

Whose kingdom is it anyway?

[John 18:33-40](#) | 2nd April 2017

The game is not quite up. There is one, final, chance to escape. Between death - which is staring him in the face - and Jesus there is a 'get out of this mess fairly free' card. It, though, is held by Pilate. He must play the card and, it seems, is inclined to award its benefit to the man who now stands before him.

All the power lies with Pilate. He summons Jesus, and Jesus is brought. Pilate asks the first question, about power ('Are you the king of the Jews?'), and the fourth question about practice ('What is it you have done?') and the fifth, about philosophy ('What is truth?').

Yet none of the power really lies with Pilate. His job is only as secure as the next revolt he suppresses, and this tinder-box situation could not have come at a worse time than Passover. Jerusalem was heaving with people, throbbing with nationalist fervour and no little hatred of Rome. Pilate has an emperor in that far-off city but reports get there all too quickly. And he has a crowd standing just outside his front door. He can't afford to displease either.

And, if presence is nine-tenths of the problem, he will as a priority have to keep his new angry neighbours sweet. So, perhaps it is the crowd which has the power. The people met in the courtyard are given an important place in the Passover tradition anyway, for they get to choose the one prisoner released at this time. It's not democracy as we know it, but, rather, a thinly disguised version of mob rule. Pilate asks them a leading question, and they can be in no doubt what he wants them to do: 'Do you want me to release the 'king of the Jews?'' Other evangelists suggest the crowd

was whipped up by a few enthusiasts, but in John's version they readily come to a common mind - though one which didn't agree with Pilate's. Not this Jesus. Not this so-called 'king'. Not the one whose death we sought. Anyone but him will do; even someone who had taken part in an uprising.

You see, now, how powerless Pilate is in face of the crowd? Insurrection against Rome was unacceptable. Barabbas should be crucified as an example as much as to be punished. But what the crowd says, today of all days, will go.



What about the third character in this power-play? Jesus may seem powerless, but he doesn't speak as though he thinks he is. He doesn't answer Pilate's question about identity; instead, he asks his own question about who planted that thought in Pilate's mind. Asked what he has done (as though he had to explain himself to an angry headmaster) Jesus simply explains that his power is located elsewhere entirely, and is probably as different in nature as it is in place from anything Pilate might assume. When Pilate mistakenly does the math and gets five from two twos, Jesus rebukes him: Jesus is a proclaimer of truth, not a prince. The impression is that it all seems too much for Pilate, who gives up on Jesus and hopes for better things from the crowd. As we have seen, he will soon be disappointed.

The game is not quite up. You may be four match points down

against your opponent, but do you throw in the towel? Had Jesus squirmed, and begged, and pleaded, then we would have known where the power lay. Had he remonstrated with the crowd, or even arranged in advance for his supporters to have stirred up the bystanders in another direction, we would have seen a different sort of influence at work. We see neither; and therefore we see real authority, real power at work.

There is an astonishing power in the Christ who accepts this condemnation, the more so because it has come unjustly. In Samuel Crossman's words:

"What hath my Lord done?
What makes this rage and spite?
He made the lame to run,
he gave the blind their sight.
Sweet injuries! yet they at these
themselves displease,
and 'gainst him rise."

It is at this point above all others, perhaps, that we see Jesus as he truly is. After this he is a military prisoner, pulled and pushed around with no opportunity to escape or to fight back. But here, before Pilate and the crowd, this orator without equal, this one who has stirred crowds to passion in the past, could bring all his expertise and experience to play to save his life.

But he does not. He exercises the power of complete trust in the purposes of God. And, rather like God, he sticks absolutely to his purposes. As Rowan Williams says:

"When Pilate and the High Priest - acting on behalf of all of us, it seems - push God in Jesus to the edge, God in Jesus gently but firmly pushes back. He does what he always did. He loves, he heals, he forgives."

What we see is our powerlessness to change God's mind. That's exactly what we would want to happen, if God is fully focused on our rescue, our redemption; on loving us. We need to know that God will always survive our failure, our anger, our hate, our sin. God is always present. God always remakes relationships. And God does this in Christ through what seems, to us, to be complete powerlessness, vulnerability and weakness. All that Jesus has to rely on at this moment is the love of God. And he relies only on that, because it is more than enough. That love takes Jesus to the cross, and to the tomb, and to a room filled with grief-stricken followers where, risen to new life, he says to them, 'Peace be with you.'

In a world where power really does matter, where do you see it lie in this story? In military force and legal process, or in the clamour of the crowd, or in the man who stands,

alone, before both and who claims to testify to the truth and who invites everyone on the side of truth to listen to him? And in a world where you are more powerful than you may imagine, how do you exercise it? Through the use of authority, or by making yourself heard above the voices of others, or through the giving of yourself in ways which are steadfast, unshakably committed to truth, and loving?

Here is a completely different picture of power. In a dark wood-panelled room in a mansion in New York's Lower East Side in the 1930s, a gangster, Don Corleone - 'The Godfather' - says to the man standing before him, 'I'm going to make you an offer you can't refuse.' (though you'll need to add the Marlon Brando voice

yourself). That is a use of power which will, no doubt, secure the right response, at least as far as the Don sees things.

Contrast that with the governor's apartment in Jerusalem. The man standing before Pilate says, in effect, 'I offer myself to you and to all; are you going to refuse?' The answer which has been given by millions through the generations since has been: 'We accept you, we trust you, we love you. How can we say no?'

This is the power of the love of God in Christ which nothing can destroy. As he stands, in a sense, before you (and you are, in some respects, not unlike Pilate) what will your answer be to him?

The game is still on. Life is still to be lived. Truth, and love, have the victory for ever.

Read further...

Goodlad, Review of Rowan Williams, *Christ on Trial: How the Gospel Unsettles Our Judgement*, at <http://www.ekklesia.co.uk/node/5603>

BBC Religion, *Who Killed Jesus?* at http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/christianity/history/whokilledjesus_1.shtml