

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

Are You The King Of The Jews?

Pilate's words to Jesus during his trial. The prisoner responds by another question: *Who's asking?* Immediately we ask: *Who's in charge of this interview - the Roman or the Jew?* This is quite intentional on John's part. An extraordinary interrogation! I always think that Jesus approaches the Prefect - who represents the might of the greatest empire on earth - just as he has all other people: with a view to his conversion, with a view to giving him faith. He wants to save Pilate. What is strange about this approach is that it leaves out what Pilate expected to be the main object: the decision about the *prisoner's* fate. He asks incredulously, *Do you not know I have power to crucify you, and power to release you?* It's Pilate's desperate effort to retrieve his hold on the situation, to re-assert what he thought was his dominance. Jesus waves that away as irrelevant: *You would have no power over me if it hadn't been given you from God.* So they are both in the presence of God, the judge of all.

Sovereignty

Jesus is never so aware of the sovereignty of God than here. He is not here on any agenda of his own, but "busy with his Father's affairs". He treats the exercise of human power as an illusion because he himself is in a field of divine power, and he knows it could, technically, blow all human deeds into annihilation: *more than twelve legions of angels* means infinite power. But God is not competing with Caesar. He works through the *obedience* of his Son, who is moving among human beings with his heart given wholly to the Father. This is what stops Pilate in his tracks. He is a good judge of men. He knows this man isn't deranged, possessed, or malevolent, and he also senses that, while there is a challenge to Roman power in this meeting, it's not one Rome could ever fear, not one that would ever express itself in Roman coinage (revolution or war). Pilate *finds no wrong in him*. He senses in Jesus the sovereignty of God, but not expressed as Jesus' weapon, even as Jesus' possession. Paul says: *His state was divine, and he did not consider equality with God a thing to be hung on to. He emptied himself of it, assuming the condition of a slave.* This, far more than the history of Rome, shows a royal power that silences a politician like Pilate. In himself, over himself, Jesus is sovereign. He can

be crucified, but only by his own compliance –an obedience, which is given not to his crucifiers, but to his Father. *Whom are you looking for?* he asks. *Jesus of Nazareth!* say the soldiers. Jesus replies: *I AM HE!* And they fall to the ground *powerless*, until he says: *If I am the one you are looking for, take me, and let these others go.* So that when they arrest him, it is in obedience to Jesus' command, no-one else's.

Reigning from the Cross

In the world where tyranny and wealth are enthroned, Jesus couldn't have represented his kind of royalty by any other means than he did. No earthly crown could properly symbolize the reign of God except the mocking one he wore in his Passion. What's more, his utter condemnation had to come not just from the Romans, *but from the Temple too.* The High Priest had to be one of the voices calling for his death, because no earthly *religious* place could have been found for him. He is eventually found an entirely *irreligious* place, nailed to the Cross. It is as a *sacrifice* that Jesus comes to reign over all subsequent human history, and the Kingdom of Heaven will never come until it is built on obedience. *Jesus must be obliterated*, says Caiaphas, *so that the whole people may be saved.* It is because Jesus understands that so well that he is content to be condemned by *all* earthly authorities, and so be consecrated to the reign of the Father, which the world cannot see. So the Solemnity of Christ the King can only be celebrated by those who, like him, have washed their hands, minds, and hearts of the lust for earthly power, in order to obey the rule of God alone. At that moment, we enter the Kingdom of Heaven, not just as its subjects, but as sharers in its unearthly power. Perhaps Jesus was not teasing his Twelve when he told them that they would one day sit on twelve thrones to judge the twelve tribes of Israel. His amazing Roman trial shows us how it is to be done. *Fr Philip*