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The Gospel of John
LI. Kingdom and Truth
John 18:28-40

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Jesus is led by the soldiers and religious leaders from the house of Caiaphas, the High Priest, to Pilate's headquarters. Pilate is the Roman ruler over Jerusalem and the surrounding areas. And the Jewish leaders bring Jesus to Pilate for one, and only one reason – because only the Romans can carry out the death penalty in the Roman occupied Jewish territories.

They bring Jesus to Pilate – and one small note not to miss as they do so. They stop outside Pilate's headquarters – the Jewish leaders will not go inside. They let the Roman soldiers take Jesus the rest of the way in to Pilate. The reason they will not enter Pilate's headquarters? Because Pilate's headquarters were considered ritually unclean – and if the Jewish leaders were to enter, they would become ritually unclean themselves, and so prohibited from participating in the Passover celebration. It is their religious scruples which keep them from entering even as they deliver the Messiah, the Son of God, to be crucified. But let us not be too hard on them – it has, very sadly, ever been so – that believers should use religion itself to do things which dishonor Christ. It is terribly easy, and a close at hand temptation, to become so wrapped up in our religious practices and doctrines that we also completely lose sight of what our religion is really all about – or rather that we lose sight of the One who our faith is meant to be all about. Inquisitions, holy wars, church fights and factions are only the beginning of the list of how we misuse our religion to miss out on Christ.

The religious leaders deliver Jesus to Pilate's headquarters. Pilate goes out to speak to the religious leaders, asking them what accusation they bring against Jesus – which sounds like a bit of play-acting, given that Pilate has already provided the soldiers to make the arrest. And which perhaps explains the non-answer the Jewish leaders then offer: *“If this man were not doing evil, we would not have delivered him over to you.”* Pilate, whose job consisted mainly in keeping things quiet in this backwater Roman territory, lest Caesar in Rome grow concerned and replace him – Pilate must not have had his morning coffee yet, as he dismisses this complaint as if he were not already somewhat complicit in the plan. So the Jewish leaders remind him of why they are bringing Jesus to him – they need Pilate to put Jesus to death – death upon a cross, the Roman way. *“This,”* says John, *“This was to fulfill the word Jesus had spoken to show by what kind of death he was going to die.”* John is reminding us, before things go too far, that while it looks like the Jewish leaders and the Roman authorities are the ones controlling events – all of this, and all of them, are actually in the hands of God, events unfolding according to the plans of God.

Jesus is then brought before Pilate to be examined. “*Are you the King of the Jews?*” he asks Jesus. Pilate has clearly been aware of Jesus and the debate concerning Him. But the question is, nonetheless, a mocking one – this man, this shackled son of a carpenter, the King of the Jews? It’s laughable to Pilate. Probably the only real reason Pilate asks that question is just to find out whether this Jesus is another one of those fake Messiahs which this Jewish nation keeps putting forth, or whether He is just simply a madman or a fool. Jesus’ answer, however, stops Pilate in his tracks: “*Do you say this of your own accord, or did others say it to you about me?*” That stops Pilate in his tracks because it is not at all the answer Pilate was expecting. A false messiah would have been on his knees crying for mercy at that question; a madman or a fool would have just smiled and said yes. “*Do you say this of your own accord, or did others say it to you about me?*” How dare this prisoner turn the tables on Pilate and try to prosecute him!

Pilate, clearly annoyed, yet even so wondering then what sort of man this must be to respond so, answers angrily: “*Am I a Jew? Your own nation and the chief priests have delivered you over to me.*” And then, perhaps more calmly, or at least with a touch more genuine curiosity, he asks Jesus, “*What is it you have done?*” Jesus responds by answering Pilate’s original question, “*Are you the King of the Jews?*” He tells Pilate, “*My kingdom is not of this world.*”

“*My kingdom is not of this world*” – we need to spend a minute thinking about that. What Jesus is saying to Pilate is not that He doesn’t have a kingdom, nor that His kingdom cannot be found in this world. What Jesus is saying is that His Kingdom is not from this world, not made up of the sort of elements that define an ordinary earthly kingship. It does not have anything to do, for example, with armies marching and borders defended and peoples subjugated and such. Jesus is a King, He is saying, but not the sort of King, and not the sort of Kingdom, as the world understands such matters – not the sort of King or Kingdom that Pilate could comprehend by looking, for example, at Caesar’s example.

