

Sunday 30th April 2023 – John 18:33-40: ‘King of kings’ (2) ‘The King of Heaven’

Recently we enjoyed watching the big BBC Sunday night drama ‘The Gold’. It’s a dramatized version of the story of the Brinks Mat gold bullion heist in 1983 – at the time the most valuable robbery in history. Over six episodes, we watched the team of detectives painstakingly try to catch the culprits *and* recover the gold before it’s melted down and disappears into global economy. The heart of the drama revolves around the chap who allegedly receives about half of the gold, and who is brought to trial on two separate occasions.

The drama of these trials is compelling. Picture the scene – a packed gallery, a top judge, the excited murmurs as the defendant is led into the courtroom. The prosecution try to paint him as an arch-villain, the epicentre of a wide web of criminal activity; the defence as a simply a prosperous businessman who is being unfairly pursued because he is very open about his success. Each case swings back and forth until the jury retires to give their verdict....

I won’t give the game away by telling you what happens. But the drama of the scene is exactly what we find in today’s passage. Try to picture it, if you can: instead of a judge, a top official, Pontius Pilate – effectively the de facto judge in this case; instead of a courtroom, a palace where the action takes place. But *the same crowd gathered excitedly to watch; the same accusers pointing their fingers and making their threats; and, at the heart of it, one defendant* – only this time not a successful businessman, but a penniless itinerant preacher: Jesus of Nazareth.

The charge?: not a robbery, not even a conspiracy – only a name: King. Jesus is being tried for allegedly calling himself ‘the king of the Jews’, the anointed rescuer of his people. Of course, that’s just the trumped-up charge – but it’s the one that gets the attention of the ruling authorities, who want a quiet life; and it’s also the one that can get him killed.

And so our judge for today, Pilate, asks the defendant – Jesus – the million dollar question directly: ‘Are you the king of the Jews?’ It’s a pretty bad strategy, as anyone who watches courtroom dramas knows: the accused is never going to admit the charge directly in front of the judge. And Jesus quite rightly bats it straight back to him: ‘Is that your own idea, or did others talk to you about me?’ In other words: what do you think, Pilate? You’ve been here in Judea a while, you’ve probably heard about me, you’ve seen the corruption and self-interest of the regular leaders – what would you say if you were me?

But Pilate is too skilled a political operator to get drawn, either – his reply is effectively: ‘It’s not my job to have an opinion, but to decide whether your opinion of yourself is worthy of executing you.’

How does Jesus respond: as he often does, by taking the question into another dimension entirely: **his kingdom is not a worldly one, but from somewhere else.** If you were Pilate, how would you respond to that? Jesus has outmanoeuvred him completely, as he did the religious leaders on a regular basis: he *is* a king, but not *directly* of the Jewish people. So, is he guilty, or isn’t he?

Pilate tries to push: so, what kind of a king are you? To which Jesus replies: one called to speak truth to the world. In other words, not an immediate political or military threat, so Pilate tries to exonerate Jesus before the baying mob – unsuccessfully, as we know... but if only Pilate could have seen that Jesus was pointing him towards something far greater, that Jesus had a far greater claim on Pilate than Pilate realised. The other place Jesus referred to is heaven. And **the king of heaven can only be God himself.**

We tend to think of Jesus primarily in terms of his life here on earth – and that is only natural. But Jesus had a life well before then: he came down to earth from heaven, as verse 2 of the carol ‘Once in royal David’s city’ begins. And he ascended back to heaven six weeks after this conversation with Pilate. As we saw last week, he has been from all eternity, and will be for all eternity.

So what does it mean for Jesus to be the king of heaven? Firstly that his kingdom is eternal. It predates human structures, and will outlive them too. The irony of the trial with Pilate is that *of course* Jesus is the king of the Jews – *and* of the Romans, and every other nation under heaven. He always has been, and always will be.

This also means, secondly, that **his rule is not defined in geographic terms. Jesus’ kingdom exists wherever the rule and reign of God is manifested.** In the church, yes, but also whenever God’s will is done, on earth as it is in heaven. Whenever the vulnerable are looked after, Jesus’ kingdom comes. Whenever a just peace treaty is signed, Jesus’ kingdom comes. Whenever people choose to co-operate with each other and dwell in unity rather than dwell in division and isolation, Jesus’ kingdom comes. And, yes, whenever people praise the name of Jesus, or pray in his name for God to act, Jesus’ kingdom comes.

Nations rise and fall; empires rise and fall – but Jesus’ kingdom continues.

Third it means that **all those who confess Jesus’ name have what you might call dual citizenship.** We belong both to an earthly nation, but also to the kingdom of heaven, the kingdom of Jesus. Mostly these two can co-exist – but, if push comes to shove, our first allegiance is to the kingdom of heaven. As Jesus says, ‘Everyone on the side of truth listens to me.’ As the times get more challenging for Jesus’ followers, I sense that we in the West urgently need to re-capture a sense that Jesus’ kingdom takes priority over our earthly affiliations.

In practice what that means is, fourthly and finally, we are called to spread the values of Jesus’ kingdom across the world, and wherever we get the opportunity to do so. Most of the time, such values and activity are welcomed by the earthly kingdoms, as they usually do good to those who need it. Occasionally, however, we act as a prophetic voice. Just like Jesus, we are called to testify to the truth – and speaking truth to power is not always welcomed.

Today, let’s rejoice that Jesus is the eternal king; a king whose kingdom stretches across both time and continent, and which welcomes all into it, from each and every earthly nation. And, as Jesus’ global community of followers, let’s recommit ourselves to spreading the reign of the king of heaven wherever the Lord grants us the grace to do. Amen.