

Remember Simba in the movie “Lion King?” He was born to be “King of the Beasts.” He couldn’t wait to be king because he didn’t want anyone telling him what to do, he wanted to be free to do whatever he wanted with no one saying “do this” or “stop that, and he wanted be able to tell everyone else what to do.” That’s why he sang, “I’m gonna be a mighty king so enemies beware! I’m gonna be the mane event like no king was before. I’m brushing up on looking down. I’m working on my ROAR! Oh, I just can’t wait to be king!”

Pontius Pilate lived 2000 years ago. He never had a chance to see “Lion King.” But he certainly would have understood Simba’s view of kingship. That’s why he’s so confused in today’s passage.

“*So you are a king?*” he asks. It’s early morning and the air in the room is full of lamp oil and irony. Jesus stands before him bound, his cheek puffy from a slap by the high priest’s guard.

As we listen in on the conversation there’s no doubt about who has our sympathy. Yet something in Pilate’s question has us leaning in for Jesus’ answer. We too want to know: “So you are a king?”

The word *king* itself a problem. Israel always wanted a king, so it could be more like other nations. Israel’s God warned them how kings tend to think and act. They have a nasty habit of taking on airs, trying to act as if they’re God. But Israel said, “Give us one anyway!”

So, God gave them what they wanted and they got what God predicted. Oh, a few, like David were impressive. But most were selfish, self-serving losers. It wasn’t long before Babylon, a nation with a really powerful king - Nebuchadnezzar - destroyed everything, and took the people into exile.

But Israel kept hoping for a great king. Some day, a descendant of David would reestablish the monarchy and they’d be strong again. Prophets, like Isaiah, promised that God would send a king, a Messiah, who’d be different, who would serve God and the people, not himself.

King Herod remembered that promise. That’s why he was so upset by the news of the birth of a new king, named Jesus; he didn’t want any “other king” threatening his rule. He’d have been even more troubled to know that at Jesus’ birth angels filled the sky, singing, “Glory to God in the highest! And on earth, peace and good will.” Those are royal words! That’s a royal proclamation! At last suffering Israel has a new king! Now the tables will be turned on the Romans and Israel will be great again!

So, we shouldn’t be surprised that when he’d grown, Jesus went to Jerusalem, the seat of kings, entered the city in a triumphant procession, to claim his kingdom and begin his rule. People cut palm branches, hailing him as one who comes “in the name of the Lord,” to re-establish David’s kingdom.

But then he enters the temple, where the royal anointing, the enthronement ceremony, should be held, and no one even cares. A bit later, he’s anointed with oil, but not at the Temple, by the high priest, but by an ordinary woman, at a dinner table, and Jesus refers to it as an anointing for death.

And, just when we’d expect a royal banquet, Jesus hosts a farewell meal, where he says he’s going to die, and adds that his disciples will desert him, and that their leader, Peter, will deny him. It’s a long way from the great banquet Isaiah predicted, celebrating the Messiah’s coronation.

Later, Jesus appears before the high priest at the temple, not to be anointed and crowned king but to be tried by a priestly council, the Sanhedrin. They don’t hail him king, but accuse and curse him.

Eventually, Jesus ascends to the palace, not to be enthroned, but to be tried. On one side is Pilate, a Roman lackey, who understands kingship as it's always been, and is still, understood, on down to Simba in "Lion King." It's about being lifted up, having power to do what you want and make others do it, too. On the other, a shabby, whipped, tortured Galilean rabbi, whose efforts to lift up not himself but God, whose seeking to do not what he wanted but what God wanted, and whose trust in self-giving love the way to do both, have already gotten him tortured, and are about to cost him his life.

So you are a king? Pilate asks with a sneer. You can almost hear the crowd laugh. Him, a king?

Pilate has his reasons for asking. Anyone claiming to be king is a threat to Rome. But this man is such an unlikely candidate that he has his doubts, so he asks again, "Are you the King of the Jews?"

If it'd been David standing there, he wouldn't have needed to ask. He'd have recognized David as a king. For one thing, David knew how to handle enemies: with "the shaft of a spear." But then David wouldn't have been caught, bound, and beaten. Neither he nor his warriors would've allowed it.

That's Jesus' point when he answers, "If my kingdom were of this world, my followers would be fighting." Jesus answers come from a realm Pilate doesn't understand. Pilate, with his head firmly in this world, hears only two words: "my kingdom," so he asks again, "So you *are* a king?"

"You say I'm a king," says Jesus. A simple "no" would've been safer, but that's not his answer. But neither is, "yes!" He says, "Yes and no! It depends on what you mean by *king*."

In John's Gospel, Jesus adds, "For this I was born, and came into the world, to testify to the truth." And Pilate tosses out his famous question: "Truth? What is Truth?" Ironically, Truth is standing there before him - the truth that Jesus is the incarnate revelation of God! This man, with puffy cheeks and bound hands, is God with us, the Messiah, about to be enthroned as Christ the King!

But what an enthronement! Later, weak-willed Pilate asks the crowd what he should do with Jesus, and they scream, "Crucify him!" The ones Jesus came in love to serve become the ones he literally dies for. As he's led away in humiliation, he at last gets a robe and a crown, but the robe's ragged, and the crown's made of thorns, an instrument of mockery and torture devised by Roman soldiers.