“*If my kingdom were of this world,*” Jesus continues, then He would be doing things in an earthly kingdom sort of way: “*My servants would have been fighting, that I might not be delivered over to the Jews.*” “*But,*” says Jesus a second time, “*my kingdom is not from the world.*” And Pilate, much like Nicodemus before him, is utterly confused by this. Jesus, remember, had told Nicodemus that he must be born again, born this time from above if he were ever to enter into the kingdom of Christ. Nicodemus could not understand this “born again” – all he could think of is the earthly experience of birth. And so he asked Jesus how in the world it could ever be possible for him to crawl back into his mother’s womb and do that all over again. Jesus explained to him that He meant born from above, born of the Spirit not of His mother’s womb.¹ And now here is Pilate having the same trouble – able to conceive of kings and kingdoms only in terms of earthly definitions, and so looking at Jesus and wondering how in the world this man in chains could ever be a king, and His tiny, ragged band of disciples ever be a kingdom. “*So you are a king?*” Pilate says to Jesus.

Jesus explains yet again that His Kingship and His Kingdom cannot be defined by the worldly definition, nor is it made from worldly elements of power and violence and coercion. “*For this purpose I was born and for this purpose I have come into the world – to bear witness to the truth.*” The Truth is what Jesus’ Kingdom is made from, made up of. And Jesus the King is the revealer of that Truth – God’s own Truth. The Truth that upholds the stars in their orbits, the

Truth that creates and sustains life in all its splendid and manifold forms, the Truth which underlies and empowers our every breath – and yet the Truth that we human beings lost hold of, lost sight of, lost access to the very moment we turned away from our Creator in sin. Jesus' Kingdom is built upon the proclamation and restoration of that Truth to the world. Jesus' Kingdom is formed from the proclamation and rediscovery of the Truth of God's presence, God's power, God's goodness, God's rule over all things; and, most of all God's love and God's grace for this world which He has made.

God's Truth – that which is everywhere true and everywhere present to those who have hearts reopened to God, eyes recentered upon their Creator, ears unblocked to once again receive and believe the Word of God Incarnate. *“Everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice,”* says Jesus to Pilate. We enter the Kingdom of Jesus, we dwell in the Kingdom of Jesus – even live out the reign of Jesus on earth as it is in heaven – by listening to the voice of Jesus. By listening to Jesus as He reveals to us the Truth about this world, about ourselves, and about the God who has made us for Himself and seeks to redeem us for His Kingdom.

Pilate hears all of this – but he does not listen to Jesus. *“Everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice,”* Jesus says to Pilate. *“What is truth?”* Pilate sneers in response. What does truth have to do with anything at all about life in this world, life in the kingdoms of this world? Might makes right, not truth. Pilate hears the words, but he does not listen to the Voice of the One who is our only the King. *“Everyone who is of the truth”* – who is of His Kingdom – *“listens to my voice.”* But Pilate, not listening, goes out to the crowd to see if there is a less messy way out of this than a crucifixion. But the crowd is not listening to Jesus either. They had heard Him speak, flocked around Him for the miracles – but they have not listened, they have not accepted, they have not embraced as Truth the things He has spoken to them. *“Not that man,”* they cry out – *“Give us Barabbas!”*

“My kingdom is not of this world . . . Everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice.” To know the Kingdom of God, the only true and eternal Kingdom, we must hear the Truth Jesus speaks to us. To enter into the Kingdom of Jesus, the only true and eternal Kingdom, we must listen to the Truth Jesus speaks. Listen – meaning not just to hear, but to receive. Meaning not just to receive, but to believe. Meaning not just to believe, but to accept. And meaning not just to accept, but to live – to live out, to live into, the Truth Jesus speaks. To give ourselves to the Truth Jesus speaks is to discover His Kingdom, to enter into His Kingdom, to bow down before Him as our King.

