

**“Words Worthy of the One We Follow”**

**John 18:33–38a**

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In his book *Christ on Trial*, the former Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, explores all four gospel accounts of Jesus’ trial, and one significant thing he notes is Jesus’ silence before the Sanhedrin and Pilate. “Jesus knows more than he can say;” Williams asserts, “he is like a naturally gifted musician trying to explain to slow or tone-deaf listeners how basic harmony works. And when the transforming power of his presence breaks through in healing, he hurries to forbid people to talk about it. It is as if he knows they will only find the wrong words, the wrong categories (p. 2).”

It is something we struggle with to this day. How do we rightly understand and then talk about Jesus, God and faith? We know that Jesus often instructs his first hearers not to talk about what he has done. It is what scholars call the “messianic secret” and we believe Jesus’ concern is that people will get the wrong idea about what kind of messiah he is. They will think he is a political conqueror. But the truth is we still struggle to understand his true character and identity. This day in the Christian year reveals the ongoing nature of our challenge.

Christ the King Sunday, as it was originally called, was instituted in 1925 by Pope Pius XI because “followers of Christ were being lured away by the increasing secularism of the world.” But “king” is a secular term which, even if we redefine it, stirs images of power and hierarchy. We use the language “Reign of Christ” to get past these potential misunderstandings, but they are difficult to jettison from our minds.

New Testament scholar Barbara Rossing says she wishes we could end the Christian year in a different way, not with images of kingship, power, dominion, triumphalism and judgment, but by borrowing from a Jewish practice. The end of the yearly Torah cycle is marked with Simchat Torah – Joy in the Torah – a celebration where the scrolls are taken out of the ark and the people sing and dance with them. Even the children have a role. Shouldn’t the conclusion of the Jesus story inspire singing and dancing?

Wouldn't that be better than an abundance of words, often far too small for the realities we are trying to describe, if not downright misleading?

That Jesus is our ultimate guide and source of strength and healing, our Savior and Lord, is not in question. But how does Jesus save and heal, guide and strengthen? Not by coercion and authority but with sacrificial love and mercy. The language we use for him and our faith needs to express these realities appropriately.

So, how might we understand and talk about Christ and our faith? As always, it seems wise to look to Jesus himself; on this day especially, to reflect on Jesus' encounter with Pilate recorded in John 18.

One thing that seems obvious, as Rowan Williams has noted, is that Jesus doesn't say very much. Pilate is interested in knowing whether he is the King of the Jews, his life is on the line, and yet still Jesus doesn't say much. He answers questions with questions, avoids the direct query, and ultimately says his kingdom is not from this world, but it is not a very thorough explanation. We might think that if he is interested in getting out of this predicament alive, he would provide a few more details, but he does not.

What are we to make of this posture? Perhaps he knows his path includes suffering and death, but does it necessarily? Perhaps he doesn't believe Pilate will listen; he is not exactly a model of multicultural understanding. Most likely he doesn't think he can say anything that will enable Pilate to understand who he is and thus convince him to let him go. Sometimes wordy explanations accomplish nothing.

The message for us seems to be that Christian witness is not always about an abundance of words. There is a place for Christian apologetics and in this time when so many talk about faith in ways that turn others off, there is a need for us to become more articulate about our faith. In a time when many practice what someone has called "flasher evangelism" — talking about something as intimate as our understanding of God with a complete stranger — and do so in a rehearsed way seeking only cognitive assent to certain theological ideas, there is an even greater need for people who genuinely care about others, get to know them as human beings, and in the context of caring relationships, share personal faith experience, whatever it is, when it seems natural to do so.

But while there is still a need for conversation about faith, there is an even greater need for a quiet example of love and compassion. There are many people who talk a lot about Jesus but live in a way that seems to indicate they don't know who he is. Whether we agree with him on certain issues or not, the title of John Pavlovic's new book points to this concern — *If God Is Love, Don't Be a Jerk*. Or to frame the concept in more positive terms, Francis of Assisi reportedly said, "Preach the Gospel at all times. When necessary, use words." If we follow Jesus' example, very few words are needed. If we don't follow his example, all the words of *War and Peace* accomplish nothing.

But there is another reason to monitor our word count — I say as someone who speaks for a living — when we are talking about faith, it is difficult to find words worthy of the God we know in Christ, words that convey the character of our encounter with the Holy, words that can capture sacred mystery. Rowan Williams quotes a line from Anita Mason's novel *The Illusionist*, "There is a kind of truth which, when it is said, becomes untrue." The moment we name our experience with the Holy, it inevitably shrinks. Before Pilate, Jesus doesn't say very much. There are times when we benefit from following his example.

