

“... not from this world” a sermon based on John 18:33-37 preached at Knox Church Dunedin New Zealand on the Sunday of the Reign of Christ, 21 November 2021, by Kerry Enright

I was at an international conference and had been listening to a Palestinian theologian, Mitri Raheb. He talked about Jesus and Palestine and outlined steps to end the conflict there. After the presentation, a colleague and I were leaving the hall and on the way he said – what did you think of that? Wasn't it brilliant I said. Clear, inspiring, biblical. My colleague said “I thought it was terrible. He spoke entirely about this world. Jesus said “my kingdom is not of this world.”” The conversation ended as we headed for our different meetings.

I had not heard that phrase used in that way. Do you notice the different translation. He said “of this world” whereas our translation says “from this world”. The Greek word is ek which can mean of or from. How we translate that word makes a difference here. My colleague was suggesting that Jesus had to do with a world apart from this world and that Jesus was not as concerned with this world as he did for another one. Is that what Jesus meant?

Think of the setting for this exchange. Jesus stood before Pilate and there was no doubt that Pilate was the ruler. Everything proclaimed it. A great building, fine clothes, many servants, a strong army, a notorious reputation for cruelty, the questioning of Jesus. Here was a powerful politician, a ruler who gave orders and knew they would be actioned.

By contrast ... Jesus at his physical and emotional worst: dishevelled, harassed, hungry, abandoned, sleep-deprived —standing before the notoriously cruel Pontius Pilate. And the week of this exchange, he was to be an arrested and falsely accused criminal. A dead man walking.

Jesus looks at Pilate, what got Pilate to where he was, what kept him there, this form of power, and Jesus says “My kingdom is not from this world.” The realm of Jesus does not come from the world of Pilate, the world of the Roman army, of vying for authority, of seeking popular support, of imposing truth, of shutting down opposition and killing opponents. Jesus is saying ... my kingdom is not from your world.

In the process, Jesus puts that kingdom in its place. One day it would end, along with the Temple, because it did not have the moral or truthful or spiritual authority to sustain it. Pilate's power soon turned to dust.

This haggard and harassed nondescript Jesus represented a kingdom that continued long after Pilate's ended. But it was a different rule, a reign of consistent service and enduring love, of wooing and winning the hearts and minds of people. It was power as servant hood in service of truth and it sets out how we are invited to exercise power.

Today we mark White Ribbon Sunday which is for overcoming the abuse of power. As a child I saw a man strike a woman. I was so shocked and disturbed and unsettled, all I could do was hide. Sixty years later, I remember it vividly, where it happened and especially what I felt. It shook my sense of safety, to learn that people could treat each other like that.

Adapting words provided for White Ribbon Sunday ... men especially need to learn more healthy ways to be men, to be healthier versions of masculinity, to be who they were made to be and to express emotions safely. As the White Ribbon resource says, the more we men talk about having respectful relationships and the many different ways we can be men, the more we will learn how to properly exercise the power we have.

There is a hymn by Brian Wren – “Can a man be kind and caring? Jesus was. Can a man who's kind and caring be adventuresome and daring, bravely doing right, walking in the light? Jesus did and so I can: I will be a Jesus man. Can a man be sad with crying? Jesus was. Can a man who's sad with crying, shed his tears, yet keep on trying, loving to the end, enemy and friend? Jesus did and so I can: I will be a Jesus man. Can a man be hurt and broken?

Jesus was. Can a man who's hurt and broken show his friends how God has spoken, giving to us then, power to start again? Jesus did and so I can: I will be a Jesus man.”

In New Zealand, we can learn from a part of our history for guidance and spirit, into traditional Māori attitudes to women and children from the pre-colonial period. In those days, women were more equal, children were affirmed and child abuse was rare. In the words of Ngāi Tahu leader Tā Mark Solomon “Abuse against a child, or against a woman, is an abuse against the whakapapa of the whole whānau. An abuse against a woman or a child led to war. It was never accepted.” Moreover, historical records suggest that the possibilities for Māori tāne were much broader before the importation of European models of masculinity. These records suggest that Māori men were looked down upon by Pākehā for lacking stoic ‘masculine’

behaviours, and were instead talkative and animated, doing the same work as women, and readily expressing their emotions.

The exchange between Jesus and Pilate is about power and how it is exercised, but also about truth. The two are closely related.

Jesus says - "For this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice."

And Pilate asks: "What is truth?" Jesus doesn't immediately respond, with words. His silence seems to say: "You're looking at it." "You're looking at the truth. I am the truth." In other words, truth isn't an instrument, a weapon, or a slogan. The truth is the life of Jesus, the way of Jesus, the love of Jesus. He is truth's most complete and complex embodiment, just as he is of power.

We need to pay attention to what is happening with truth in our time. In some quarters, truth has become a matter of opinion. One person's truth is as good as another. In the process, for some people, truth has ceased to be public, ceased to be the result of careful study and considered discussion and disciplined focus. We have entered an era where truth has become associated with the exercise of power. Google search truth and up comes "The Death of Truth," "The Assault on Truth," "Notes on Falsehood," and "Our Post-Truth World." As Debie Thomas says, there is a culture of confident lies, sly exaggerations, doctored images, conspiracy theories, and fake news. Which makes it hard to listen to our best scholarship about climate change and pandemics.

But as Thomas says, on this Sunday of Christ the king - if truth is king, then "fake news" is not. If truth is king, then self-deception (however expedient or attractive) is not. If truth is king, then distorting inconvenient facts for political, racial, social, cultural, religious, or economic gain, is not. The truth Jesus embodies in his life, death, and resurrection is not instrumental or to puff him up in any way. It does not serve to bolster his own power and authority. Quite the opposite — it humbles him. It empties him. It takes away his life.

When truth is being questioned, can we keep speaking of the gospel that has truth as its call, embodied in Jesus? Can we speak of power that is known in the humility of Jesus? Next week is Advent, when we wait again for the light to dawn, for the truth to reveal itself, for the first cries of a vulnerable baby to redefine truth and power forever. This truth endures when Pilate is dust.

KNOX CHURCH, DUNEDIN

*Captivated by the vision of the realm of God,
made known in Jesus, given in grace*



Knox Church

449 George Street

Dunedin

New Zealand

Ph. (03) 477 0229

www.knoxchurch.net

Kerry Enright: 027 467 5542 minister@knoxchurch.net