

April 13, 2025—“*Absolute Reality*”

Throughout this season of Lent, we’ve been staring at the idea from Brian Zahnd’s book that the cross of Christ is *The Wood Between the Worlds*—literally, that Jesus’ death on the cross is the bridge between two kingdoms, the Kingdom of Heaven and the kingdom of this world. And in our final week before we celebrate Easter weekend, we’re going to dig into arguably the most significant way that this is true, by comparing the two kingdom’s *fundamental operating systems*—their underlying values and ways of working—at the very instant when Jesus was condemned to die.

If you have a Bible or Bible app on your phone, please turn with me to John chapter 18, as we enter into this story. We’ll pick it up in verse 28, where it says:

Then the Jewish leaders took Jesus from Caiaphas to the palace of the Roman governor... So Pilate came out to them and asked, “What charges are you bringing against this man?” “If he were not a criminal,” they replied, “we would not have handed him over to you.” Pilate said, “Take him yourselves and judge him by your own law.” “But we have no right to execute anyone,” they objected.

In His three years of public ministry, Jesus’ teaching had increasingly infuriated the religious establishment of His day. So much so, that the Sanhedrin—the group of chief temple priests, led by Caiaphas—had decided that Jesus needed to be terminated. But there was just one problem: their religious laws, and the laws governing their society, wouldn’t let them. So they brought Him before the Governor of Judea, a man named Pontius Pilate, because, in their words, “*They had no right to execute anyone.*” Only Pilate had the power to enact capital punishment, so they brought Jesus to Him.

What they probably didn't expect, though, was that Pilate, at first, didn't think Jesus' antics were such a big deal. In verse 33 of John chapter 18, we read on that:

***Pilate then went back inside the palace,
summoned Jesus and asked him, "Are you the king of
the Jews?"***

This was the claim being made by the chief religious priests, and the key word here is "king". Everything about the trajectory of Jesus' life hung in the balance of this term.

See, Pilate understood Jesus to be a *religious* leader—meaning, he taught people and created a following for spiritual purposes. In his day, there were terms for those kinds of leaders—terms like "priest", which existed in their day, or terms like "prophet", to mean someone who spoke on behalf of God. Both of these terms were significant, but both lived in the category of *religious* leadership for *spiritual* purposes.

The chief priests had brought the accusation to Pilate that Jesus had claimed to be *King* of the Jews. And the term "king" in their day, was a very different term. A king was a *civil leader*—a leader of society, and of the government. And in the province of Judea, under Roman rule, there was only one king: Tiberius Caesar. More importantly, to claim you were king was something that, in first-century Roman law, was punishable by death. That's the technicality the chief priests were hoping to trap Jesus with.

But from Pilate's perspective, he didn't feel politically threatened by Jesus. Before this presentation of Jesus by the Jewish religious leadership, Jesus was nothing more than a hashtag trending on Twitter—like Alex Ovechkin this week in our world. For sure, Jesus was popular and influential, but Pilate wouldn't have felt him to be a political threat. There were no lawn signs with Jesus' name on them; His teaching didn't promise a "buck a beer". So his initial question to Jesus was expected to be rhetorical.

But it was in Jesus' response to Pilate that things began to unravel. Verse 36:

Jesus said, "My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jewish leaders. But now my kingdom is from another place."

On the one hand, Jesus denied Pilate's summary of the religious leaders' accusations. Jesus had never claimed to be a political leader, in a way that denied Caesar's rule in the Roman Empire. He wasn't positioning Himself as a political threat to Pilate, and was in no way looking to take his job. Jesus was, in that sense, who Pilate thought.

And yet, Jesus also affirmed the accusation by deliberately using the term "king". He confirmed that he's the leader of a Kingdom by declaring "my Kingdom". And He gave His first clue in the defining demarcation of His Kingdom, by describing how those in His Kingdom behave. The comment that, "*If His Kingdom were of this world, His servants would fight to prevent His arrest...*" is a commentary to the way in which earthly kingdoms work. They operate according to the system of *power*—like survival of the fittest, where only the strong survive. And, ultimately, they operate according to the strength of capacity to fight and to kill. In the way of the natural world—whether it's the food chain of animals, or the hierarchy of nations—the most powerful ones are the ones who have the capacity to dominate the other. It's a society ultimately ruled by power.

Here, Jesus is beginning to explain to Pilate that His Kingdom, fundamentally, worked differently. It doesn't feel like He had the time to give Him a full rendition of the Sermon on the Mount, or the beatitudes in summary; He just made a blanket statement that His Kingdom worked very differently than those of politics or religion in His society. But, in that statement, Jesus did confirm one significant detail: He claimed *to be a king!*

Can you feel the tension escalating? To Pilate, all Jesus of Nazareth had become was a popular celebrity in his day. Had He sold tickets to His events, Jesus might have competed with the Eras Tour. But He certainly wasn't a political threat.

Except that, when confronted by Pilate, Jesus did, technically, confess to the very accusations the chief priests had made. He confessed to the one crime in His day that was punishable by death that He could be remotely accused of. Even though Jesus clarified that His Kingdom was not of this world, He'd still declared that He was a King.

So, Pilate leaned in further into his investigation of Jesus, hoping for an out:

Pilate went back inside the palace. "Where do you come from?" he asked Jesus, but Jesus gave him no answer. "Do you refuse to speak to me?" Pilate said. "Don't you realize I have power either to free you or to crucify you?"

