world weariness?

"What is truth?"

Of course Pilate didn't recognise it but the man before him, this man bloodied and chained, actually embodied the ultimate truth of human existence. But he didn't only embody the truth of human existence, he was also the way to access that truth, and was the living example of that truth - that's why Jesus referred to himself as "The Truth, the Way and the Life" of God.

But this man Pilate was pathetically weakened by political considerations, and that was so true that he had to override what he could see to be true: he knew that this man, Jesus, had committed no crime. He even went back out to the crowd and said "I find no reason to convict this man!"

But in the end, he went with the baying crowd calling for Jesus to be crucified. He could see this man has committed no crime, but he went with the will of the Crowd.

In Matthew chapter 27 we have that amazing word picture of Pilate taking the bowl of water, dipping his hands in it, washing them and then drying them on a towel as though such a symbolic act could wash away the guilt of this man's sin. In knowing the truth and choosing to go against it for political expediency. Because the truth is that only this prisoner standing before him could truly forgive this compromised man.

What is truth?

And then inverse 10 of chapter 19; I'm just going to read from the beginning of chapter 19.

[Reading John 19:1-16]

So we have in verse 10 that fourth question that I want to pick up on: Do you realise I have power

to free you, or to put you to death?

The ultimate irony here, of course, is that even the power that was wielded by Pilate was given by God, as Jesus said in verse 11. Pilate's attempt in his fourth question is to assertive status and his power: do you not realise I am the one with power? But, of course, having to assert it in that way simply highlights the smallness of human achievement and human puffing up of ourselves. Because Pilate is actually standing before the true source of all power and all freedom.

I don't know about you but I found it so sad in this last couple of months to see Putin behind his enormous table trying to prove how powerful he is. And you look at it and say "if only you knew what real power, real authority looked like! It doesn't come from being able to kill innocent people, it comes from a heart and a desire to love and to serve those people that are in your country."

"Do you realise I have power to free you?" says Pilate.

I'll just finished by referring to a story about this man. His name is Pastor Martin Niemoeller and he was met by a US Bible scholar and professor by the name of Jack Finnegan. And Jack Finnegan first met this man, Martin Niemoeller, in 1933 when Hitler came to power in Germany. So this man, Jack Finnegan, was sat in pastor Niemoeller's office (he was also a university professor and a church pastor). And they were sat in his office in a suburb of Berlin. Martin Niemoeller was a very keen student of politics in his own country and he could see the early sign of what was to come with Hitler and the Nazis. He could already see the way that the civil rights of people in Germany were being chipped away in the name of national unity in Germany.

A few years later Martin Niemoeller was arrested and sent to a concentration camp for publicly criticising the Nazis in his preaching. Immediately that Martin Niemoeller was put into prison, his agèd father, Heinrich Niemoeller, came out of retirement and took over the pastorate of his son's church. And he preached – now he was more guarded than Martin was, he wasn't as open with his views. But Heinrich died soon after the war – the father died soon after the war; actually Martin survived the war and didn't die until the 1980s. But soon before Heinrich Niemoeller died, he told a friend of Jack Finnegan, the American professor, he told him "Yes, it is terrible to have a son who is in a concentration camp, but it would have been so much more terrible if God had wanted a witness and Martin had been unwilling to witness to the truth.

I pray that we'll never have to make that decision: whether to be prepared to be witness to God's truth in such a stark way as Martin and Heinrich Niemoeller had to.

And yet we are called to stand for God's truth in a world where you feel as though so many people ask "What is truth?"

We know the truth of the gospel, we know how we are called to follow our Servant King in how we live. in this world at this time.

Let's pray together.

Dear Jesus, we come before you asking that you will help us to live lives that are witnesses to your truth. Help us Lord to know how to navigate the complexity of living in a world like ours. We pray Lord God that you will help us to cling to you, to your character, to your truth, so that we can know how to respond in the difficult circumstances that sometimes come in our daily lives. We pray your Holy Spirit will guide us Lord Jesus.

Amen