

Our gospel read today may seem out of place just before the season of Advent. The story involves the confrontation between Jesus and Pilate. The drama begins at John 18:28 and continues through 19:16, with an epilogue at 19:19-22. The passage we read today occurs as one scene in this drama, and includes not only Jesus and Pilate but also the religious authorities.

The narrative is structured by the physical movement of Pilate back and forth from inside his headquarters of Jerusalem, where Jesus is held, to the religious authorities standing outside the building. The reader is let in on the irony of this situation a few verses earlier, when the narrator explains that the religious authorities did not want to enter Pilate's headquarters so as to avoid ritual defilement, since the Passover was near. Our passage today occurs inside the headquarters and thus relates a conversation between Jesus and Pilate, but the religious leaders bringing charges against Jesus are only a few steps away.

The text is called "the trial before Pilate." It might better be called "Pilate on trial," for Pilate knows that Jesus should not be on trial. "What accusation do you bring against this man?" Pilate asks the religious leaders. "Take him yourselves and judge him according to your law". Obviously Pilate—who is charged with maintaining Roman rule in Judea—does not consider Jesus a threat to that rule. So why does he try Jesus, find "no case against him", but then have him flogged and hand "him over to them to be crucified"?

Something seems a little strange here. What is Pilate's goal in this trial? Pilate likely is confident, and considers himself the most powerful, most in-control person in Jerusalem. He is, after all, the local representative of the greatest world power of that time. In his encounter with Jesus he brags about the position and

the power he possesses, saying, “Do you not know that I have power to release you, and power to crucify you?”

But Pilate, the one supposedly in control and has it all together, is more likely trapped in fear. The religious leaders want Jesus crucified. If Pilate does not give them what they want, will he be able to stay in control? Does he have enough reinforcements to control the trouble those leaders might stir up? And how will it play back in Rome if on his watch he is not able to handle matters in Jerusalem?

So when Pilate summons Jesus and asks him, “Are you the King of the Jews?” Is that REALLY his question? Does he truly believe Jesus is an insurrectionist? Or is he fishing around to find a technicality on which to condemn Jesus in order to appease the leaders? Is he free or contained in his effort to stay in control? Is that Pilate’s real goal, regardless of the cost—to stay in control? He is more or less trapped—he has to hide his true convictions, his honest questions, and his haunting fears.

It makes me think about how Pilate represents that person or institution that is confronted with a critical decision. Having instincts in one direction, but maybe pressured by the circumstances to move reluctantly in the opposite direction. And on a more personal level, does this reading prompt us all to examine the realities of how fearful, and thus how trapped we might feel as we hear this text in this day—in this time when we are surrounded by uncertainties of all kinds?

We are sometimes hesitant to be our real selves. To reveal who we are, what we truly believe, and how we actually perceive things. We might be trapped, like Pilate, by our fear of losing our “position” or maybe having that path of upward mobility disrupted. So we sometimes resort to hiding ourselves and

maybe doing and saying things we do not want to do or say just in order to “stay in control”? I don’t know about you—but pondering all that tends to make me more sympathetic towards Pilate!

Pilate begins the trial as the judge, the figure with authority, and even late in the drama still thinks he retains such power. But increasingly the religious leaders rob him of his power and box him into a corner, so that he yields to their power. All the while we, as readers and listeners to this drama are aware that the real judge, the one with ultimate power, is the prisoner Jesus. Pilate, like most power brokers, lives in a world with a false perception of power. He is eventually mocked by his ultimate lack of power.

So, let us concentrate on the words of Jesus and the very nature of his rule. The claim that “my kingdom is not from this world” is not to imply that Jesus and his followers have no role to play in human affairs, in the struggle for justice and peace. Quite to the contrary, I think. Maybe the claim distinguishes Jesus’ role from the various forms of power that mark most earthly institutions. Domination, violence, and economic exploitation are common (and some would say even necessary) weapons of maintaining power. Jesus’ power obviously derives from an entirely different source.

Jesus says to Pilate, “Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?” There, before Pilate, Jesus seeks to encounter the real Pilate—the one who in truth is utterly trapped in his desperate effort to stay in control. In that space, Jesus gives himself to be with the true person who is Pilate. There, Jesus invites Pilate to be transparent, to share how it is with him— to utter the truth of his own life.

The theme of “Christ among us” came to my mind as I was writing this sermon and I thought about this print I have from Kirkridge, a retreat center in the Pocono Mountains that has been welcoming pilgrims (of all kinds) since 1942. The print, by Fritz Eichenberg, from 1950, is entitled *The Christ of the Breadlines*. A more modern title might be *The Christ of the Food Pantry*—or in a wider sense it might be *The Christ who Stands with us in our Truths*.

Eichenberg was a master wood engraver who died in 1990. He dealt with social themes in a religious framework. He fled Germany for Central America and the United States when Hitler came to power. In 1940 he became a Quaker. In the late 40’s Eichenberg was asked by Dorothy Day, co-founder of the Catholic Worker movement, to donate his talents to *The Catholic Worker* newspaper. Some of his most famous works came from that period, including this print.

Jesus continues to invite us to be transparent—to share how it is with him, to utter the truth of our own lives.

Our reading portrays the very last encounter Jesus has with a human being before his death—an encounter that leads to his death. He makes an offer to Pilate. “Everyone who belongs to truth listens to my voice,” says Jesus. As Walter Brueggemann puts it, “Jesus wants to talk about “truth”, an utterly strange topic to Pilate. Pilate operates in a carefully maintained world of illusion, and the presence of one whose mission is to strip away the illusions and point to what is really real poses an enormous threat. ‘Dis-illusionment’ is precisely what Pilate needs if he is to be set on the road to truth, but it is what he fears the most.”

Even to Pilate Jesus offers to be the good shepherd, who, when his sheep listen to his voice, are led into abundant life. The way, the truth, and the life. His very presence in our lives and being

calls into question the many perceptions on which our worlds are constructed.

I close with these words from a prayer of protection from the Celtic Tradition of the 5th Century.

Christ be with me, Christ within me,
Christ behind me, Christ before me,
Christ beside me, Christ to win me.
Christ to comfort and restore me.
Christ beneath me, Christ above me,
Christ in quiet, Christ in danger,
Christ in hearts of all that love me,
Christ in voice of friend and stranger.

Amen. Thanks be to God!