A better King

Westlake Lausanne 31 August 2025 | Text : The Gospel of John 18:28-40

Introduction

We are in the Gospel of John, and John has a clear goal in what he writes. He says, *I am writing these things so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ—the king—the Son of God and that by believing you may have life in his name.* (John 20:31)

See, he wants us to experience life, life in the present and life that lasts forever. Ok, but think about that: to believe that the real leader this world needs and my life needs is Jesus, God's chosen King is not just a simple "check the box" kind of conviction is it? It takes years—even a lifetime—to fully appreciate and be committed entirely to Jesus our King.

In the late 1800s, a Russian painter, Nikolai Ge, experienced a spiritual renewal in his life. He decided he wanted to paint realistic scenes from the gospels and so he painted this scene of Jesus and Pilate. He did meticulous research and tried to be accurate. When he finished and the work was exhibited, to his surprise, it created a scandal. The painting was banned by the official church. To the church, Jesus should look immediately good, handsome, and powerful.

I think via his painting, he was trying to get people to look again at Jesus. Can we see the beauty, the power and the truth that is under the surface?

See, we can easily have a superficial vision of Jesus that doesn't see the deeper, truer and real beauty of who he is. After all, if we take a snapshot of this scene and we look at it, what do we see? An entire crowd thinks he is a criminal and deserves to die. He is weak, his hands tied behind his back, he is beaten up. He seems

pathetic. His claim to be a witness to the truth seems a little strange.

John wants us to be aware of the snapshot, but you know what he wants us to do? He wants us to take another look at this king! There is more here than the snapshot. And for John's readers, who lived in a culture where following Jesus would have been difficult, and left them feeling perhaps marginalized or even persecuted, seeing this deeper beauty and power of Jesus is so important.

What John wants us to see is that this king is different and he is better. Which means there is more life to experience as we trust in Jesus more fully. So let's take another look at Jesus.

He is different and he is better in his goodness, in his power and in the way he is the Truth. So let's look first at how he is good.

1. A King who is good

Jesus was taken before the Jewish authorities and they decided they wanted to execute him in an official way and for that they needed the Roman approval. So they take him to Pontius Pilate who represented the Roman empire and authority.

John 18.29 *So Pilate went outside to them and said, "What accusation do you bring against this man?"*

This is the key question at a trial, right? What is the wrong this man did that he should be condemned?

But look what detail John shows us in the verse right before.

John 18.28 *[The Jewish leaders]…. They themselves did not enter the governor's headquarters, so that they would not be defiled, but could eat the Passover."*

What was the Passover? It was the big holiday of the year that celebrated God's salvation from the bondage of slavery in Egypt through the death of the Lamb. Do you see the irony? Here are the leading theological experts. "Oh no! We can't set foot in Pilate's headquarters lest we become defiled for our Passover parties in our project to put to death this man."

If you have been reading the story from the beginning, you know that these Jewish leaders have not wanted to even listen to Jesus and understand him. They have decided he should die. This is not a fair, honest trial. So they are willing to condemn an innocent man and have him killed and at the same time, they are careful to follow certain details of God's Word.

John shows us the failure of outward religious observance to produce true goodness. We've seen movies about Jesus and these guys are the "bad guys." But at the time, they were not seen like that! They were seen as the moral "over-achievers" of the society. Here they are scrupulously following external instructions from God's law, while they are plotting the death of an innocent man.

And how is Pilate presented?

He ends his examination by saying, "I find no guilt in this man" a conclusion that is repeated three times in the Gospel. But in the end, he caves into the pressure of the crowds out of fear of a bad job review to his boss, the Roman emperor. The job of a judge is to uphold justice, to punish the guilty and acquit the innocent. Which is precisely what he doesn't do. In the end, the fear of others, and his reputation, push him to give an innocent man over to the crowd to be crucified.

This is an odd trial isn't it? A group tries to condemn Jesus before a judge, and in the end, what is clear is that the accusers and the judge are guilty!

