

Today’s gospel scene of Jesus’ trial before Pilate is best visualized for me by the Italian film director Franco Zeffirelli in his 1970s television mini-series, *Jesus of Nazareth*. Its most telling moment shows Jesus after being interrogated by Pilate, then scourged, crowned with thorns and now wearing a bright purple cape walking once again into Pilate’s chamber. Pilate looks straight at the viewer who sees the Roman governor through the eyes of Jesus. Profound silence fills the scene. Pilate’s face witnesses confusion and terror as he gazes into the eyes of this man beaten, bleeding, crowned with thorns, covered with spittle, clothed in a fool’s cape as a pretender king. In this encounter it dawns on Pilate that he is not the one who is judging, but the one being judged! Pilate is on trial! Finally, Pilate gets in Jesus’ face and demands: “Just who are you?”

In writing his narrative of Jesus’ death, John the evangelist highlights the trial. John writes up the trial in such a way that, while Jesus is the one being tried, everyone else is on trial except Jesus. In addition to Pilate, the Jewish religious authorities, the apostles and disciples, the crowds watching, and we who hear the story today—all of us are on trial! Pilate’s question in Zeffirelli’s film portrayal, “Just who are you?” is also our question.

Pilate, like us, knows all about how power in the world works—government power, economic power, military power, the power of the media (yes, even the ancient world had media) to shape and interpret events—Pilate knows all about this. He is, after all, a person of power, the local arm of the emperor. Pilate knows what power can do—crush and obliterate anyone or anything that gets in its way. Yet Pilate is afraid. Why?

Pilate is afraid because he has come face-to-face with another power, a power that operates by a different set of rules, a power that comes not from this world but beyond it. Pilate and we stand before the power of truth, the power of love, the power of God.

Pilate knows and fears that while he may be able to eliminate the physical body of the prisoner who stands before him, he has come to realize that the power out of which

Jesus speaks, the Spirit, he will never be able to crush. Even in death, perhaps more so, this power will live and has the potential to change the course of history.

This feast of Christ the King is a relative newcomer to the Church's liturgical calendar. It was instituted by Pope Pius XI in 1925, eighty seven years ago as an antidote to secularism, a way of life which leaves God out of human thinking and living and organizes human life as if God did not exist. At that time this secularist philosophy was taking political form in the rise of communism, fascism, and nazism. While the particular governments associated with these systems have disappeared, newer forms of secularism have taken their place—individualism, materialism, moral relativism, and atheism. A recent look at events in our own country over the last ten years, for example, have witnessed religious values, not just of Christianity and Catholicism in particular, but other religious traditions as well, being pushed to the margins, if not being eliminated altogether under the guise of secular “tolerance.” In instituting today's feast not only did the pope want to proclaim the triumph of Jesus' cross and resurrection and the definitive establishment of the Kingdom of God in the world, but also call we the Catholic faithful to re-embrace Jesus and the Kingdom of God and continue to proclaim it as the God-given gift of the on-going means of the world's, and our own, redemption. In calling for the current Year of Faith and the recent Synod of Bishops on the New Evangelization, our current Holy Father, Pope Benedict XVI is reiterating the intent of today's feast.

In answering Pilate, Jesus says his kingdom is not of this world. It is a kingdom not fought for with old means of warfare. It is a kingdom in which the poor, the meek, the stranger, the outsider, the broken in spirit are the “blessed” while the “mighty are cast down from their thrones.” It is a kingdom in which those who are the greatest stoop down to wash the feet of others. It is a kingdom revealed in brokenness—bread to feed many hungers, bodies spent so that others might have life. Yes, Jesus is a king, but a suffering king. He will not kill for the truth. He will die for it. He will not demand ransom. He will ransom. He will win, not by spilling others blood, but by offering up his own. And he invites us to “do this in memory of me.”

“Who are you?” **This, is who Jesus is.**