Pilate's question, "*Where do you come from?*" is an attempt to respond to a technicality with a technicality. Jesus did declare Himself to be a King, which is big trouble, but if Pilate could get Jesus to clarify *where* this Kingdom was—hoping it was beyond the Roman jurisdiction—then maybe things could be smoothed over after all.

But to that question, Jesus remained silent. This is important to appreciate, that where Jesus could have played Pilate's political game, He refused to, because His Kingdom operated according to completely different values than political power.

Which is precisely what Pilate affirms in his frustration with Jesus. When he asks Jesus, "*Don't you realize that I have power either to free you or to crucify you?*" he's putting a pin on the exact point Jesus has sought to make—that these two kingdoms function according to diametrically opposing values. In Pilate's world, things are governed by the power to kill. In Jesus' world, things are governed by sacrificial love.

I'd like to say that this story ended happily ever after, but we all know what the cross of Christ represents. Verse 16 of John chapter 19 summarizes the conclusion:

Finally Pilate handed him over to them to be crucified.

After being tormented by Jesus' vague and non-responses, with an escalating uproar from the crowd of citizens he was responsible for crying for His death, Pilate finally succumbed to what seemed to be everyone's wishes that Jesus would die. And, in spite of trying to wash his hands of this burden, Pontius Pilate went down in history (or, at least, to the Nicene Creed) as the person who ultimately decided to kill Jesus.

Now thankfully, we also know that Jesus' death—from a spiritual perspective—wasn't the end of the story. And next weekend we get to celebrate the ultimate reality that, three days later, Jesus conquered the grave and rose from the dead, and was able to then empower would-be followers of His with His Holy Spirit, so the same spiritual power that drove His life of love could drive ours—personally and together—so we could propagate the development and expansion of His Kingdom, a way of life beyond political borders, defined by self-emptying, others-oriented, sacrificial love.

For today though, let's appreciate how the cross of Jesus Christ literally serves, as Brian Zahnd's imagery describes, as the Wood Between the Worlds. More than any of the features we've reflected on throughout this series, the cross serves as contrast between the two societal operating systems—what we've titled today as “absolute reality”. On the one hand, the cross represents the absolute reality of our world, where power, particularly the power to kill, ultimately governs the day. And, at the same time, the cross represents the absolute reality of Jesus' Kingdom governed by sacrificial love.

Have you ever understood this contrast before? Knowing how popular the symbol of a cross is in our day, did you ever appreciate that, in its day, it symbolized something very different? In the first century, crosses were a symbol that *power wins*. If you're into those crime scene shows—like *CSI* or *Criminal Minds*—you know that sometimes serial killers will leave a signature. The cross was Roman society's signature that they were not to be messed with—almost like a swastika, or, as some would feel these days, a red MAGA ball cap. The cross was the ultimate symbol that if you challenged power, power won, because power ultimately had the capacity to kill. And in a survival-of-the-fittest world where only the strongest survive, the world gets governed by the strongest power with the greatest capacity to kill. Until Jesus, that's all the cross symbolized. It was only through Jesus' death that it began to represent something more—something different—and became known for sacrificial love instead.

The question for you and I and us together today is: which of these operating systems do we most live by? Have we embraced the contrast between how our world still works today, in direct opposition to the teachings of Jesus and the vision for how His Kingdom would work and grow among us? Because, there is still a stark contrast today:

When you follow your own wrong inclinations, your lives will produce these evil results: impure thoughts, eagerness for lustful pleasure, idolatry, spiritism, hatred and fighting, jealousy and anger, constant effort to get the best for yourself, complaints and criticisms, the feeling that everyone else is wrong except those in your own little group, envy, murder, drunkenness, wild parties, and all that sort of thing... But when the Holy Spirit controls our lives he will produce this kind of fruit in us: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

Which of these systems most governs your life? Are we defined most by greed or generosity, by competitiveness or compassion, by revenge or forgiveness? Sometimes, I'll admit, it's hard to differentiate between the two—especially looking at ourselves.

A couple weeks ago, I was on a Zoom call with a group from a different Christian denomination than our church has been a part of—so I didn't really know these people. They were meeting to plan an event for people and churches in their denomination as a response to the threat of annexation here in Canada by the US. It was an interesting call to listen in on, but I have to admit, I did find it interesting to witness how quickly and urgently we could mobilize to support the threat of our land being taken away, in contrast to the ignorance and apathy we've so chronically demonstrated when it comes to reconciliation and reparations with Indigenous communities. And in a meeting of exclusively Christ-followers, it made me wonder: by which system do we most operate?

Just so we're clear, I wasn't being judgmental, because the fact of the matter is: I default to the world's system way more than I should. I can be apathetic in my privilege and complacent in my comfort, whether it's lifting up those less fortunate or resolving relational conflicts. Power lets me move at my pace. Interpersonally as well, there have been times where I've powered up as a boss, powered up as a spouse, even powered up as a parent—leaning into the results power gets instead of sacrificial love.

As we prepare our hearts to once again receive communion, let's reflect on which reality most drives our lives—and which we most want to. Let's appreciate how, in representing the absolute reality of God and His Kingdom perfectly, Jesus chose the way of self-emptying, others-oriented, sacrificial love. That's what communion represents. And, because of Jesus, that's now what the cross can represent to us too.