

Pilate then went back inside the palace, summoned Jesus and asked him, "Are you the king of the Jews?"

³⁴ *"Is that your own idea," Jesus asked, "or did others talk to you about me?"*

³⁵ *"Am I a Jew?" Pilate replied. "It was your people and your chief priests who handed you over to me. What is it you have done?"*

³⁶ *Jesus said, "My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jews. But now my kingdom is from another place."*

³⁷ *"You are a king, then!" said Pilate.*

Jesus answered, "You are right in saying I am a king. In fact, for this reason I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me." (John 18:33-37)

Where is Jesus' Kingdom?

Where is Jesus' kingdom? That might sound like I'm asking for a geography lesson, like someone might ask, "Where is Singapore?" But that's not the point I'm trying to make. This morning, Jesus and Pontius Pilate are talking about his kingdom. And it might seem pretty obvious to us what he means by that, but then again, it might not. Is Peace Lutheran Church Jesus' kingdom? Is the WELS Jesus' kingdom? A few weeks ago, I showed the older kids a movie about Martin Luther and one of them asked me what "Christendom" means. It was the idea that the Christian nations of Europe were the kingdom of Christ. Every Sunday – hopefully more often than that – we pray, "Thy kingdom come." What are asking God to do? **Where is Jesus' kingdom?**

I.

Jesus and Pilate spoke these words in the morning of the first Good Friday. It would get worse as the day went on, but already at this moment, Jesus did not look very kingly. He was bound. He was bruised and bloody. Hours earlier, the Jewish ruling council had blindfolded him and played that cruel game of "Who hit you?" Now, he hadn't been scourged yet. He wasn't wearing the crown of thorns yet. But standing there as a prisoner before Pilate, who wasn't even the governor – he was a procurator, which means he worked for the governor – standing there before this midlevel bureaucrat, the whole idea of Jesus being a king seemed laughable.

But that's what they talked about. Jesus gave answers Pilate never expected to hear. Jesus admitted that he was a king. But he redefined that role. Pilate naturally thought of a ruler of a country, of a man with an army and a capital and ministers. Jesus self-evidently was not such a man. But he was still a king. How could that be? Jesus' kingdom is not a place, it's an activity. It's what he does. Jesus' kingdom is his ruling over things. That takes place even though we can't find any borders to cross. Jesus rules the Church and because he rules, we can say that the Church is his kingdom. Not Peace Lutheran Church, but the true Church, the gathering of all those in trust in him as their Savior. That's the point Jesus made when he said, **"You are right in saying I am a king. In fact, for this reason I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me."**

Jesus was born to be a king. But did you hear what being a king means to Jesus? It means testifying to the truth. Now, that doesn't mean just being honest. Honesty is a Christian virtue. But the truth he's talking about is greater. It's the truth of the gospel. It's the truth that God in his love sent his own Son into this world to die for our sin and to give us eternal life. Everyone on the side of that truth listens to Jesus – that means we let his word rule in our hearts. Everyone on the side of truth – everyone with faith – is a part of Jesus' kingdom.

The kingdom he came to rule is the Christian Church. And Pilate couldn't see it. We can understand that. At this time, there were no church buildings. There were no national church headquarters, no synods or seminaries or fund drives. The Christian Church was nothing but a bunch of people who believed in Jesus. And that is still true today. As important as Peace Lutheran Church is, this is not the kingdom of Christ, at least not by itself. But it is a corner of that kingdom because it is a gathering of believers. Even if there're hypocrites hiding among us pretending to be believers, because the gospel is here, faith is here. Because God always works through the gospel, Christ does rule over the hearts of his people here.

Is that enough for us? Jesus said that everyone on the side of truth listens to him and Pilate spouted, “What is truth?” He wasn’t looking for an answer; he was dismissing the whole idea. To this day, unbelievers dismiss Jesus’ claims. “Where is your God?” they ask – which comes out to pretty much the same thing. A cruel and unbelieving husband said that once to a Christian woman I knew as he left her and her children to live with another woman. Many unbelievers have taunted Christians in their hurt and sorrow with that question. And deep inside us, that question lurks. The logic goes something like this: Jesus is ruling over all things. He promises to protect me and watch over me, so that means that nothing bad should ever happen to me. When the hurts and sorrows of this life slam into us, the devil whispers in our ear, “Where is your God?” Our own sinful flesh echoes the question: “Maybe Jesus really isn’t ruling. Maybe I’m not really a part of his kingdom. Maybe it’s all a fairy tale and I need to stop looking for God to solve my problems.”

That kind of doubt attacks the very rule of Christ, because it attacks our faith. At those moments we need to look at Christ the way he was when he spoke with Pilate. That prisoner, bound before this midlevel Roman bureaucrat, without even an armed guard to defend him, that man whose life was in Pilate’s hands was the king of the world. With a thought he could’ve sent Pilate to hell. With less effort than it takes for you and I to scratch an itch, he could’ve stepped out of the ropes and destroyed the guards and leveled Jerusalem. At his command, all his enemies would’ve had no choice but to bow down and worship him. Yet, Jesus never gave that command. He stood there bound. He allowed the illusion of Roman power to continue. He let Pilate send him to the cross. And in that defeat he won the greatest victory of all: he won eternal life for you and for me.

