

Reflection for the Feast of Christ the King

Pontius Pilate was Governor of Judaea for eleven years from AD26 to AD37. Contemporary historians refer to him as a fairly crass and brutal individual who hated the Jews. The historian Philo of Alexandria said that Pilate “had vindictiveness and furious temper” and that he was “naturally inflexible”; He wrote about “his corruption, and his acts of insolence...his habit of insulting people, and his never ending, gratuitous, and most grievous inhumanity.”

It is hard to imagine that Pontius Pilate gave much time or consideration to the average malefactor dragged before him for judgement and condemnation. However, he does engage with Jesus in a serious and extended conversation which is very pertinent to today’s feast of Christ the King. All four gospels tell us that Pilate swept aside the accusations of the Chief Priests and Jewish Leaders that they “*had found Jesus perverting our nation, forbidding us to pay taxes to the emperor, and saying that he himself is the Messiah*”.¹ Instead he asked the question “*Are you the King of the Jews?*” It isn’t an obvious question falling out of the charges and surely, as Prefect of Judaea, Pilate knew all the movers and shakers of the district and so knew that Jesus was not a king in the conventional sense.

In asking the question “*are you the king of the Jews*” Pilate is referring to the Jews as a religious or ethnic group to which he does not belong. He does not share or understand Jewish religion and he appears to accept that the charges and allegations against Jesus are trumped-up, so he asked Jesus directly “*it is your own people and the chief priests who have handed you over to me: what have you done?*” Jesus then speaks of the nature of his kingdom: “*Mine is not a kingdom of this world*” and Pilate need have no fear of armies fighting his cause. The purpose of Jesus’ kingdom isn’t territorial gain or political ambition, but it is to “*bear witness to the truth*” and “*those who are on the side of truth listen to my voice.*” Later, Pilate is at great pains to point out the other-worldly nature of Jesus’ kingdom when he says on three distinct occasions that he can “*find no case against him*”. Jesus is to die not for wrong-doing but for religious reasons. And he underlines this when he hands Jesus over to be crucified and declares “*Here is your King*” and gives the instruction for an inscription to be written and placed on the cross which read “*Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews*”.

Today we celebrate the feast of Christ the King. Today’s gospel emphasises that Jesus is not a king in any worldly way nor for worldly gains, but his kingdom is a other worldly kingdom of truth and love.

¹ Lk 23:2