Isn't it fascinating how different the Jewish leaders and Pilate are... and yet how similar? External rule-keeping or self-centered pragmatism are both unable to produce real goodness? Ok, and think about our lives. I'm going to earn my goodness by external moral performance. Or we live driven by what others think of us, or just a pragmatic, "do what is easiest for me." And if we are honest, we realize we don't meet God's standards.

But there is good news here. And what is it? There is one who is good. More than just good, there is one who is wholly innocent.

John emphasizes that this was the day of preparation for the Passover. Wherever John mentions a Jewish feast always implies a link with Jesus, most of the time how Jesus fulfills and lives out the true meaning of the feast and celebration.

On this day of preparation, in the temple, the lambs were being killed for the Passover feast. So a few hundred meters away, in the temple, a long line of Jews were waiting with their lamb and the priests would examine the lamb to make sure they were spotless. The priest would examine the lamb and say, "I find no spot in him!"

Pilate's conclusion says more than he realized - "I find no guilt in him." He echoes the priest's words - this one is a spotless lamb.

Do you remember how John the Baptist first spoke about Jesus in Chapter 1?

John 1:29 *The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!"*

At the end of this scene when the crowd shouts, "take him away!" Ironically, they use the very same verb in Greek from this verse, "who takes away the sin." They want to take him away because they see him unworthy of life and God is taking him away

precisely because he is worthy of life, and therefore worthy to bear our sin.

That is what we are supposed to see here - here is the perfect, innocent lamb of God. And because he is innocent, he really can take away the sin of the world. The lamb stood in the place of the guilty. That was what the great sacrificial system reminded the people day after day, month after month. What I did was terribly serious, but it is paid for by the death of the animal and my relationship with God is restored, renewed, and at peace.

This is not new news to most of you. But maybe this morning you need to be reminded of it. Jesus is not only so good he is innocent, he is so good he gives his innocence away to the guilty.

After all, think of standing before an infinitely good and infinitely perfect God. Can you imagine showing up at the entrance to his presence and the angel says (what is perfectly evident once we glimpse God's perfect splendor), only the perfect and pure and spotless can enter here. What would you say? How would you feel? We'd be deluding ourselves to say, "no problem, that's me." If we are honest, we will say, "There is no hope for me."

He goes on, "ok, Mr. Niblack, let's check your record. Do you deserve to be celebrated and welcomed by God for the life you lived? David Niblack, right? That's me. Let me pull up your file. Every thought, action, intention, behavior over the course of your life. Let's do a scan here.... You're good - 'I find no guilt in him.' Perfect, spotless, pure - you are welcomed, celebrated and free." We say, "Wait, that's great news but I think you got the wrong file. I've got a thousand faults, no, a million! And that's just counting this year. How is this possible?" And he answers, "Well, I see someone stood in your place. Your record has been washed."

When we realize and treasure what Jesus has done for us and rest in his goodness, it changes us. It changes our hearts. It gives us peace and it gives us a new motivation to live for Him.

2.A King who is powerful

Pilate is the most powerful political leader in town. He represents the Roman Empire, the most powerful political force history had ever known up to then. Not only powerful, brutally powerful. Maybe we are fans of Asterix and Obelix and we think of Obelix smashing up the Romans, sending the silly looking legionaries into the sky with their sandals left on the ground. But for the readers of this gospel, Rome represented terrifying power and control. Think of the gladiators and the thumbs up or thumbs down. That was the power Pilate had.

The danger Pilate sees is that Jesus is a political revolutionary and so he brings him in for a private interview and gets right to the point with this question in verse 33.

So Pilate entered his headquarters again and called Jesus and said to him, "Are you the King of the Jews?"

At the time, the Romans occupied all of the land of Israel and the Jews despised the oppressive Roman rule. A king of the Jews would mean a nationalist Jewish freedom fighter who would rebel against the Romans, such as will happen in under a generation of time in the First Jewish War.

