

There's a really fascinating internal argument in the Bible about whether kings are a good thing or a bad thing. Israel's earliest form of government was judges, sort of tribal leaders who led ad hoc armies in battle and otherwise seemed to hold authority over the localities. The book of Judges tells colorful stories about these characters, some of whom are more rascally than admirable, but the book ends with a chilling story of the gang rape and murder of a concubine, and the war of vengeance that ensued. The closing verse says, "In those days there was no king in Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes."

Given that, you might have some sympathy with the elders of Israel who come to the prophet Samuel in 1 Samuel 8 and ask him to appoint a king to govern them. Samuel, however, is displeased, and God affirms his displeasure, saying, "The people have not rejected you, but they have rejected me from being king over them. . . Now then, listen to their voice; only—you shall solemnly warn them, and show them the ways of the king who shall reign over them." Samuel tells the people that kings make their subjects into personal servants, that they tax their subjects in order to enrich themselves, and that people inevitably cry out to be liberated from their kings. But the people insist on having a king, and Samuel embarks on the journey to find and anoint Saul, the first king of Israel.

Clearly there is a memory here of a time when some law and order was needed. There's also probably a more recent memory of kings who abused their power. The conflict is never resolved in the Bible; you just watch it play out over and over, from the Pharaoh of Egypt to the emperors of Babylon and Persia and Rome. The good kings offer security and a sense of participating in something

glorious. The bad kings make life miserable. Either way, the problem of who's in control is solved. They are.

In John's portrayal of Jesus' appearance before Pilate, Pilate is the stand-in for a king. He governs Judea by appointment of the Roman emperor, and although he lives in Caesarea Maritima, he comes to Jerusalem every year at Passover to remind the Jews that the liberation from slavery happened long ago and far away and is not to be considered as a template for current affairs. Pilate is the local guarantor of the Pax Romana. Brutal though Roman rule may be in Judea, he represents security against outside invaders and a certain vicarious glory in being part of the Roman Empire. The temple elites, for sure, find some utility in his administration: since they can't put Jesus to death, they hope that Pilate will.

So the situation in today's reading is that there is an enormous power imbalance: the temple elites and the Roman Empire versus Jesus, the rabbi from Nazareth. The question is, where does the power really lie? To the eyes of the uninitiated, it's obvious that Pilate holds all the cards. He has an army, the power to execute, the support of the Jewish religious authorities. But look at him scuttling back and forth between the religious authorities and Jesus, questioning Jesus and failing to understand him. Pilate doesn't want anything to do with this hot potato; he doesn't like the Jews and he doesn't like having to come to Jerusalem at Passover, and he *really* doesn't like having to deal with this obscure troublemaker who, if he'd popped up a week later, would have been somebody else's problem. This is not what makes being a Roman governor fun.

Jesus, on the other hand, seems perfectly comfortable. Pilate has questions,

but Jesus has answers. It's just that Pilate doesn't understand his answers, because they have nothing to do with strategy and political needle-threading. "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." Jesus will not establish his claims by violence because the truth to which he witnesses is that God is love. The greatest power is that of love, not intimidation or high office, so Jesus is not scared and he's not going to do violence.

The tragedy in this scene is not Pilate's power or the Jewish authorities' power to do physical violence to Jesus. The tragedy is that the people themselves do not understand that to which Jesus witnesses. Given the choice between releasing Jesus and releasing the bandit Barabbas, the people shout, "Not this man, but Barabbas!" Just like the ancient Israelites insisting to Samuel that they must have a king, the people of Jerusalem have no use for a so-called messiah who does not employ deadly force on the hated Romans. Rather than imagining that God is love, they imagine God to be violent because they live in a world of violence.

Jesus could not have been executed without the consent of the people. That's the political reality, the truth, of both the Temple authorities and Pilate: they have to keep the people somewhat placated in order to continue in power. So who is "right," or how do we know what is right?

Mikhail Bakhtin, writing in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, said, "Truth is not born nor is it to be found inside the head of an individual person. It is born *between people* collectively searching for truth, in the process of their dialogic interaction." It's easier to understand when you read it. Let me repeat. [] He's

saying that truth emerges from dialogue or conversation. It is not one static thing. That's why I love the Bible's multiple voices, condemning kings and praising kings. The Bible argues with itself, and invites us to join the conversation, about whether Israel should have had kings or not. Only in conversation can we treat such questions adequately, and each time we have the conversation, we may think about it differently.

Pilate asked "What is truth?" and did not wait for an answer. Lent is one of the opportunities that Christianity allows for us to ask the same thing. What is truth? Who is responsible for putting Jesus to death? Where are we in this story? What do we not want to look at, if anything? What are we going to do about it this time?

Let us pray: God of the crucified and exalted one, bless our conversations so that, listening to ourselves and to others, we let truth guide our lives. Amen.