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Beverly E.C.C., Chicago, IL

“THE KING”
John 18:33-37

‡ Why do we ask questions?

That varies, depending on the questioner and the circumstance. But in general we pose questions to acquire information we lack. I ask how to get from Point A to Point B when I do not know the way. I ask for your email when I have either lost it or never had it. I ask “What’s good here?” when I have never eaten at this restaurant before.

Does anyone feel like asking why I am asking such simple questions and making such obvious statements?

▣ It has to do with the dialogue recorded in our sermon text. Please turn with me to John 18:33-37.

It is early in the morning on Friday.

{Mt 26:47} Last night, Christ Jesus was seized by **“a large crowd”** that was led by Judas Iscariot and **“armed with swords and clubs.”**

Since his arrest the Lord has appeared before the Sanhedrin (the Jewish High Court), then Pontius Pilate (the Roman governor of Judea), then Herod Antipas (he rules Galilee with Roman permission), and finally back to Pilate again. During these long, dark hours he has been interrogated, falsely accused, spat upon, struck with closed fists, slapped in the face, and mocked.

The Sanhedrin is the driving force behind this travesty. Their goal is straightforward: kill Jesus.

If they had their way, they would simply issue an order of execution and it would be done. That’s how things used to work, prior to the Roman occupation.

Not any more. Rome has stripped the Sanhedrin of that power. Only the governor is authorized to impose the death penalty.

On the face of it, this is not that big a bump in the road. Pilate has two objectives: keep the tax money rolling in, and maintain order. He has proven himself more than capable of spilling Jewish blood to accomplish this. It is in his best interest to eliminate anyone who disturbs the so-called “peace” – and Jesus of Nazareth is a lightning rod for controversy.

On the other hand, Pilate is not as ham-fisted as his critics contend. He is determined not to be anybody’s pawn, and thus he is wary of getting entangled in internal Jewish disputes.

That is why he sent Jesus to Herod Antipas, who is in Jerusalem for the Passover. Jesus is a Galilean, and Galilee is where he began his ministry, so it could be argued that Herod (the Tetrarch of Galilee) has jurisdiction over this case.

{Lk 23:8} Herod is **“greatly pleased”** to meet Jesus, because he is excited to see a miracle. But he is not eager to kill a Galilean who might be a prophet, and who is still popular with many of his subjects.

Besides, Pilate might be testing his submissiveness to Rome. The last thing Herod wants to do is exceed his delegated authority and give the impression that he is straining at the leash! So he

sends Jesus back to the governor, thereby deferring to his masters.

■ Pilate has no choice but to bite the bullet. Verse 33: “[He] then went back inside the palace, summoned Jesus, and asked him, ‘Are you the king of the Jews?’”

“ARE you the king of the Jews?”

“Are YOU the king of the Jews?”

“Are you the KING of the Jews?”

? Why does Pontius Pilate ask this?

He asks because he is short on information. He does not know whether Jesus of Nazareth is “king of the Jews,” or if he even claims to be.

Now, get this: the only reason he makes this inquiry is that members of the Sanhedrin have just told him, “We have found this man subverting our nation. He opposes payment of taxes to Caesar and claims to be Messiah, a king” (Luke 23:2). If they had not said this, he would never have thought to ask, “Are you the king of the Jews?”

{Rev 19:16} To many of us it is obvious that Jesus is, in fact, the “KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS”. Is the governor slow on the uptake? Is he unusually imperceptive? Is he blind to the signs?

We can get a better understanding of his point-of-view by asking explicitly what Pilate only implies. Scripture will supply the answers.

? “Are you the king?” Where are your regal robes?

A first century king wears splendid purple robes at pompous ceremonies. For regular business he dresses in elegant garments of the highest quality.

Jesus’ clothing is unremarkable: a pair of sandals, a head covering, a belt, an outer robe, and an under-tunic, all of average quality. Four soldiers divide the first four items evenly. They cast lots for the under-tunic so as not to tear it (John 19:23-24).

? “Are you the king?” Where is your jewel-encrusted crown?

