

JESUS TESTIFIES TO THE TRUTH

John 18:28-40

Key Verse: 18:37

“‘You are a king, then!’ said Pilate. Jesus answered, ‘You are right in saying I am a king. In fact, for this reason I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me.’”

In today’s passage Jesus stands before the Roman governor Pontius Pilate. In outer appearances, Jesus seems to be on trial. At trial, most persons only desire to escape and avoid punishment, whether they be innocent or guilty. But Jesus makes no effort to save himself. Jesus testifies to the truth that he is the king of the Jews, the promised Messiah. Jesus testifies through his words and through his act of obedience to God. Jesus’ testimony is not merely an historical statement. It demanded a response from Pilate; it demands a response from us. May God help us to accept Jesus’ testimony and stand on the side of truth.

First, to fulfill the words Jesus had spoken (28-32).

Look at verse 28. “Then the Jews led Jesus from Caiaphas to the palace of the Roman governor. By now it was early morning, and to avoid ceremonial uncleanness the Jews did not enter the palace; they wanted to be able to eat the Passover.” Though Jesus is the Son of God who has authority over all people, he was being led around by the Jews to be tried like a criminal. Isaiah said, “he was led like a lamb to the slaughter” (Isa 53:7). It was a willing surrender. Jesus gave up his human freedom and human rights. We Americans value human rights

highly. Some are willing to fight to the death for human rights. But Jesus gave up all his human rights to take our place of punishment.

At the same time, we find in the Jewish leaders a compelling obsession to condemn the innocent Jesus. They were willing to do anything necessary, cheating their consciences and staying up all night. However, when it came to entering a Gentile palace, they drew the line. They would not go in because they thought it would defile them. Their insistence on ceremonial cleanness, as they condemned the holy Son of God to death, is sheer hypocrisy. However, God used even this to enable Jesus and Pilate to have a most meaningful conversation.

Look at verse 29. “So Pilate came out to them and asked, ‘What charges are you bringing against this man?’” We can imagine the scene. The religious leaders, lacking sleep, stand impatiently in front of the palace, tapping their feet on the stone pavement. A palace guard goes to get Pilate. Maybe Pilate was just getting up, and came out to confront them in his pajamas. In any case, he was willing to go out to them when they were unwilling to come in to him. This telling sign reveals Pilate’s tendency to acquiesce to the Jews. Pilate asked, “What is the charge?” Their answer was, “Don’t ask about the charge. He is guilty. We want the death penalty.” The injustice of this exchange is galling.

However, John explains in verse 32, “This happened so that the words Jesus had spoken indicating the kind of death he was going to die would be fulfilled.” John’s commentary is indeed enlightening. John sees the fulfillment of Jesus’ own words about how he would die. Jesus had said in John 12:32-33, “‘But I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself.’ He said this to indicate the kind of death he was going to die” (see also Jn 3:14). Being “lifted up” referred to

crucifixion. Only Romans could carry out crucifixion. If Jesus died at the hands of the Jews it would be through stoning. So, even though the process reeks of malice and injustice, the final result is that Jesus would be executed by the Romans in fulfillment of God's will and Jesus' prophetic words. Thus, John sees God's sovereign rule behind this event.

This passage challenges us, also, to see God's sovereign rule behind the events of life. It challenges us to have faith that God is always working for good to carry out his world salvation plan (Ro 8:28). We must see everything through the eyes of faith. After the Lord raised me as the director of Chicago UBF, I began to pray with three prayer topics: to grow as a powerful messenger of God's word, to learn the love of Jesus for his people, and for wisdom to be a good administrator. Many prayer warriors also joined me in this prayer. God is answering this prayer. Now I find the love of Jesus growing in my heart for many precious young people. It happened through God's discipline. About two years ago, my oldest son David suddenly declared his intention to go his own way, abandoning his spiritual heritage. This was devastating to me personally, and it brought a lot of emotional turmoil in our family. Through much struggle, we realized that all we could really do was pray, crying out to God. With a broken heart, it was hard to see that God was working for good. But now we realize it is true. The Lord taught us his love for his people. God loves each person even more than I love my son. No matter how rebellious they are, God wants them to come back to him. For this, he waits with longsuffering patience and undying hope. After learning the heart of God, I began to love many young people like my own children. God is always working for good for those who love him. Let's believe this and see everything with the eyes of faith.

Second, Jesus shares the kingdom of God with Pilate (33-37).

After figuring out what the Jews wanted, Pilate went back inside the palace, summoned Jesus and asked him, “Are you the king of the Jews?” Jesus said, “Is that your own idea, or did others talk to you about me?” (33,34) With this question, Jesus changed the tone of the meeting. Jesus made it a personal conversation, not an interrogation. Jesus began to talk with Pilate man to man, not as a prisoner before a judge. Jesus’ piercing question got to the heart of Pilate’s problem. As a Roman governor, Pilate was invested with power by the Roman Empire to carry out Roman justice. He should be impartial and his justice should reflect the standard and nobility of the Roman ideal. So Pilate should make deliberate decisions based on facts and Roman principles, without being swayed by undue influence. However, Pilate was already on the defensive before the relentless Jewish leaders.