*“Attention is the beginning of devotion.”*² I came across that profound and lovely quote from the pen of the poet Mary Oliver several weeks ago – *“Attention is the beginning of devotion.”* To see the Kingdom of Jesus, to enter into the Kingdom of Jesus, to live the Kingdom of Jesus begins in our willingness, our desire, our passionate dedication to attend to the Word Jesus has spoken – to pay attention to the Truth. Kathleen Norris, a Presbyterian writer, tells of returning to the small Presbyterian church of her grandparents on the plains of South Dakota – and specifically of the first time she showed up for the women's Bible study there:

*I have a spotty education but am an incurable reader.
Acutely aware of my ignorance, I read widely in theology, church*

history, monastic, liturgical, and biblical studies . . . But at the first Bible study I attended with the women of Spencer Memorial Presbyterian Church, it was the sight of the well-worn Bibles carried by the mostly gray-haired women – contrasting sharply with my nearly new one . . . that my husband had given me for Christmas – that stunned me into silence. It was the thing itself . . . staring me in the face, telling me more than words could convey. Looking at the women, I felt as if I were seeing my own grandmother again. Her Bible, spine broken, binding cracked . . . looked very much like theirs. These women knew things about the Christian religion that I did not, the kind of things that are learned . . . through a lifetime of faith.³

A lifetime of attending to the Word of God. What do the spines of our Bibles look like? What do the bindings of our Bibles say about the binding of our lives to Him and to His Truth? *“Attention is the beginning of devotion.” “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.”*

“Attention is the beginning of devotion” And not only to listen, but also to believe, to accept, to seek to obey, to try to put the Truth, the Word, into practice – devotion to the Truth of Jesus. When he was a young man, Billy Graham went through a period of questioning in which he debated the authority of the Bible – debated whether he should receive the Bible as God’s inspired Word and therefore the ultimate source of authority for his life, or whether he should receive the Bible as merely a religious book filled with bits of helpful human wisdom. While he was going through this, he had a friend, Chuck Templeton, another rising star in the world of young evangelical preachers, who was going through the same thing. Templeton eventually decided that the Bible was not the sole authority for his life, the sole source of truth for the living of his life – and he tried to convince Graham to follow him in that decision.

Graham’s response was to go for a walk in the woods near a retreat center outside Los Angeles. And there he laid his Bible open upon a rock, and he prayed this prayer: *“Oh God, I cannot prove certain things. I cannot answer some of the questions Chuck is raising and some of the other people are raising, but I accept this Book by faith as the Word of God.”* Graham would later say it was that prayer, and that decision to strive to live his life by the truth of God’s Word no matter what, which changed everything. As for Chuck Templeton, he left the pulpit. Many years later, he was asked about that decision he had made. He reflected back on his life for a moment, and then he said the most tragic thing: he said that he missed Jesus. And then he broke down in tears.⁴ He had missed out on Jesus – missed out on the Truth which brings us into the Kingdom of God in this life, as well as in the next. We listen to the Truth of Christ, we seek to live out our lives by the Word of God. And so Jesus becomes our King; and so we enter into His Kingdom life now, as well as in eternity.

“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.” So yes, Pilate, Jesus is a King. In fact, He is the King of kings. In fact, though it is not a Kingdom made up of that which defines an earthly kingdom – armies and borders and violence and such – it is indeed a Kingdom

very much in this world, right here and right now. And if we will listen to Jesus, not only will we find ourselves able to see that Kingdom all around us in this world, but we will be able to enter into that Kingdom now – enter now into the fullness of the glory and grace which is the stuff of that Kingdom. Jesus is not “a” king, Jesus is “the” King. And He shall reign forever and ever.⁵ Amen.

¹ John 3:1-15.

² Mary Oliver, Upstream: Selected Essays (New York: Penguin Press, 2016), p.8.

³ Kathleen Norris, Amazing Grace (New York: Riverhead Books, 1998), p. 243.

⁴ James Emery White, Christ Among the Dragons (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2010), pp. 41-42.

⁵ Revelation 11:15.