

November 21, 2021
John 18:33-37

Christ the King
Pastor Jeff Laustsen

“The King of Truth”

“For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth.”

Douglas John Hall is one of the most important contemporary theologians in the Christian Church, a retired professor at McGill University who has written extensively on the future of the Church in North America and on the relevance of Martin Luther’s Theology of the Cross in the modern world. I was introduced to Dr. Hall’s writings in seminary and have several of his books, to which I refer quite frequently. He has long been one of my favourite authors, so when I heard that he would be giving a lecture at a local seminary when I was in New Jersey I quickly registered. I had never seen a photograph of Dr. Hall, but in my mind I created an image of a powerful orator who would capture the room with his charismatic personality, a large man with a powerful voice who would be a modern-day version of the Old Testament prophets who cried out to the people of Israel to repent of their sinful ways and return to the Lord. I brought my pre-conceived notions of this Canadian theologian to the lecture at Princeton Seminary and discovered that many other people were interested in Dr. Hall’s speech as the large lecture hall was filled and buzzing with excitement. As I looked around for the person I was expected, I noticed a small man with a neatly trimmed mustache and cardigan sweater approaching the podium. At first, I thought that this might be a member of the Princeton faculty preparing the dais for Dr. Hall’s speech, but I was surprised to discover that this was Dr. Hall, who in no way resembled the person I was expecting. Not only that, but he was not a fiery orator; in a very soft voice he read his entire speech, rarely making eye contact with the audience. He quietly and patiently answered questions at the end of the lecture, and then stayed on to sign autographs in his books. I still have my signed copy of *The Steward* and have heard Dr. Hall speak on other occasions, but I will always remember the lesson I learned at that first lecture: that our preconceived notions of a person should not determine how we respond when we encounter the real person.

Our preconceived ideas of how a person should look and act often cloud our judgment and prevent us from appreciating the real person when we meet them. We may expect a leader to be larger-than-life and very charismatic, but often the best leaders are humble and soft-spoken. We may go to a concert expecting a performance

that will “bring down the house,” only to experience an introverted performer whose talents shine forth. I will always remember the day I went to see Wayne Gretzky and the Edmonton Oilers play the Philadelphia Flyers in the early eighties; I kept looking for the “Great One” as a Goliath-like player on ice and was at first surprised to see someone whose uniform looked five sizes too big. But when the game started, Gretzky’s play made it clear why he is considered one of the greatest players of all times. We need to be careful lest our preconceived notions of a person in a certain role blind us to the truth of someone who may not fit into our categories but who in truth is the one for whom we have been searching.

A major figure in the passion narratives of Jesus Christ in all four gospels is Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor of Judea who presided at the trial of Jesus and condemned him to death on the cross, the uniquely cruel Roman form of capital punishment. Pilate served as the representative of the Roman Empire and particularly the Caesar, the all-powerful ruler who was worshiped as a god. Roman emperors were powerful, ruthless warrior-kings who would lead their troops into battle and would return to their communities in triumphal processions meant to fill the audience with awe and to intimidate would-be opponents of the Empire. Pilate had a very firm preconceived notion of how a king should look and act, and this is one reason he is so surprised and bewildered when a man who has been accused of being the King of the Jews is brought before him. A Roman authority would primarily be concerned with the political aspect of Jewish messianism; anyone claiming to be a king would be seen as a rival to the emperor and thus an affront to Roman imperial rule (*“They are all acting contrary to the decrees of the emperor, saying that there is another king named Jesus.”* – Acts 17:7). So when Pilate enters his headquarters, he is expecting to meet an insurrectionist who is seeking to lead the Jewish people in a revolution against the Roman emperor and Roman rule.

But when Pilate lays his eyes on Jesus, he is shocked and bewildered by the man before him. The man from Nazareth is not a mighty warrior-king, nor does he look anything like the kings that Pilate has known and served. He is a man who has been broken and beaten, with a crown of thorns impaled in his skull. He has no army waiting to storm the gates of Jerusalem; instead, his followers have all abandoned him, and he does not appear to be any threat to the reign of Caesar. Pilate may have heard of the prophet Isaiah and his teaching about a Suffering Servant whose appearance was repulsive rather than attractive or threatening:

- “He was despised and rejected by others; a man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity; and as one from whom others hide their faces he was despised,

and we held him of no account ... He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth ... They made his grave with the wicked and his tomb with the rich, although he had done no violence, and there was no deceit in his mouth.” – Isaiah 53:3-9.