How does Jesus respond? He doesn't answer with a simple yes or no, does he?

So he asks Pilate verse 34: *"Did this question come from you or did others say it to you about me?"*

In other words, Pilate, do you understand what you are asking? Are you asking that question based on your definition of a king or so others talk to you about me?

Pilate replies, "Look, don't complicate things! I'm not a Jew, don't expect me to know, your own nation is behind this accusation. So what did you do? Defend yourself. What have you done!"

Jesus answers in a remarkable way. Look at verse 36:

John 18:36 *Jesus answered, "My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would have been fighting."*

I am a king and I rule a kingdom. But my kingdom is "not of this world." If it were, we would be fighting like you, the Romans.

What does that mean? Jesus means that the origin of his kingdom is not from this world, it is not human. Jesus continues in verse 37:

John 18:37 *Jesus answered, "You say that I am a king. For this purpose I was born and for this purpose I have come into the world—to bear witness to the truth."*

See, yes, Jesus is a King! This was the fundamental purpose of his life. But no, he is not a king like Pilate. His rule originates outside human reality.

Where something originates from, where it was made, often says a lot about it, doesn't it? If you are abroad and see two chocolate bars for sale, one made in the USA and one made in Switzerland, I can tell you which one you want to buy! Whatever strengths we have as Americans, making good chocolate is not one of them.

So Jesus really is a leader, a king. But his authority is of a different nature from human political structures. If we look at the Bible's perspective on political rule, it's a necessary part of human

society. Political power is the power to enforce, to make people do what the law or the congress or the king has decided. Political rule doesn't suggest, does it? It mandates, it makes people do what the government has decided. I haven't heard of a government say, "We recommend and encourage everyone to pay their taxes but no obligation, it's up to you to decide."

Jesus is not calling for a rejection of the human political system. But, see, what Jesus implies is that we were made for something better. And in the life and person of Jesus, God launched his kingdom which will be fully realized when Jesus comes back. Jesus' kingdom is not the same thing as a human political institution. Jesus's authority is far greater, far more personal, and in the end, far more powerful than political force. And at the same time, his power is not coercive, not forced and not political in the sense of human political systems.

There is a warning and an encouragement here. This is the warning: Human political power is not the way Jesus will advance his kingdom in this world.

Down through the centuries Christians have been lured into assuming that human political structures can be the motor behind the growth of the Christian faith. "If the government is Christian, there will be a massive renewal for the church in the whole society." In my own life, I can remember the tremendous excitement at church when George W. Bush was elected president. Looking back, we can say now that having an evangelical-friendly president in the White House didn't exactly bring widespread renewal to the church.

The flipside is also true, *something* we can be very intimidated when we don't have any political influence. Where is one of the places in the world where Christianity is growing the fastest? Iran, a country with certainly not a very Christian-friendly

political regime. So let's not be seduced and let's not be too intimidated.

But here is the encouragement: Jesus and his kingdom are far more powerful and bring far more change than political power. That is the irony here. Who is powerful here? Who is really in control? It's the man with his hands tied behind his back. He is in control. It's his decision to lay down his life. John reminds us at the darkest moment—when crucifixion is hinted at for the first time in verse 31, this was all to fulfill what Jesus had previously said about how he would die. In fact, everything is going according to his plan, things aren't going according to Pilate's plan.

But more, Jesus will change the world in ways Pilate could never even imagine. Because Jesus's authority is far greater, far more personal, and in the end, far more powerful than political force.

Remember the conversation Jesus had with one of the religious leaders Nicodemus in chapter 3. What did he tell Nicodemus? Listen, Nicodemus, I've got better policy insights. I can legislate better laws and you should put them into place in the synagogue. I'll be able to raise an army that can face the Romans.

