

GOSPEL SEEDS

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**Biblical reflections to encourage us in the
work of evangelisation**

KINGSHIP AT THE SERVICE OF TRUTH



***Jesus replied, 'Mine is not a kingdom of this world; if my kingdom were of this world, my men would have fought to prevent me being surrendered to the Jews. As it is, my kingdom does not belong here.' Pilate said, 'So then you are a king?' Jesus answered, 'It is you who say I am a king. I was born for this, I came into the world for this, to bear witness to the truth; and all who are on the side of truth listen to my voice.'* (John 18:36-37)**

Jesus is brought for trial before Pilate (the state authority of his day), for being a king. "We found this man inciting our people to revolt, opposing payment to of the tribute to Caesar, and claiming to be Christ, a king. (Lk

23:2)" It is this charge of kingship that Pilate takes up. "Are you the king of the Jews? (Lk 23:3)" Though he is not interested in whether Jesus has broken specifically Jewish religious laws or blasphemed against Jewish sensibilities by his claims to Divinity, issues affecting the political world are another matter. Pilate is most definitely interested in issues of kingship since they touch on political stability and peace in a region for which he has responsibility. This is the setting of John's account given above. What unfolds establishes that Jesus' claims – and indeed who he is and his entire ministry – are a profound challenge not just for the religious sphere but for the political sphere and entire social order.

Jesus affirms that he is a king. But he quickly defines this kingship in terms of service of truth. It is not about worldly power or the splendour and privileges, fame and riches associated with it. Nor is it about the pride, arrogance and suspicion that often inhabit it, or the selfish and often ruthless ambition, betrayals, intimidation and violence of varying sorts that only too often build and sustain it. He is there to witness to truth. That truth is not a big part of Pilate's understanding of political power is clear from his response "Truth, what is that?" (v 38) whether this is understood as said with a contemptuous sneer or confused and even perplexed scepticism – or a mixture. Pilate, like many power brokers, sees truth as illusive, weak and irrelevant though it does convince him, for a while at least, of the innocence of Jesus. Truth cannot be a threat – or can it?

The terms of truthful witness to transcendent and transforming truth
Pilate ends up condemning Truth to death but actually this becomes a trial by which Truth is vindicated. Jesus may be labelled as the chained criminal or the abused victim but he is calm and in charge, poised and measured, the centre around which the action happens, right up to his last breath. He acts with the stature of a king throughout his arrest, trial, torture and execution. Jesus identifies his kingly function is to witness to truth. This is not just the statement of a quiet academic who wants to be left peacefully in his study or academic ivory tower. "All who are on the side of truth will listen to my voice!" This is a rallying call, a call to action. It is even a call to arms – though not those of military might: he has already forbidden his disciples to take up swords (Mt 26:51-56). Truth is founded in and comes from God. Witnessing is not just giving one's opinion. It requires us to recognise truth; then to proclaim it in word, in deed and to bring it to bear on all aspects of life that it pertains to. But such witness and action can only validly be undertaken using the means that express the truth it seeks to serve. Otherwise such witness lacks integrity, authenticity and credibility, and the truth is compromised. Thus, it defends human freedom even though this can be used wrongly against God's truth. It recognises the place of governments and the laws they make in God's order - even if such governments and laws are sometimes corrupt. But it also names the correct use of human freedom and the moral reference points and principles for legislation. It names the evil of violence and aggression but will not take up these means to promote its own cause as this only adds to the cycle of violence. Yet it does seek morally to reform and transform society that God's will be done and his Kingdom come on earth as it is in Heaven.

God: the source of truth, the bringer of truth, and guarantor of truth

Is such witness to the truth as expressed in and by Jesus weak and ineffective? No - because it is established by God and will triumph. Jesus had faced hostility before. He did not change his message in the face of it. Yes, he used various tactics, and often defused a situation of tension. But he steadfastly lived his message of truth and practiced its justice and mercy. Now, facing almost certain death, he gives his testimony and dies by the values he has lived by. Thus he preaches in season and out of season. He does not return insult with insult, or threat with threat. In this he witnesses to his trust in he who judges justly (1 Peter 2:21-25). His cause is in the hands of his Father in whose triumph he has absolute confidence. In all this, he also asserts the truth of who he is, God himself, Truth itself, the truth that sets us free. He knows the source of the truth he witnesses to, and is in deep communion with this, and this makes him strong (but gentle) and bold (but not arrogant) in witnessing to truth. Therefore his death will not be of no avail. He has sown in the Spirit and will reap in the Spirit. He has sown justice and will reap a lasting kingdom of justice. Such is the king of martyrs!

His witness has an impact even in his dying. A robber sees his integrity and is saved. A Roman centurion sees his divinity and surely moves in the direction of salvation. The religious and civil authorities of the day are quickly exposed. The temple veil is torn. The Jewish leaders, attempting to protect their material temple and religious freedoms, have destroyed the true temple, Jesus. He rose to live forever, but in a generation their temple and society had been wiped away by the Romans whom they did a deal with to get rid of Jesus. The church has long outlasted that very Roman Empire too. Such assessments can be made in empirical historical terms. But the perspective of eternity and reality of the kingdom of God dwarf any visible measure of the size and influence of the church on earth. And the church has to be constantly on guard against corruption that comes from adopting the attitudes and ways of worldly power. Her founder and God went to a shameful and painful death rather than do that. Such is his kingship - and his integrity and selflessness in exercising it! Thus he always rules and thus he can always he relied on - since God raised him, vindicating the transcendent and all-encompassing nature and power of this truth. The church is called in each generation to do the same: to witness to truth, even to the point of martyrdom. The church is all of us. We are called then to serve truth because in doing this we reign, even now on earth, with Christ who lives forever, the King of kings (& see 1 Tim 6:13-16).

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