Pilate said, “Am I a Jew?” (35) This reveals his real agony. Though he was supposed to be in charge as the Roman governor, he seemed to be helpless before the Jewish leaders. He ended up doing what the Jews wanted him to do. Sometimes he didn’t know if he was a Roman or a Jew. He hated being manipulated by the Jewish leaders, but it happened again and again. In fact, it was not Jesus who was on trial, but Pilate, whose problem was exposed through a few words of Jesus.

We can imagine how tired Pilate must have been. Although he was a glorious Roman governor, his daily life was full of anguish. The renowned New Testament scholar, William Barclay, has synthesized the accounts of two contemporary historians, Josephus and Philo, to relate a defining moment that marked the beginning of Pilate’s reign. When Pilate rode into Jerusalem for the first time, he

came with a detachment of soldiers. They carried Roman standards, which were topped with gold busts of the Roman Emperor, considered a god by the Romans. However, to the Jews, this was tantamount to idol worship and it violated the first commandment. The Jews protested with all their strength, but Pilate would not concede. After his visit to Jerusalem was over, he went back to Caesarea where his main palace was. The Jews followed him and argued with him about this matter for five straight days. Finally, Pilate met them in the amphitheater to settle the matter. After the Jews assembled, Pilate had them surrounded by with soldiers in a surprise move. He threatened to kill them if they did not back down. The Jews said, “Go ahead, kill us all. We will not give in to idol worship.” The Jews had been trained by God Almighty for many years to obey his commands as a matter of life and death. Especially, they were ready to die to worship the one true God. Daunted, Pilate backed down. The Jews got their way and went back to Jerusalem singing songs of victory. From that time on, for Pilate, ruling Judea was like having a monkey on his back. He was never free from Jewish pressure, always apprehensive that they were up to something. At the same time, Pilate had to answer to his boss, Tiberius Caesar. They say that Tiberius was insanely jealous. He always suspected his subordinates of conspiracy and could suddenly strike them dead on slight evidence. Although Pilate looked like a glorious Roman governor, his reality of life was miserable.

Jesus knew Pilate’s agony of life very well. Jesus really wanted to help this man. So Jesus began to share the good news of his kingdom with him. Clever lawyers would say that Jesus was making a mistake by volunteering information to Pilate that could be used against him. When a suspect is arrested in America, he is informed of his right to remain silent and told, “Anything you say can and will be used against you in a court of law.” But Jesus did not keep quiet. Jesus began to

talk to Pilate about his kingdom. It was out of his shepherd heart for Pilate. Jesus said quietly in verse 36, “My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jews. But now my kingdom is from another place.”

When Jesus said, “My kingdom is not of this world,” he tells a very important truth about the kingdom of God. The kingdom of God is not of this world. The kingdoms of this world are built on military power. They are ruled by applied force. No matter how well decorated they are, they can be compared to brutal beasts that crush and devour mankind (Dan 7,8). Consider Communism. It was established through bloody revolution. Although it promised “from each according to his ability to each according to his need,” it actually made party leaders rich and ordinary people very poor. It also made them lazy. How about capitalism? It has fueled incessant war to keep the makers of weapons in business. It has also led to cutthroat practices that suddenly leave faithful workers jobless. It has left us with a terrible health care crisis. Most modern people are so busy trying to survive that they have no time for anything, even for quiet moments with their own family members.

Jesus said, “My kingdom is not of this world.” Nations rise and fall. Systems come and go. The newest one always promises to be better than the former ones. But they end up being just the same in their effect on people. But Jesus’ kingdom is not of this world. Jesus’ kingdom is different. Jesus’ kingdom is from above. Jesus’ kingdom is the kingdom of heaven. It is not built on military power, but on the redemptive love of God. It does not suck the life out of its members, but gives life to their souls. It does not demand their allegiance on the threat of death, but it gives them the most precious gift of God, the sacrifice of his one and only Son as a

ransom for their sins. It is not built on coercion but on the willingness of the redeemed to follow and to serve their Lord out of love for him. It is a kingdom of true justice, righteousness, peace, love, joy and eternal life. What Pilate really needed was the kingdom of Jesus. It is amazing that Jesus spoke to Pilate about his kingdom. It was nothing but the grace of Jesus toward a miserable and perishing soul.