No. Jesus said something far deeper. You must be born again—I have come to give you a new nature. I come to bring living water—to satisfy the deepest thirst and longing of the human heart. I am the light of the world, I provide the ultimate perspective on life. I am the resurrection and the life, the one who believes in me will live even though he dies. This is what we were made for, a king far more powerful and far less coercive than human political authority.

We can witness this king. We can have our political opinions and we can vote, but if our deep allegiance is to Jesus, I think we'll see

our role as witnessing to his life, his love, his grace, and mercy are more fundamental than forcing our opinion.

3. A King who is Truth

Jesus doesn't force with political power. But he does make an astounding and powerful claim. He is not just a good king, a powerful king, he is a king who is the Truth itself.

John 18:37-38: *For this purpose I was born and for this purpose I have come into the world—to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice.*

What is Jesus saying? I came from outside the world into this world to show the truth. Everyone who is on the side of truth ends up listening to me. That is huge isn't it? But it's another way of saying what he said to the disciples a few chapters back in John 14:6, "I am the way, the truth and the life... no one comes to the Father except through me."

All other religious leaders at best point to the truth, claiming to show us the way. Buddha, Mohammed or the modern thinkers. Who would dare say, "Everyone who is on the side of truth listens to me."

38 Pilate said to him, "What is truth?"

Pilate will go down in history for his three-word question he uses to reply to Jesus. Likely Pilate is cynical and perhaps a little depressed. But his question captures the human predicament—we long to know deep down what is ultimate, what is truth.

And what a contrast with Pilate. "What is truth?" His question is so present and relevant today isn't it? How do we know what is

ultimate if all we have is our own little perspective? It's why the claim to ultimate truth comes across so arrogant. So what is the alternative? Well, you have to come up with your own truth. You have to make—not discover—the ultimate meaning of your life and of the universe.

What would you have to have to be able to make a legitimate claim to ultimate truth? Well, you would have to have the ultimate perspective. You would have to know everything perfectly, to be the maker, the creator of everything. You would have to be able to stand outside, to be infinite, perfect.

That is what is so incredible. This beaten, bound, Jewish man standing before Pilate makes that same claim. If that is true, it's not arrogant to say there is an ultimate truth. That truth can be known, accepted, understood.

The ultimate truth is personal, so personal he stepped up as our Passover lamb, to be beaten, to be mocked, to be nailed to a Roman cross and there—there—is the truth and three days later he rises from the dead.

We saw in this trial it's not only Jesus on trial, it's Pilate, the Jewish leaders. But you know what? This trial and Jesus's question also reaches out to you and me. Pilate represents the tragedy of so many, he asks the most important question in the world and doesn't stick around to consider an answer. The irony is the Truth is standing right in front of him, it's so close! I don't know where exactly you are this morning. But don't be like Pilate. Don't just shrug your shoulders and walk away. Can you find goodness, power and truth like this anywhere else? Could it be that it's real? Would you consider listening to his voice?

John tells us, by believing in Jesus, we enjoy life in his name. Would you treasure this Jesus more?

Conclusion

We saw in this trial it's not only Jesus on trial, it's Pilate and the Jewish leaders. But you know what? This trial and Jesus's question also reaches out to you and me. Pilate represents the tragedy of so many, he asks the most important question in the world and doesn't stick around to consider an answer. The irony is the Truth is standing right in front of him, it's so close! I don't know where exactly you are this morning. But I think John is trying to tell us, "Don't be like Pilate. Don't just shrug your shoulders and walk away." Can you find goodness, power and truth like this anywhere else? Could it be that it's real? Would you consider listening to his voice?

And for those who are following Christ, we are bombarded with alternatives to the claim and asked for our allegiance just about every week. Would we take the time to look deeply at our King and realize that he is different and he is better, in the most important qualities that we could hope for in a leader? Seeing Jesus afresh has such power to renew our trust in him and reconnect to that life. And as we start this new school season and this new academic year, we need the life that only Jesus gives. So let's look to him again, trust him more deeply, and enjoy the life that is in his name.