So, when Pilate first encounters Jesus who in no way fits into his preconceived notions of a king, his question is one of surprise and confusion: “*Are you the King of the Jews?*” (John 18:33). This is the first of nine times when “king” (*basileus*) is mentioned in the trial before Pilate in the Fourth Gospel; the prominence of the kingship motif underscores the intersection of religion and politics in the trial narrative. In John’s Gospel, however, the kingship motif has theological significance, and throughout the trial the political and theological meanings of kingship play off one another.

As is typical of Jesus throughout the Fourth Gospel, he responds to Pilate’s question with one of his own: “*Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?*” (18:34; another example is his response to Nicodemus’ question “*How can these things be?*” Jesus answered him, ‘*Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?*’” – 3:9-10). Jesus questions whether Pilate can act on his own or only in response to others. Jesus’ question signals the direction the rest of the trial will take, because it turns the tables on Pilate and positions himself as the interrogator. He also exposes Pilate’s disdain for the Jewish people when the governor replies “*I am not a Jew, am I? Your own nation and the chief priests have handed you over to me. What have you done?*” (18:35). Pilate obviously looks upon the Jewish people as inferior to the mighty Roman Empire, and exposes the biases of the governor who is pretended to be an impartial judge at this trial:

- “Pilate wants to act as though he is innocent of his prejudiced notions about Jesus, while playing along with the lies and corruptions of his constituents. Jesus does not fall for that; he instead unmask the demonic forces of his society that engage in such egregious abuse of power.” – Samuel Cruz.

Pilate’s question exposes his disdain for the Jews; this disdain will govern his dealings with the Jewish authorities in the remainder of the trial. Pilate’s reference to “your own nation” (*ethnos*) reinforces the role of political expediency and self-interest in his “handing over” of Jesus to death:

- “Now it was the day of Preparation for the Passover; and it was about noon. He said to the Jews, ‘Here is your King!’ They cried out, ‘Away with him! Away with him! Crucify him!’ Pilate asked them, ‘Shall I crucify your King?’ The chief priests answered, ‘We have no king but the emperor.’ Then he handed him over to them to be crucified.” – 19:14-15.

Jesus responds to Pilate by defining his kingship as one that is radically different from the empires and emperors of Pilate’s experience. While Jesus has been hailed as “king” by various Jewish persons who saw him as the promised messiah, the one whom God would raise up to overthrow their Gentile overlords and rule over a restored monarch in Israel (as he was hailed in his entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday: “*So they took branches of palm trees and went out to meet him, shouting, ‘Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord – the King of Israel!’*” – 12:13), Jesus used other biblical images to present to true nature of his messianic kingship: “*Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem! Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.*” (Zechariah 9:9). Jesus’ response that “*my kingdom is not from this world*” (18:36) refers to the nature and function of his kingship rather than its location. The Fourth Gospel has repeatedly emphasized that Jesus originates from God (“*You are from below, I am from above; you are of this world, I am not of this world*” – 8:23) and his kingship has the same origins (“*Because you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world – therefore the world hates you.*” – 15:19). His kingdom, unlike that of the king that Pilate serves, is not secured by force, which Jesus proves when he orders Peter to “*put your sword back into its sheath. Am I not to drink the cup that the Father has given me?*” (18:11).

- “Jesus is saying that the values of his kingdom are different from those of the current system. In other words, Jesus does not have to exercise the type of authority that seeks to be on top, which results in oppression, corruption of the judicial system, and precisely the kind of hypocrisy that Pilate exhibited in the interaction between him and Jesus. Jesus tells him: ‘If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here.’” – Cruz.

Pilate’s growing confusion is evident when he again asks Jesus “*so you are a king?*” (18:37). Jesus neither directly affirms nor denies Pilate’s words, but once again returns the responsibility to him: “*You say that I am a king.*” He then takes on his role as a teacher when he declares that “*for this I was born, and for this I came into*

the world, to testify to the truth.” Jesus’ kingship is to be understood in the context of Jesus’ mission in the world:

- “Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.” – 3:17.
- “... for I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will, but the will of him who sent me.” – 6:38.
- “I came into this world for judgment so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind.” – 9:39.