Jesus further explained something that must have been quite troubling to Pilate. Jesus said, "If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jews." No doubt, Pilate knew something about Jesus. And he must have known there was a great triumphal entry just a few days before when Jesus was welcomed by the people of Israel as the king of the Jews. To Pilate it must have been hard to understand why none of Jesus' supporters were there, and how it could be that Jesus was deserted and so alone all of a sudden. Jesus did not talk about the desertion of his disciples. Jesus simply explained that his kingdom was not political and it was not worldly. It is a spiritual kingdom and it is where God rules.

Pilate said, "You are a king, then!" At first glance, it seems that he was elated to find a charge against Jesus based on his own confession about his kingdom. This would seem to get Pilate off the hook politically. But Pilate's subsequent attempt to release Jesus reveals that he knew Jesus was not a political king. Pilate's exclamation may have contained an element of admiration for Jesus, for he recognized in Jesus true nobility and a kingly bearing. Jesus really was the king of the Jews. He must also have liked Jesus' message of the kingdom of God. Jesus had found an opening in the armor around Pilate's heart. Jesus explained further about his kingship in order to win his soul to God.

Look at verse 37b. “Jesus answered, ‘You are right in saying I am a king. In fact, for this reason I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me.’” Jesus encouraged Pilate to make a confession of faith; Jesus wanted him to accept him as the king of the Jews. But Jesus wanted him to understand this spiritually, not politically. Jesus is the king of truth. This kingship does not have geographical boundaries, nor can it be defined by national or cultural symbols. This kingship is not based on the power to coerce, but on the truth. The truth is that God exists and that God is the Creator and Sovereign Ruler of the heavens and the earth. The truth is that men are sinners who have rebelled against God and gone their own way. The truth is that God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. Jesus came into the world to testify to the truth. Jesus came into the world to make God known, to reconcile God to man, and to restore God’s rightful rule in the hearts of men. Jesus came to destroy the devil, the father of lies, and to cast him into hell forever. When we accept Jesus as our king of truth, we can know the truth about God, ourselves and the world. We can know the meaning and purpose of our lives. We can live in God’s presence, which gives us peace, joy, hope, and true life. We can have assurance of eternal life in the kingdom of God, where there are no tears or mourning or crying or pain, but only the glory and beauty of God forever.

Jesus is the king of truth and he restores the kingdom of God. But he does not force anyone to enter his kingdom. Jesus said, “Everyone on the side of truth listens to me.” We can be on the side of truth by accepting one word of Jesus in our hearts (Jn 5:24). Then we are born into God’s kingdom as his blessed children. We can hear his voice of truth, and it is so sweet to our ears. We know in our hearts that it is the truth that comes from God. We willingly obey Jesus’ voice of truth, and

follow Jesus, and stand on Jesus' side. We are ready to pay the price to stand on the side of truth. Jesus really wanted Pilate to accept his word and to stand on the side of truth. Jesus clearly testified to the truth that he is the king who brings salvation and the kingdom of God.

Third, Israel rejects the king of the Jews (38-40).

Look at verse 38. "What is truth?" Pilate asked. With this he went out again to the Jews and said, "I find no basis for a charge against him." Pilate talked back to Jesus, saying, "What is truth?" Pilate did not accept Jesus' words and decide to stand on the truth. He knew Jesus was innocent, but he did not stand on the truth. Instead, he tried to compromise. He appealed to the crowd, saying, "But it is your custom for me to release to you one prisoner at the time of the Passover. Do you want me to release 'the king of the Jews'?" Pilate must have hoped that he could circumvent the influence of the religious leaders through a direct democratic appeal. But Pilate miscalculated.

Look at verse 40. "They shouted back, 'No, not him! Give us Barabbas!' Now Barabbas had taken part in a rebellion." Jesus stood before the Jews as their rightful king. Jesus was king by birth. Jesus was proved to be king through his divine teaching and miracles. Jesus had done only good: healing the sick, driving out evil spirits, preaching the gospel of his kingdom. Many in the crowd had been touched by the love of Jesus. This Jesus stood before them as Pilate asked, "Do you want me to release to you the king of the Jews?" And they shouted back, "No, not him! Give us Barabbas!" Jesus was utterly rejected by the very people who should have welcomed him as the king sent by God. John 1:11 says, "He came to

that which was his own, but his own did not receive him.” Isaiah cried, “Who has believed our message and to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?” (53:1)

Rejection is very painful. The greatest fear of many young people is to be rejected by their friends or peers. Yet the Son of God was rejected by sinful men. It was for us. Isaiah said, “He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and familiar with sufferings.” We should be rejected by God, but Jesus bore this rejection in our places. Isaiah goes on to say, “Like one from whom men hide their faces, he was despised, and we esteemed him not. Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed” (Isa 53:3-5). Because Jesus was rejected, we can be accepted by God.

In today’s passage we learned that Jesus testified to the truth. Jesus is the spiritual king who gives us eternal life and the kingdom of God. When we listen to Jesus and accept his word, he comes into our hearts to reign. Let’s accept Jesus and testify to the truth with him.