We’re sinners. We doubt his rule and question his love when our lives are hard. We are not worthy of the sacrifice he made for us. But he did make that sacrifice. He paid for the sin and weakness that causes us to doubt. He suffered death and hell because we deserved to for our miserable excuse for faith. He paid for it all. And when he rose, he set us free from death and from hell. We will not pay for our weak faith or our doubts. We will live with him.

But just as his power was hidden when he appeared to be helpless, just as his victory was greatest when he seemed to be beaten, so also today, Jesus is ruling over us even when doubt claws at our hearts. He works through the gospel at that moment to keep our faith alive. He rules this world even when it seems like the devil has the upper hand in everything. He shows his love for us when we suffer most, because at that moment, he is showing us that this world is not our true home. What we see around us here is not our reward. Our real life is in heaven. The more he separates our hearts from the things that humans love here, the more completely he brings our hearts under his rule. There is nothing more blessed, there is nothing greater than being part of Jesus’ kingdom. That truth Pilate couldn’t see. But God has revealed that truth to you and to me through his gospel. **Where is Jesus’ kingdom? It is in the hearts of those who are on the side of truth.**

II.

For now, Jesus’ rule is hidden in our hearts. The world around us can’t see it and laughs at the idea of it. It points to all our sins and failures and claims we’re all a bunch of hypocrites. It celebrates our defeats as proof that God either can’t or doesn’t want to help us. We ourselves only see glimpses of that rule. We see those glimpses in the changes God makes in us, in the new priorities we have because we’re Christians, in the new life we lead because of our faith. But even for us, our sins and our failures hide Jesus’ rule. Sometimes we even doubt that it’s there or wonder if we really are Christian or if our faith will survive.

To us, in our doubts and misery, in our weakness and in the devil’s persecution, Jesus speaks in these words to Pilate. He really does rule in our hearts, even though our sin hides it even from us. And the day is coming when his rule will come out into the open and all people will see it.

Jesus said, **“My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jews. But now my kingdom is from another place.”** Jesus’ kingdom has no army to defend it. There are no soldiers of Christ that march across the globe conquering his enemies and defending his cause. There is no government here that enforces Jesus’ will. We need to get that through our heads. It’s natural for us to wish that the government of our country would be Christian. Again and again down through the ages, Christians have tried to make the government an agent of the church. That effort still continues in the religious right of our day.

But Jesus’ kingdom is not of this world. There is no place in the church for running the government. There is no place for forcing unbelievers or even forcing Christians to do what God says in the Ten Commandments. Only when Jesus rules in our hearts do we obey his commandments. No government can

change our hearts. Only preaching can do that. Only the Holy Spirit working through the gospel can change us and make us want to be citizens of heaven.

That's what Jesus meant when he said his kingdom is from another place. It's from heaven. We will see that kingdom when we leave this world and see our Savior face to face. And we will see that kingdom when Jesus comes back. Pilate will rise and see the kingdom he dismissed. The leaders of the Jews who demanded that Jesus die will rise and see that kingdom. And our enemies today will see it. All those who still mock our faith and ask where our God is will have to acknowledge that Jesus is the Son of God and the Savior of the world. They will hear the angels singing to the King of Kings and Lord of Lords and they will have no choice but to lift up their voices and praise him before they go to hell.

And we will praise him. At long last, the sinner in our heart will be gone. At long last God will sweep away from us all doubt and all weakness and we will finally see Jesus as he really is. We won't need the picture of a bound and helpless Christ anymore because we won't live in a world bound by sin anymore. We will see the King stand forever and hold all things in his hands.

But until that day comes, we should expect that the world will hate us because it hated Jesus. We should expect that people won't care what we Christians want and how we feel about the way they trample our holidays and abuse our symbols and blaspheme our God. We should expect that even in churches the love of most will grow cold, because that's what Jesus said would happen. We should never be surprised by apathy, by people leaving to find something more exciting, by temptation or sin. All those things are part of this age.

But don't despair when you see those things. Because we should expect one more thing: the power of the gospel. Jesus said that the gospel would be preached in all the world. That is still happening here at Peace and in churches in every country under heaven. Everywhere that gospel is proclaimed, the Holy Spirit reaches into the hearts of sinners, of unbelievers, of enemies just as dismissive as Pilate was, and he turns them into citizens of heaven. That's what he did for us. We were just as bad as Pilate was. But God came to us in the waters of baptism. God came to us in the gospel that we've heard year after year. God came to us and he gave us faith. He put us on the side of truth. He made us a part of Jesus' rule and he keeps us there through that same gospel message. And he will continue to do all that until Jesus returns. And then we will live in joy in his kingdom. **Where is Jesus' kingdom? In another place – in heaven.**

But only for now. Soon, Jesus will reveal himself. Soon, the rule in our hearts will be revealed to all mankind. Until that day comes, trust in the gospel message. Trust in that Savior who humbled himself, who stood before that little man and let that bureaucrat send him to the cross so he could win by losing, so he could raise us to life by dying and rising. Trust in Jesus when all the world seems to be in revolt against God and your own faith is hard to see. He is ruling in our hearts. He is ruling in heaven. And soon, he will reveal his rule here. Amen.