Another thing we might note in this story is that Jesus is not bound by Pilate's categories of thought. Jesus does not answer the questions as Pilate poses them. Is he the King of the Jews? Well, is this Pilate's question or someone else's? What has Jesus done to cause his own religious leaders to turn against him? His kingdom is not from this world. As is often the case, Jesus answers questions with questions, he avoids the direct question and turns the tables on his questioner, he seems a bit like a political leader "pivoting" in an interview.

We have witnessed this so many times, it has become cliché. A reporter asks a question, and the interviewee says something like, "Look," or perhaps even, "That's a great question," and then proceeds to say something totally unrelated to the question. It is an intentional strategy coached by public relations "experts" which is supposed to make it okay. The motivation may be to avoid the question or to make certain the person gets across his/her

talking points, but either way, it is a shift away from the question, the reporter's focus.

Jesus doesn't ignore the question, he is not afraid of it, he has nothing to hide. He just knows that without a definition of terms, like — what is a king, what kind of kingdom, who all is included, how did he become this kind of king — he cannot provide a meaningful response. Is Pilate interested in the hard work of understanding all of this? Jesus' own followers haven't been thus far. Pilate isn't likely to do better, but this doesn't mean Jesus has to answer Pilate's question as is and thus accept his categories of thought and understanding wherein kings are political rulers, and by the way, his area already has one — him!

The message for us is that we don't have to accept the categories of thought others assume in the questions they ask about us, God, Jesus or faith. We need not pivot in a way that insults the questioner, but we are free to reframe conversations in ways that get at what is important.

For example, when I played the role of Jesus in a touring production of the musical *Godspell*, I was asked by a television reporter before one performance, "Have you had any unusual experiences portraying *the man*?" I must have given him a look of disgust — Dana says I do not have as good a poker face as I think I do — because after a few moments of awkward silence, he said, "Perhaps I should rephrase the question less pretentiously." He did, and I was able to talk about the very real challenges and blessings of portraying Jesus.

Many questions people have concern matters of suffering and evil which are real and significant. But often those who question assume that the only theistic framework possible is one where God controls everything. Thus, given the realities of this world, either there is no God or perhaps God is evil or uncaring. The problem lies in the assumption that if there is a God, God must be in control of everything. Challenging this assumption is the only way to shift the conversation.

Other questions concern the institutional church, and they are real and significant. But those who ask these questions assume we will deny their validity. We don't, the church has its problems. It is a human institution, no matter how we view God's involvement in it, it is not perfect, nor is any other human institution. As the punchline of a joke points out, there as many

hypocrites in the bar down the street as there are in the church. Jesus is not bound by Pilate's categories of thought. Nor should we be bound or feel threatened by the assumptions of others.

Jesus limits his words, he speaks out of his own understanding, and then, he addresses the most pressing part of Pilate's question. The question underneath all of his questions is this: who does Jesus think he is? Jesus says he is a witness to truth. He comes to shape a whole new community, call it a kingdom if we want, but it is nothing like any kingdom we know. It is not a geopolitical entity. It is not from this world; it is from God. Though he does not say so in this passage, it is the way of the beloved community, a way of living together wherein love and kindness and justice and peace prevail. He is the leader of this way, the One we follow, this is who he is.

So, we are talking about some kind of realm. Let's set aside the words "king" and "kingdom" because they point to a geopolitical entity requiring power and hierarchy. Jesus brings another way through a different methodology — by living among us, extending mercy through his life, death and resurrection. But it is still a realm, a way of being together. It is more than a set of beliefs. It is a way of life wherein we feed the hungry and welcome the stranger, love the enemy and forgive those who hurt us, seek justice and righteousness and peace for all.

The message for us seems clear. We are called to participate in this new way. It may seem unobtainable, and to be clear, not all things are yet subject to Christ's reign, but over two billion people around the world at least claim to follow him. That's a pretty good start for a man who had little to say going to his death, a man who coerced no one, a man who simply laid down his life for others.

What might that say about how things work in this world and what words do we have for that? Suffering Servant, Self-Giving Savior, Source of Love, Faithful Friend. No words are adequate, but these point us in the right direction. These are words worthy of the One we follow.