

A new kind of king: John 18:33-37

by [Leonard Beechy](#) in the [November 17, 2009](#) issue

"So you are a king?"

The question is Pontius Pilate's. It's early morning, and the air in the room is laced with lamp oil and irony. Jesus stands before him bound, his cheek puffy from a slap by the high priest's guard.

We listen in on the conversation courtesy of John's Gospel, and there is no doubt about who is carrying our sympathy, our faith. Yet there is something in Pilate's question that has us leaning in for Jesus' answer. Our reasons are different from Pilate's, but we too want to know: "So are you a king?"

The word *king* is itself a problem. It smells of everything that keeps our post-Christian friends away from church: pre-Enlightenment mustiness, patriarchy, triumphalism. Then there's the problem of evidence: what is there about the world that suggests it is ruled by someone beneficent and powerful, or by anyone at all? I recall the hush that followed a question from a rabbi to my seminary classmates: "If Jesus was messiah, where is shalom?" Yes, there are answers, anecdotal and theological, and my classmates rallied to proffer them. But the hush in that room still haunts me. It testifies to the blunt force in the rabbi's question and blends with the blunt force of Pilate's question: "So you are a king?"

Pilate has his own reasons for asking, and they are 99 percent pragmatic. He is investigating the only charge that interests a Roman prefect. Pretension to kingship in this restive province on a festal weekend is an annoyance and requires his attention. But the man before him would never have caught the notice of imperial profilers, and Pilate is a little incredulous: "Are you the King of the Jews?"

If it had been David standing there, the question would have been unnecessary. If, by some literal fulfillment of national hope, David had been reborn, he would have been a king that Pilate would recognize. For one thing, David knew enemies when he saw them, and knew how to handle them: with "an iron bar or the shaft of a spear" (2 Sam. 23:7). But David would never have been found, bruised and bound, in the praetorium of the enemy. Neither he nor his loyal warriors would have allowed him

to be captured.

This is the point Jesus makes when he answers Pilate. "If my kingdom were of this world, my followers would be fighting." As it is, the only military order Jesus issues is to Peter: "Put your sword back in its sheath" (John 18:11). Pilate, with his feet planted firmly in this world, hears only two words: "my kingdom." Jesus' answers so far have been couched in questions and poetry, and Pilate wants to get it straight.

"So you *are* a king?"

"You say that I am a king." All the Gospels agree that this, in so many words, is Jesus' answer to Pilate, and its obliqueness may exasperate us as much as it did Pilate. The safe reply would have been a simple no, but that's not Jesus' answer. But neither does he answer yes, and this interests those of us standing by and listening in as we prepare to celebrate Christ the King Sunday: when Jesus is asked, with his life on the line, whether he is a king, he says, "Yes and no." He says, "It depends on what you mean by *king*." He says, "That's your word." If we are uneasy about the idea of Christ as king, apparently Jesus is too.

But it's not his last word. In the Synoptics, Jesus gives his cryptic reply and falls silent. John's Gospel records an elaboration: "For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth." Here Pilate tosses out his most famous question: "Truth? What is that?" He exits the room without an answer, but by this point in the story, readers of John's Gospel know the answer that has been staring Pilate in the face the whole time. The truth is that Jesus is the incarnate revelation of God. This Jesus, the one with the puffy cheek and the bound hands, is God present in the world. This is the one about to be "lifted up" in order to draw "all to himself," the one about to be enthroned as the greatest power in the universe.

If Christ the King Sunday makes us uneasy, perhaps it is because the church has too often made Pilate's mistake. Failing to recognize the supreme revelation of God's love in the paradoxical form that stands before us, we look instead for the conventional trappings of lesser powers. The apocalyptic imagery of horses, thrones and swords harbors truths in its metaphors, but it should not be allowed to dethrone the Jesus who stood before Pilate in favor of one who looks more like David or Tiberius. If Christ's reign has not yet succeeded in whipping the world into shape, it may be because suffering love has no whip, and drawing all things to itself is slow business. In the meantime, our worship need not enthrone violence and patriarchy,

two of the powers that must, in the end, lay down their crowns before the Alpha and the Omega.

In his conversation with Pilate, perhaps Jesus could have tried speaking Latin: *mutatis mutandis*, “with the necessary changes having been made.” Yes, I am a king, he might say, with the necessary changes having been made in the meaning of the word king, in the way the world looks at power, and in you. Let us “crown him with many crowns” but remember that the one we worship is the Lamb upon the throne.