

Holy Textures

Understanding the Bible in its own time and in ours

John 18:33-37

*Short, easy to use, thought provoking background commentary for your sermon, bible study lesson, or scripture reflection.
Listed on The Text This Week, www.textweek.com.*

Year B, Season of Pentecost

Reign of Christ Sunday

Proper 29, Ordinary Time 34

Sunday Between November 20 and November 26 Inclusive

Final Sunday of Pentecost Season

Read the passage: [The Message](#) or [The New Revised Standard Version \(NRSV\)](#).

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Here we are, already filled with anticipation of celebrating the impossible possibility⁺ of the birth of one who is fully-God-and-fully-human, but before that happens, we are now called to ponder the impossible possibility of a world order that is fully-Sovereign-and-fully-Servant / fully-of-this-world-and-fully-not-of-this-world / fully-already-accomplished-and-fully-not-yet-complete / fully-powerful-and-fully-non-coercive / fully-judging-and-fully-merciful.

Blessed be the preacher who is able to stand fully in this tension and not resolve it.

In case you haven't already done this, please use the foot note below to give the authors their due by finding and purchasing Bruce Malina's, et. al. books. You'll be glad you did. These comments are drawn from *The Gospel of John*, pages 254-267.

As always, when reading modern translations of the Gospels, it is crucial to remember that the word translated into English as "Jew," would be better translated as "Judean."

At the time of Jesus, there was a huge distinction between southern Judeans and northern Galileans. The capital city, Jerusalem, was in Judea. And the Temple - the centre for all religious rites - the place where the Ark containing the 10 Commandments was placed - the place where God's earthly throne was located - was in Jerusalem. And so Judeans looked down on Galileans as uncultured hillbillies.

But the Judean elite had also been co-opted by the occupying Roman Empire. Jerusalem - and the Temple - had become Roman puppets - collectors of Roman taxes, and responsible for ensuring civil order.

A third factor that complicates how we read the story of Jesus' arrest, trial, and execution is that while Galileans and Judeans referred to themselves collectively as "Israel," Rome - which concerned itself primarily with the capital city Jerusalem, made no such regional distinctions and referred to all "Jews" as "Judeans." (Which is in fact the origin of our current use of that designation.)

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Thus the tension in the Gospels is not between Jesus and "the Jews." The tension is between Jesus the Galilean hillbilly proclaimer of the coming of God's Kingdom of non-violent justice and the Judean snobbish elites who are also collaborators of the Roman Empire of violent non-justice.

In the context of this passage, we need to read "the Jews" as "Judean elites (Priests, Pharisees, Scribes, etc.) who are collaborators with Rome."

Like collaborators everywhere they are caught in a web of conflicted values. Their personal lives and privileges depend on them being good and trustworthy puppets. And, they believe, maintaining civil order by collaborating with a superior military force is the lesser of two evils. A belief that will be born out 30 years later when Rome suppressed a rebellion by obliterating the rebels and utterly destroying the Temple. They are caught in a compromise not of their own making.

This historical background is what shapes the exchange between Jesus and Pilate in this passage.

Pilate is the highest ranking representative of Rome in Jerusalem. By re-entering his headquarters, the story has now moved out of the public space, and out of the immediate participation of the Judean elite. The questions / challenges are no longer between Jesus and the Temple; they are between Jesus and Rome.

Pilate's questions to Jesus should **NOT** be read as an individual seeking personal enlightenment. Nor should they be read as a modern day trial judge seeking to determine the facts of the case in order to determine guilt or innocence. Jesus was tried and found guilty way back in John 11:45-54 after restoring Lazarus back to life. The "trial" that is happening now is to determine what is the appropriate punishment.

Verse 33. Pilate's question to Jesus, "Are you King of the Judeans?" is a hostile one. It is meant to have Jesus plead guilty to a charge and establish what sort of punishment is justified and required. It also - probably unwittingly - insults Judeans by suggesting that a low status Galilean is their King.

Verse 34. A low status person would not reply to a superior's question with a question. So Jesus' response to Pilate indicates that Jesus does not accept Pilate as a social superior. His question to Pilate in effect asks, "Have you been following my career yourself? Do you have first-hand knowledge about me?" Pilate, of course, would only be following the career of superiors, upon whose shifting loyalties and rank his own life and privileges would depend.

Verse 35. Pilate's reply would be heard as a loss of honour because he accepts - and answers - Jesus' question, "I am not a Judean." Having failed to get Jesus to plead "Guilty as charged," Pilate now demands that Jesus make a confession, "What have you done?" Notice that this question assumes Jesus has done something; that he is guilty. The question is, "What is it that you, Jesus, are guilty of?"

Verse 36. Having bested Pilate in their exchanges in Verses 33 and 34, Jesus now responds to the question asked in Verse 33. Notice that Jesus does not deny being a king, just that his kingdom is not "of this world." And the evidence for this is that his followers do not behave like the followers of the kings of this world - they do not fight with force of arms.

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Verse 37. Pilate, still looking for a guilty plea, asks again, "So you are a king?"

I wasn't in the room, and so didn't hear Pilate's tone of voice; nor am I a Greek scholar, but I note that Pilate's "question" can also be translated as an accusation / declaration.

Jesus' response, "You say that I am a king," honourably does not make such a claim for himself, but accepts the declaration from Pilate without comment.

Depending on where your loyalties lie, Jesus' response can be heard either as an acclamation by Pilate / Rome of Jesus' kingship or as a guilty plea by a dangerous upstart whose vision for a new political order needed to be annihilated as quickly and completely as possible.

Jesus is almost certainly aware of the two possible meanings of his response, and so his continued response further sets the cat among the pigeons of our wavering loyalties:

Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.

WE belong to the truth - don't we? WE listen to Jesus' voice - don't we?

Notice again, John's repeated emphasis that "truth" is not simply an idea that one agrees with. "Truth" is a relationship that one belongs to. We belong to / abide with Jesus; just as Jesus belongs to / abides with us; and he with God; and God with him - and with everything that Jesus and God represent - truth, light, life in abundance, love for the world.

Verse 38. (I know it is not included in the lection, but it should be - read it anyway.) "Pilate asks the wrong question. His question should be, 'Who is it that is of truth?' Then his examination would proceed properly." (Malina, page 258.)

As I said at the outset, the text today, calls us to live in the midst of an impossible possibility: hearing and belonging to One not of this world but born into this world out of love for this world so that truth-light-love might abide in this world - and they in us.

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* [Link to Amazon.com Bibliography for Bruce Malina, et. al.](#), Social Science Commentary on ... The Synoptic Gospels; The Gospel of John; The Book of Acts; The Letters of Paul; The Book of Revelation; and others.

+ "Impossible possibility" is a phrase I first saw in John Caputo's book, "What Would Jesus Deconstruct?"