It is too uncomfortable (not to mention risky) for a monarch to wear their diadem or tiara 24/7. However, they do put it on for special occasions.

At the moment, Jesus’ head is bare. But in a few minutes he will wear a crown for the first – and last – time during his Incarnation -- “a crown of thorns,” which the soldiers will jam down on his head (John 19:2).

? “Are you the king?” Where is your palace?

Emperor Tiberius resides in a vast one on the Isle of Capri. Herod Antipas is only a client king, yet even he dwells in extravagant luxury.

Jesus is homeless. For the last three years he has slept on floors, beneath sheltering trees, and out under the stars. “Foxes have holes and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head” (Matthew 8:20).

? “Are you the king?” Where is your treasure?

There are no formal limits on how much money a first century king can wring from his subjects, and he himself pays no taxes. Many amass mind-boggling fortunes in gold, silver, precious stones, and land.

Jesus has no treasure. He and his disciples are financially dependent on Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Susanna, and several other women who **“support them out of their own means”** (Luke 8:2-3).

What is more, Jesus has no financial ambitions. His attitude is summed up in his teaching, **“Do not store up... treasures on earth... store up...treasure in heaven ... For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also”** (Matthew 6:19-21).

? **“Are you the king?”** Where is your court?

Royals tend to surround themselves with aristocrats and other members of the socio-economic elite. A non-elite commoner who is exceptionally brilliant or beautiful might win a place in the circle.

Jesus seeks out all kinds of friends. His “court” (if you can call it that) consists of a few rich people, a handful of the highly educated, and large numbers of fishermen, day laborers, lowly poor, women, **“tax collectors and sinners”** (Luke 7:34).

? **“Are you the king?”** Where are your slaves?

Some kings in the ancient world own vast numbers of slaves. Most utilize prisoners as *de facto* slaves. Many compel their subjects to labor on public works with little or no compensation.

Jesus invites his followers to freely enter into his service, but he has no slaves. A week ago he announced, **“The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve”** (Matthew 20:28). Less than a day ago he performed the menial work of a servant by washing his disciples’ feet (John 13:1-11).

? **“Are you the king?”** Where is your army?

A first century sovereign will not keep his throne for long – or, for that matter, his head –without an army. He needs regular troops to repel invaders and repress insurgents, and a royal guard to foil assassins.

Jesus has no army. He has consistently preached non-violence: **“Do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also”** (Matthew 5:39). Just last night, when Peter presumed to be his bodyguard, Jesus rebuked him: **“Put your sword back in its place, for all who draw the sword will die by the sword”** (Matthew 26:52).

“Are you the king?” Pontius Pilate is not slow, imperceptive, or blind. He is looking for the wrong kinds of signs, because he is expecting the wrong kind of king.

■ The Lord explains in verses 36-37: **“My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jewish leaders. But now my kingdom is from another place... the reason I was born and came into the world is to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me.”**

■ The governor can believe in a kingdom built on wealth and power, but not one founded in the truth of God. **“What is truth?”** he retorts in verse 38.

So although he finds no basis to condemn Jesus, he refuses to accept his unworldly kingship. Consequently, in chapter 9 he orders his crucifixion.

? You and I are confronted with the same basic question as Pilate: Is Jesus king? Is he our king?

Surely we would reply in the affirmative and with gusto: He is our king!

This leads to another question: Is our Jesus the King “**from another place**”? Or is he more like earthly rulers, only better?

Allow me to rephrase this question.

? Is *our* King’s wealth exhibited in what we give away, or in what we hoard?

? Is *our* King’s dignity seen in our humble service, or in our demands for privilege and honor?

? Is *our* King’s power displayed in our self-sacrifice, or in our control and domination of others?

? Is *our* King’s goodness revealed in our love for our enemies, or in our condemnation of them?

{Mt 7:21} Not everyone who calls Jesus “**Lord**” will enter his kingdom. Many serve a pretender, a false sovereign they call “Jesus” but who is just a Christianized version of the kings of the world.

May we not repeat Pontius Pilate’s fatal error! Let us receive Jesus as our Christ, our Messiah, our King from another place.

John 18 is the word of the Lord.