

Good Friday - 2022

Perhaps you have heard this story. It's a great story: Many years ago, when Hitler's forces occupied Denmark, the order came that all Jews in Denmark were to identify themselves by wearing armbands with yellow stars of David. The Danes had seen the extermination of Jews in other countries and guessed that this was the first step in that process in their countries. The King did not defy the orders. He had every Jew wear the star and he himself wore the Star of David. He told his people that he expected every loyal Dane to do the same. The King said, "We are all Danes. One Danish person is the same as the next." He wore his yellow star when going into Copenhagen every day in order to encourage his people.

The King of Denmark identified with his people, even to the point of putting his own life on the line. It's a wonderful story with a powerful point. The only problem is it isn't true. It's an urban legend. It's been around for a long time and told thousands of times over.

And now with the internet we are getting a lot of these legendary stories retold. Too bad! What an image for a king, identifying with his people. "Are you the king of the Jews?" Pilate asked. "Is that your idea," Jesus said to him, "or did others talk to you about me?"

That's how these legends get started. Other people talking about what other people have said. Jesus was essentially crucified on gossip and rumor. An urban legend had developed around his ministry that he was going to lead a revolt against Rome. In his conversation with Pilate, Jesus finally does imply that he is a king. "My kingdom," he explains, "is not of this world."

Not of this world. That's what it takes. That's what it takes to find a King who identifies with his people. A King of heaven, a King of kings from some place other than this world. **Pilate and Jesus, Kingdoms in conflict.** There are great lessons found in the tension between these two.

A couple of things I am thinking about: one is to ask if we are really mainly interested in Pilate's questions or in Jesus' answers? That is, Pilate is asking these questions in the middle of this narrative. We live on this side of the narrative. We know the story.

So how do these questions function for us? We know how they function in the story. Pilate is a character in an unfolding drama who poses questions and the reader may be asking similar questions. So the reader awaits Jesus' answers. Do we ask those same questions? Do people in the pews ask them?

Second thought is a segue from the first one: what difference do the questions or the answers (either Jesus' answers or our own) make for us? For me that's the more critical issue here. **Is Jesus a king? Well.... do I care?** I don't conceive of Jesus in royal political images. So does the question point beyond what Pilate meant to something like my asking, "So Jesus, how should I regard your role in my life? What is your place in it?"

"What have you done?" Well, we know what Jesus does in the story. But is that a story from 2,000 years ago like so many other such stories or is it an ongoing story? What is Jesus doing now? **That is, what is God doing now?** What difference does that make for me today? **"What is truth?"** Makes me think that I am back as an undergraduate philosophy major.... If Pilate had asked, "What is true?" then I might have had a better shot at this one. But again, what does an answer to that question mean for me today? Again and again I am less interested in conceptual sermons exploring the nature of kingship (human or divine), the recounting of what Jesus did in the Gospels and the philosophical foundations of epistemology and the nature of truth, than I am in **what difference this makes for me and my life and the lives of those around me today.**

Interesting that so often the conversation about these kinds of issues come around again and again to "power." Isn't it interesting that so often we frame all of these things in terms of power. Who has the most power? Who has the least? Who is abusing their power? Why should she or he have more power than another? Maybe it just isn't about power. Ascribing power to God as we think of power and what it would mean for a person to have the power to make things happen may be a kind of category mistake. Tennessee Williams wrote a line that reminds me that we confuse power with the ability to bring change about. It is a line that meant so much to him, it's on his gravestone, "The violets in the mountains have broken the rocks." "The violets in the mountains have broken the rocks." Isn't that it when we talk about the power of God? We get all caught up in God being some all-powerful mighty creator who winks and a star blossoms into a supernova. But to me, it's much simpler. The hard, the cold, the oppressive will be broken apart by a force that is beautiful, natural, colorful, alive. When we follow Jesus we're a bunch of violets breaking through the rocks. And it happens. The rock is cracking away. The rock of hate and falsehood is being broken apart. That is power.