

Pilate said to him, "So you are a king?" Jesus answered, "You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I have come into the world, to bear witness to the truth. Every one who is of the truth hears my voice." Pilate said to him, "What is truth?"

John 18: 37-38

I don't think that was a rhetorical question. When Pilate asks "what is truth?" I think he's genuinely looking for an answer. So it scares me that Jesus doesn't give him one.

The conventional version of the story avoids this problem, because in the conventional version, Pilate isn't really sincere. He's just a condescending snob. (Picture William F. Buckley in a toga.) "What is truth?"-- like a law professor asking a Socratic question, just to show this unsophisticated amateur how empty his passion really is.

I don't think this is the right way to read the story. After all, Pilate is the only decent person left in the story. And he's in a desperate situation, just as much as Jesus is. Here he is, warden of the most dangerous colony in the Empire. Some religious nut rides into town with the natives shouting "King of Kings!" "The kingdom of Heaven is at hand!" This, just in time for Passover, when the Jews celebrate how God delivered them from slavery by slaughtering the Egyptian oppressors in their beds. A holy war like that would wipe out Pilate's garrison, and bring down a punitive expedition from Rome that would have to destroy the city in order to save it for Caesar. In his own imperialist way, Pilate has the same responsibility that Jesus has-- he's a shepherd trying to save Jerusalem from its sins in the name of a jealous emperor god. But now the natives switch sides, and Pilate faces the bizarre threat of a Hebrew mob accusing *him* of treason against Caesar, and threatening to tear the city apart if he *doesn't* kill their messiah.

This is a very dangerous situation. Under the circumstances, the fact that Pilate even

hesitates to kill this guy shows a lot of humanity. So it doesn't fit the story to read "what is truth?" as a put-down. If that's all Pilate meant, Jesus would be dead already. No, I think Pilate is asking in a sincere panic. He needs to understand what Jesus is saying, so he can stop the madness in his city. Pilate is acting more like a Christian than anyone else in the story. Peter and Judas have left Jesus for dead, but it's Pilate who's still looking for a way out.

So it should terrify us Christians that Jesus doesn't give him one. "Everyone who is of the truth hears my voice," so why can't that include Pilate? Why doesn't he get a command performance of the Sermon on the Mount? Is Jesus now a racist—"It's a Jew thing, you wouldn't understand"? No: this is Christ, remember, the bearer of universal love. He's not supposed to abandon souls over matters of politics. That's why this version of this story doesn't satisfy me. It makes it seem like Christ has washed his hands of Pilate, not the other way around.

I think Jesus can't answer because here, in the praetorium, is where the obsession with kingship finally silences hope. Romans and Jews alike have mistaken Jesus to mean that God is like a king, and so a king is like a god, and since there is only one god and one king, there is no truth but what a king brings from God. Jerusalem was willing to follow Jesus when they thought he was some mystical warlord-- that's why they turn on him when he doesn't act like one. That's why Pilate is so fixated on Jesus' royal credentials. For all his good will, he just can't understand this talk of **truth without authority**. I think that this is the real moment of crucifixion, when Jesus has to stand silent before Pilate, when all the superstitions of power keep Christ from being understood. So if there is a Resurrection from this kind of death, it must mean these superstitions will pass away, even though they killed us the first time around. _