And then he's exalted, not on a throne, but a cross, with a sign over his head, "King of the Jews." And to add to the irony, he suffers and dies there between two thieves, one on his right and one on his left, just a few days after James and John had requested that, when he came into his "glory," one could sit on his right and the other on his left. But the greater irony is that the cross which so completely contradicts the glory of kingship in worldly terms, is the glory of kingship in divine terms. It's what makes Jesus, King.

On Christ the King Sunday the church gives its answer to the ancient question: Is this Jesus - the one who stands before us in suffering and share - is he King?

The church says, "Yes!"

If that makes us uneasy, maybe it's because we often make Pilate's mistake. Failing to recognize the revelation of God's power in such humility and apparent weakness, we trust instead in more obvious power. We let apocalyptic imagery of horses, thrones and swords dethrone the Jesus who stood

before Pilate in favor of one who looks more like David or Caesar.

But the real king is the one who stood before Pilate, not the one who returns like a cosmic Rambo in the *Left Behind* series. If Christ's reign hasn't yet whipped the world into shape, it may be because suffering love has no whip, and drawing all things to God is slow business. In the meantime, we don't need to enthrone force and control, powers that kings and would be kings have always trusted, but powers that must, in the end, lay down their crowns before the Alpha and the Omega.

It's up to us to choose, Jesus as our king, with his seemingly powerless power, or someone else, with the more obvious kind. Maybe that's why Jesus didn't really answer Pilate's question. He wanted you and me to answer.

So, what do you say?

Is this one whose seeking to do not what he wanted but what God wanted, and whose trust in self-giving love, slow and painful though it is, as the only way to establish God's justice and peace, brought him shame and death, really king?

We may say "yes," that rolls easy off the tongue on Sunday morning, in church. But that's not enough, because the next question is, "If Jesus is King, how shall we live?" There's no hope for us, or the world, if we say "yes" but live as if he's a king like any other, as if our real answer is "no."

Too often, that's what we do. Seeking to serve ourselves rather than God, and seeing that force, intimidation and control, bring quicker results than patient, self-giving love, that's what we trust in, that's what we use. We try to impose our will - on our spouse and children, on peer-groups or co-workers, on fellow committee members, or on youth we think unworthy of an opinion. Or, if that doesn't work, we use more subtle means; we withhold our gifts of time, talent, or treasure, even when we know they're needed. Or worse, we join Pilate and the crowd. Intimidated by those who give so fully, so selflessly, because their giving exposes how much we hold back, their selflessness exposes our selfishness, we try to discredit, undermine, get rid of those who love and serve the most.

Self-giving is what's gotten Jesus where he is. It's part of the reason that Pilate looked at him and, with scorn and doubt, asked, "*So, you are a King?*" The world today looks at him and, with that same scorn and doubt, repeats the questions, "*So, you are a King?*"

He doesn't stand here, today, to answer. Today, we're the one's who must speak. What do we say?

The world's hope and ours is that we not only say, "Yes, he is king," but that as we "crown him with many crowns" we also remember that he is the Lamb upon the throne, and so live our lives, truly serving him, with the patient, self-giving, suffering love, with which he served God and all people.

May God help us serve Jesus, the lamb, who is king! Our king! May we trust in his apparently powerless power, enough to do just that – live his humble, patient, self-giving love.

Dear Jesus,

Like Pilate, the world keeps asking, “So you are a king?”

You certainly don’t look or act like one.

Nothing about you speaks of power or glory as the world understands it.

Yet, you did not deny that you are king.

You did not deny that you are a king,

...but you said and you showed that your power and your glory

...were of a very different kind that the world understands and values.

Your power is humble, self-giving love, for all people.

Your glory is your willingness to give that love, even unto death, even for your enemies.

Today, we, your people, affirm that you are a king.

We affirm that you are a king not because we believe that when you walked among us

...you were putting on a humble act, paying your dues,

...so that some day, at the end of time, you could come back as some cosmic Rambo,

...clean house, set things, and show real power and glory, the way the world understands it.

No, we affirm you as king because this is what your heavenly Father did

...in raising you to life after you gave your greatest gift of self-giving love, on the cross,

...even for your enemies, then and now.

We affirm you as king because this is what our forbearers in faith, the resurrection witnesses, did,

...when they made that joyful, revolutionary proclamation – Jesus is Lord!

Dear Jesus, we call you Lord, we refer to you as “Christ the King.”

Help us to live that affirmation.

Help us to remember that you are the Lamb upon the throne.

Help us to trust in the power that you trusted in –

...the power of humble, self-giving love, for all people.

Help us to remember what true glory is –

...the willingness to give that love, even unto suffering, even unto death, even for our enemies.

Help us be your loyal and faithful subjects, by loving and giving as you love and give.

Help us do that at home with our families, with our peer groups and co-workers,

...and here in this church –

...in choirs and committees, and in how we deal with our children and youth.

Seeking to show your love and care for all people we pray for those known to us with special needs.

We pray for...