Jesus can testify to the “truth” (*aletheia*) because he is “*the Word [that] became flesh and lived among us ... full of grace and truth.*” (1:14). Jesus belongs to what is above and is the only one who has come down from heaven; thus he has seen what the Father does and what the Father has said (“*I have much to say about you and much to condemn; but the one who sent me is true, and I declare to the world what I have heard from him.*” – 8:26). Jesus is the embodiment of truth, so that the deeds and words of his ministry constitute testimony to the truth: “*I am the Way, and the Truth, and the Life; no one comes to the Father except through me.*” (14:6). Those who recognize Jesus as the true King are those who recognize and follow this truth: “*Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.*” To “belong to the truth” is to recognize in Jesus the truth of God, to see the fullness of God revealed in Jesus, and to hear God’s words in Jesus’ voice. It is recognizing Jesus as the “good shepherd,” the one who “*lays down his life for the sheep*” (10:11). In the Old Testament, “shepherd” was a common metaphor for kings, most of whom proved to be unfaithful and were judged harshly by God:

- “Therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the LORD: As I live, says the Lord God, because my sheep have become food for all the wild animals, since there was no shepherd; and because my shepherds have not searched for my sheep, but the shepherds have fed themselves, and have not fed my sheep; therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the LORD: Thus says the Lord God, I am against the shepherds; and I will demand my sheep at their hands, and put a stop to their feeding the sheep; no longer shall my shepherds feed themselves. I will rescue my sheep from their mouths, so that they may not be food for them.” – Ezekiel 34:7-10.

Those who belong to the truth, who recognize Jesus as the true shepherd-king of God’s people, are the one who recognize his voice as the one that proclaims the truth of God’s love: “... *the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own by name and leads*

them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice.” (10:3-4). Jesus’ presence in the world and the word of truth that he speaks are the moment of judgment and decision for the world (“... *and he has given him authority to execute judgment, because he is the Son of Man.*” – 5:27). Although Jesus is on trial here, he is the one who uses this occasion to testify to the truth, and the world is judged by its response to his witness.

- “As he stands before Pilate and the Jewish authorities, dressed in the raiment of a king, his presence bears witness to the truth of his identity. He is the king, not the kind of claimant to power that Pilate fears, but the good shepherd-king, who is about to lay down his life for those he loves.” – Gail O’Day.

On this last Sunday of the church year, we celebrate Christ the King, our beautiful saviour who is the *“king of creation, Son of God and Son of Man”* (ELW Hymn 838). We give thanks for the one who is the true King because he is the King of Truth, whose authority comes from the truth to which he bears witness and the truth to which his followers are called to listen and obey. We look forward to that day when the one who is seated at the right hand of the Father *“will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will be no end.”* (Nicene Creed). We are called to follow Jesus as the true King who is sent from God to testify to the truth, the one who did regard equality with God as something to be exploited but takes the form of a slave and humbles himself unto death, the one who will be highly exalted by God so that *“every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father”* (Philippians 2:11).

- “All those who know the way of this king and his kingdom willingly bear the cross. For they not only know that Christ, the eternal king, fared in the same way and is thus willing and ready to suffer (because a servant should not fare better than his Lord), but they also take comfort in the knowledge that life in the eternal kingdom is full of joy and splendor, even though suffering must be endured on earth. That makes Christians joyful even in the midst of sorrows and trials.” – Martin Luther, 1545.

I have continued to treasure the writings and teachings of Douglas John Hall, even though he did not at first fulfill my expectations of a great theologian. We follow our Lord not because he fits the human expectations of a mighty warrior-king, but because he is the King of Truth who defeats the forces of “sin, death, and the power of the devil” through his death and resurrection. He is the one in whom we trust, the one who leads us as our Good Shepherd-King, our Lord and Saviour who abides with

us always and will one day gather us together into our eternal home. He is not the king of our preconceived notions; he is the King of Truth, sent by the God of Truth to testify to the Truth that *“if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.”* (Romans 6:5). Thanks be to God for Christ the King, the King of Truth who shall reign for ever and ever!

Amen.