

Christ the King Sunday

THE TRIAL WITHIN THE TRIAL

John 18:33-37

Christ the King Sunday

Analysis by Cathy Lessmann

33 Then Pilate entered the headquarters again, summoned Jesus, and asked him, "Are you the King of the Jews?" 34 Jesus answered, "Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?" 35 Pilate replied, "I am not a Jew, am I? Your own nation and the chief priests have handed you over to me. What have you done?" 36 Jesus answered, "My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here." 37 Pilate asked him, "So you are a king?" Jesus answered, "You say that I am a king. 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."

Author's Note: This Crossing is based on a Sabbatheology Ed Schroeder wrote several years ago on this text, in which he included much helpful background information. I encourage you to read it: <https://crossings.org/theology/1997/theolo88.shtml>.

DIAGNOSIS: The Bad News: God Is Judge of the Cosmos

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *The Trial within The Trial*

In this trial, Jesus stands as defendant in a Roman courtroom

before Pilate for judgment. His accusers (the scribes, Jewish leaders) have already determined his guilt (of blasphemy) and sentenced him to death. "We have a law and by that law he ought to die" (19:7). They simply need Pilate's imprimatur to make their verdict official. Accusations against Jesus have all revolved around his identity: Who is he really (truthfully)? Is he the messiah, the anointed king? If so, what and where is his kingdom? Pilate tries hard to discern "the truth." First he asks, "what have you done?" and when Jesus answers with a confusing "my kingdom is not from this world" (v. 36), Pilate puzzles, "then you're a king?" (v. 37). He can only conclude that Jesus is trying to usurp Roman authority.

It is important to our Gospel writer John, that we understand that in addition to Pilate and the Jewish accusers acting as both prosecutors and judges over Jesus, there is a third group equally caught up in the trial, namely, the spectators. Even more important is to understand that these spectators include not just those who were watching 2000 years ago, but spectators today—everyone who encounters Jesus and judge who he is for them. A good teacher? A crusader for justice? A magician to cure our ills and make us rich? A savior? Finally, but most significantly, among the spectators sits Someone Else, taking notes. It's Almighty God, who, as we shall see, turns out to be more than uninvolved.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *The Penultimate Truth*

Pilate's confusion is understandable. He is trying to judge according to the only rules he knows, namely, the rules and regulations that govern worldly kingdoms. Call that "the old-fashioned" system. [Remember John Houseman's famous line in a Smith-Barney advertisement? "How do they make money? ...the old-fashioned way....they earn it!" It's that debits-and-credits and might-makes-right system. [Theologians call it the Law.] In this

system, Pilate is the one with power, “Do you not know that I have power to release you, and power to crucify you?” (19:10). He will decide “the truth” of the case which then will dictate Jesus’ fate. What Pilate doesn’t grasp is that his way of gauging “the truth” is only via a penultimate truth; that there is a greater “truth” beyond that which he knows and operates by. But then, it’s not just Pilate who operates under this penultimate “truth,” so do all who operate “the old fashioned” way, including accusers and spectators. Us too.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *The Cosmic Trial*

John now broadens the scenario to disclose that this Roman trial is in fact a trial within a cosmic trial which is simultaneously taking place. This cosmic trial involves the exact same participants, but with one striking difference! The roles have been shuffled. Almighty God moves from “observer” to Judge. The accusers, prosecutors, and judges (Pilate, the Jewish accusers, spectators, ahem, including us) now become defendants. They (we!) become the ones on trial! They/we will be judged according to the verdict they/we render about Jesus. Do they/we reject Jesus?

Just as the verdict rendered on Jesus is “put him to death,” so too will the Judge condemn Jesus-rejecters to death.

PROGNOSIS: The Good News: God is Judge of the Cosmos

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *A Rigged Trial*

But wait! This potentially catastrophic cosmic trial is not yet over! Shocking evidence reveals that the trial has been rigged! Crucially, another leading role has been swapped, namely, Jesus has moved from defendant to defense attorney (can you believe it?). Additionally, we learn that He and the Judge are in cahoots with each other and (to top it off) that they are

related—father and son, no less! To everyone's surprise, it seems that the two are bent on saving Jesus' accusers: Almighty God and Jesus (his beloved son) have been scheming a way to bring about a new reign (the kingdom of God) on earth. Their scheme is so scandalous it's scarcely believable: the defense attorney will switch places with condemned defendants! Specifically, Jesus will take the rap for the condemned, will suffer God's judgment in their place! All this will all be accomplished via the outcome of that first trial in front of Pilate. Clinching evidence that this switcheroo is successful will surface Passover day (in case we need a clue, it's when God's angel of death passes over) when the condemned and crucified Jesus as he dies pronounces "tetelestai" meaning, case closed: the sentence is paid. Finally, with great panache, The Judge clinches the whole transaction Easter morning with a stunning resurrection reprieve.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *The Ultimate Truth*

Some people might conclude this is totally unfair. Bingo! Correct. It IS absolutely unfair, according to the specs of the old-fashioned system. But then, that only signifies that Jesus and his Father must operate by an entirely different system. And, in fact, God's Kingdom does operate differently, namely, on mercy and forgiveness. In this kingdom people get what they don't deserve (life instead of death). It's where the king dies for the people, not vice versa. (This is what makes Jesus king.) It's where power derives from love, not might. It's truth enables citizens to grasp and confess the truth about themselves, joyfully no less, on account of knowing they've already been salvaged. Who wouldn't want to belong to this kingdom with Jesus as king? The invitation is out to everyone; John announces: "But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God" (1:12).

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *Surviving (All) Trials*

When God's kids have the assurance that they've already survived their cosmic trial (remember, it's a done-deal, it happened 2000 years ago), they display a remarkable fortitude in withstanding the trials (hardships) they encounter in the everydayness of their lives. As they endure such trials, they give public evidence regarding whom it is they are trusting to get them through. Even when their last trial arrives, they can't help but exult, "Ride on, King Jesus, I'm following you right through death itself!"