

Jesus before Pilate

Last week we stood with Peter around a charcoal fire. While Jesus was being interrogated, Peter too was on trial. He didn't do so well.

Jesus will later redeem him and he'll go on to be the leader of the early church. But at his trial around the fire, he was convicted when he denied his own identity as Jesus' disciple.

But what was also on trial in that scene were two different notions of power.

That trial is even more stark in this week's reading. So let's look at the different characters in the story. Who has power here, who doesn't, and if they have power, what does their power look like?

First, there's Pontius Pilate. He thinks he holds the most power. We know very little about Pilate before or after his governorship. But all four gospels and the three most notable Jewish historians agree he is the one who ordered Jesus' execution.

In the gospels he comes across as doubtful about Jesus' guilt and is pressured by the priests to condemn him. The Jewish historians do not let him off the hook so much.

Pilate is unsettled by Jesus. But he's caught between the truth he can't quite see and the power he refuses to lose.

He was assigned to Judea to be the Roman authority there. He was assigned by the emperor – the supreme power and source of power.

He didn't live in Jerusalem. He was there with his soldiers to maintain order and prevent revolt during Passover.

It would have been obvious to everyone he was the one with the most power. He was the one who could decide between life or death for those beneath him.

Then there's Caiaphas, the High Priest. Rome allowed some religious freedom in their occupied territories, so the Jewish religious rulers could rule over day-to-day life in their region.

But the High Priest was appointed by Pilate. Caiaphas remained in the post throughout Pilate's governorship. They were allies.

The Sanhedrin was the Jewish ruling council. The majority and the ones with the most power were the Sadducees. That is the class the priests largely belonged to. The Pharisees were the minority and had less power.

John kind of puts the Pharisees in the same category as the priests, but they drop out of the story after Jesus' arrest. John makes them more guilty than they likely were because his community had a problem with them.

That's probably splitting hairs a bit, but it's important in our power question.

The Pharisees did not have that much power and the power of Caiaphas and the Sanhedrin came from Pilate...and therefore from the emperor. The religious authorities had power...but it was limited and dependent on their relationship to Pilate.

Before I get to Jesus, I'll say a brief word about Barabbas. He's described as a bandit here. But he's not a petty thief. He is an insurrectionist. He and his band of rebels tried to wield power against the most powerful military machine in the world and lost.

Jesus stands before Pilate really without charge in John's gospel. Caiaphas and the priests basically tell Pilate they want him dead and he should come up with the charge.

A claim to be King of the Jews would have fit the bill. That would make him guilty of sedition...of himself being an insurrectionist. That's a capital crime in oppressive regimes. In other words, Pilate tries to get him to confess to taking power that belongs to the Empire.

But Jesus doesn't fall for the trap. His power doesn't come from any human authority. His power comes from above...from God.

And it's not the kind of power Pilate...nor the Emperor...nor the high priest...nor even Barabbas depend on. If it were, Jesus would have followers capable and trained to fight back and extract him from this situation.

Instead of the power of an Emperor shaped king, Jesus uses the power of a shepherd. The power to call us by name and lead us to pasture.

Remember this from earlier in the book:

⁷So again Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. ⁸All who came before me^[a] are thieves and bandits, but the sheep did not listen to them. ⁹I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved and will come in and go out and find

pasture. ¹⁰The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.

¹¹“I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.

I don't think it's a coincidence that Barabbas is called a bandit.

The priests here are given a choice...listen to the voice of the shepherd...the voice of the one who is himself truth... or side with the bandit. They chose the bandit.

They may have been afraid of Jesus' influence, but they all assumed their power was much greater.

In his interrogation by Pilate, Jesus did not admit to being the King of the Jews, although that's likely what earned him a death sentence. But he did admit to a kingdom. Just not one that was familiar to Pilate.

The priests should have known better. After all, they were the people of a God who had been creating a different kind of world all along.

They had the writings of prophets who talked about a Messiah who would come and lead the people to beat swords into plowshares...a world where all would feast richly on the mountain of the Lord. A Messiah who would establish a kingdom of shalom for all, rich and poor.

They just refused to believe that Jesus was that Messiah. Instead, they rejected him and bought into the power that the world always seems to be drawn to...the power of the Empire. That kind of power would end up killing Jesus.

But John's signs point us to the kind of kingdom Jesus was actually talking about.

He changed water to wine, saving a wedding celebration. And more wine than you could imagine! His is a kingdom of abundance and celebration. A kingdom that would rescue a family from shame and public embarrassment and instead bring joy.

He overturned tables in the Temple. His kingdom would not be one of magnificent structures and hierarchical systems.

Instead, his kingdom...his Temple...would be his body. His kingdom would be made up of those who trusted and followed his way...a kingdom that some in our era have perhaps appropriately called a kin-dom...a community of kin.

The miraculous healings point us to Jesus as the source of abundant life...healing life. They point to relationship with Jesus, and therefore relationship with God, as a source of eternal life. We are immersed in the eternal life of Jesus and that is our source of healing.

In the healing of a man born blind, we realize the story isn't just about physical blindness. Jesus opens the eyes of the spiritually blind...so that we can see Jesus' kingdom and the promise of life, love, and salvation he offers to the whole world.

In his feeding of the multitude, we are again pointed to a kingdom of abundance. But it's also a kingdom of sharing food and trusting that there is enough for everyone.

And then, there's the raising of Lazarus. Jesus' kingdom is one where even death has no power. By contrast, Pilate and the Empire believe death is the ultimate power...it's the power they rely on to maintain their own power.

The good news...the gospel...is that the power of the world...the power that relies on violence...the power that relies on death...isn't the power that wins. The power of the world...the power of death...is overturned.

Truth is not an abstract concept or the outcome of debate. Truth is the good shepherd who leads us through death to new life. The shepherd leads us to abundant life...here and now...and into eternity.