

John 18:33-37

33 So Pilate went back into the praetorium and called Jesus and said to him, “Are you the King of the Jews.”¹ 34 Jesus answered, “Do you say this on your own or did others tell you about me?”² 35 Pilate replied, “I am not a Jew, am I? Your own nation and chief priests have handed you over to me. What have you done?” 36 Jesus replied, “My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom did belong to this world, my attendants would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here.”³ 37 Pilate asked him, “So you are a king?” Jesus answered,

¹ In all four Gospels, Pilate asks Jesus, “Are you the King of the Jews.” Yet, it is only in John that we discover a more detailed account of the interchange between the two. In John’s Gospel, this is the grand moment of Pilate’s interrogation of Jesus; serving as a moment where the One who is the Word made flesh, full of grace and truth, encounters the local ruler within the Roman Empire. Pilate’s first question aims at understanding who Jesus is. “The title of “king” is loaded with political—insurrectional—meaning for the Romans, who have little tolerance for any king but Caesar. As Rome’s chief authority in Palestine, then, Pilate is pressing the full authority of Rome against Jesus when he asks the question (Robert A. Bryant, “John 18:33-37” *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, vol. 4 (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2009), 335).” Yet, for Pilate, the deck is stacked against him before he even realizes it.

“The prominence of the kingship motif underscores the intersection of religion and politics in the trial narrative. Political sedition fell under the jurisdiction of the Roman courts, and Pilate’s questioning about Jesus’ political claims points to the Roman awareness of the potential threat Jewish messianic hopes posed to their governance. Yet for the Fourth Evangelist, the kingship motif also has theological significance, and throughout the trial he plays the political and theological meanings of kingship off one another (Gail O’Day, “The Gospel of John” *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, vol. 9 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 816).” In this way, John is preparing us for an encounter of one whose authority and kingship that supersedes the other.

² With a flare of rhetorical humor and irony, Jesus pokes back at Pilate, questioning whether Pilate has this knowledge on his own or is he a pawn of the Jewish leadership. In other words, can Pilate act on his own and under his own authority or only in response to others (O’Day, 816)? Symbolic within this passage is the reality that Pilate does not act on his own; rather, his actions and choices are constrained by the work of God within the world to bring the climax of salvation to a head. In Jesus’ question to Pilate, we come to know that this is the Lord of the cosmos poking at a Roman governor.

³ “My kingdom is not from here” does not refer to some spatial location but refers to origin. Jesus is not suggesting that his kingdom lies beyond the reaches of space and time in some other location; rather he is asserting that the origins of his kingdom are not forged with human hands. Jesus confirms this by suggesting that if his kingdom were of human origins, then his followers would fight tooth and nail to keep him from his current situation. All of this is to suggest that the coming of Jesus’ kingdom will not be with violence and warfare, as it is within the Roman world, but will come through God’s own grace and glory centered within the crucified, resurrected, and reigning life of his Son.

“You say I am king.⁴ For this I was born and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.”⁵

Witness to the truth in the Gospel of John:

1:17 – The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.

3:31-36 – “The one who comes from above is above all; the one who is of the earth belongs to the earth and speaks about earthly things. The one who comes from heaven is above all. He testifies to what he has seen and heard, yet no one accepts his testimony. Whoever has accepted his testimony has certified this, that God is true. He whom God has sent speaks the words of God, for he gives the Spirit without measure. The Father loves the Son and has placed all things in his hands. Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever disobeys the Son will not see life, but must endure God’s wrath.”

8:14-18 – “Jesus answered, “Even if I testify on my own behalf, my testimony is valid because I know where I have come from and I know where I am going, but you do not know where I come from or where I am going. You judge by human standards; I judge no one. Yet even if I do judge, my judgement is valid; for it is not I alone who judge, but I and the Father who sent me. In your law it is written that the

⁴ While Jesus does not affirm that he is the king of the Jews, he does confirm Pilate’s suspicions that he is a king. Even though Jesus does not come right out and say it with words, we can infer that Jesus is assenting to Pilate’s claim through his silence.

⁵ Gail O’Day stresses two important points in reference to our final verse. She writes, “First, it (Jesus’ answer) stresses the connection between Jesus’ origin with God and his witness to the truth (e.g., 3:31-36; 8:14-18, 42, 46; 14:6; 17:17). ‘For this I was born’ and ‘for this I came into the world’ are synonyms that place Jesus’ kingship in the familiar Johannine idiom of Jesus’ mission in the world (see also 3:17, 19; 6:38; 9:39, 12:46-47; 16:28) and affirm that the origins of Jesus’ kingship are not of this world. Second, the expression ‘Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice’ recalls the claims of the shepherd discourse of John 10 (vv. 3-4, 16, 27); to ‘belong to the truth’ is thus to be one of Jesus’ sheep. In addition, at 8:31, knowing the truth and being Jesus’ disciple were presented as synonyms. TO belong to the truth is to recognize in Jesus the truth of God, to see the fullness of God revealed in Jesus, to hear the words of God in Jesus’ voice (O’Day, 817).” Jesus’ kingdom is synonymous with his mission and ministry to the world. As Jesus has been proclaiming the kingdom, we now learn that the kingdom is present, if only in part, even now. In this way, we discover a common thread running throughout the Gospel of John that ties everything together.

Truth is an important concept within John’s Gospel and we might benefit from understanding what it means. While we often assume truth to be contrasted with falsehood, there is a larger way of understanding truth within the New Testament. Truth is not solely something we believe or assent to with our minds; there is a kinetic aspect of truth that represents activity. We belong to the truth, as Jesus suggests. That means that truth also involves a way of living. In belonging to the truth, in being joined in union with Jesus, we come to know that we are active witnesses to truth, and active witnesses within the kingdom of God that is present even now.

What we learn in earlier chapters comes together in the trial of Jesus and we come to know the reality of his kingship and reign, the reality of what it means to confess Jesus Christ as Lord. Jesus’ reign is seemingly surreptitious, in that, he calls men and women to the truth, calls them into a loving relationship, and shifts their allegiance from earthly rulers to himself. Only those who know the truth know the reality of Jesus’ kingdom; only those who have been joined in union with the one who is the truth is able to know the glory of kingdom living as it can be experienced even now.

testimony of two witnesses is valid. I testify on my own behalf, and the Father who sent me testifies on my behalf.”

14:6 – “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”

17:17-19 – “Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. And for their sakes I sanctify myself, so that they also may be sanctified in truth.

Jesus’ witness to his mission in the world:

3:16-19 – “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. And this is judgment, that the light has come into the worlds, and people loved darkness rather than the light because their deeds were evil.”

6:38-39 – “For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will, but the will of him who sent me. And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day.”

9:39 – “I came into this world for judgment so that those who do not see may see and those who do see may become blind.”

12:46-47 – I have come as light into the world, so that everyone who believes in me should not remain in the darkness. I do not judge anyone who hears my words and does not keep them, for I came not to judge the world, but to save it.”