

A great book, in my opinion, is one where you discover something new every time you read it, no matter if it's your second time through or your fiftieth.

As a priest and a Christian I'm of course obligated to point to the Bible as the best proof of this little theory of mine. There's such infinite depth and divine wisdom contained in scripture that it's impossible to read intentionally through even the shortest books in the Bible without coming away with some new insight or detail you'd never noticed before.

But this also holds true for those of us blessed with the joy of having other favorite books we return to time and time again. I'm blessed with several, and one of these favorite books is TE White's *The Once And Future King*. This classic fantasy retells the story of King Arthur—of Sword in the Stone fame—and his mentor, the eccentric wizard Merlin who exists outside of time and thus can use his knowledge of human history to raise Arthur into a just and righteous king. Written on the eve of World War 2 the book is full of fascinating political parables that reflect the hopes and fears of a man who lived through one terrible conflict and was watching his country slip inexorably into another.

This summer I began re-reading *The Once And Future King* once again and was struck by this fascinating exchange between Merlin and Arthur's brother, Sir Kay.

In an argument over whether war is ever justified, Kay declares:

"A good reason for starting a war is simply to have a good reason! For instance, there might be a king who had discovered a new way of life for human beings—you know, something which would be good for them. It might even be the only way of saving them from destruction. Well, if the human beings were too wicked or too stupid to accept his way, he might have to force it on them, in their own interests, by the sword."

Merlin clenched his fists, twisted his gown into screws, and began to shake all over. "Very interesting," he said in a trembling voice. "Very interesting. There was just such a man when I was young—an Austrian who invented a new way of life and convinced himself that he was the chap to make it work. He tried to impose his reformation by the sword, and plunged the civilized world into misery and chaos. But the thing which this fellow had overlooked, my friend, was that he had had a predecessor in the reformation business called Jesus Christ. Perhaps we may assume that Jesus knew as much as the Austrian did about saving people. But the odd thing is that Jesus did not turn the disciples into storm troopers, burn down the Temple at Jerusalem, and fix the blame on Pontius Pilate. On the contrary, he made it clear that the business of the philosopher was to make ideas *available* and *not* to impose them on people."

I read this exchange five months ago. So why has it remained etched in my mind, so vividly that I barely needed to consult the book to quote it for you here today? Firstly, I think that Kay's warmongering impulses are not nearly as alien to us as we'd like to think. We all have our ideas

about how the world should work and if we're honest we secretly wouldn't mind seeing the principalities and powers of this world enforce those ideals on those too stupid or too wicked to accept our unimpeachable ideas on how the world ought to be run. This idolatrous worship of naked power has infected our body politic for a long time—but that's a sermon for another time.

More importantly, Merlin's allusion to violent revolution in the name of the greater good cuts to the heart of what Jesus is not—and reminds us of our repeated inability to recognize the kingship of God as something entirely different from worldly kingships of domination and power. We gather today on Christ the King Sunday to renounce our idolatrous allegiance to the principalities and powers of this world and celebrate our new life in the kingdom of the One, True God.

Our God, the crucified King, is a far cry from the Messiah the people of Jesus's day expected and an even further cry from the Caesars of his day and our own. Pontius Pilate certainly has worldly matters on his mind as he cross-examines Jesus in his headquarters. Unlike the Pharisees and the High Priests who arrested Jesus, Pilate could not care less about the law of Moses, the proper worship of God, or blasphemy. He is entirely a creature of this world and thus perhaps the most relatable figure in the Gospels—at least, for the modern American mind.

Our headlines and government offices and business centers are full of men like Pilate. He is preoccupied with the kingdoms of this world, set on keeping the peace and placating Jerusalem's ruling elites, with an eye on public opinion and career progression and always, always preoccupied with making sure a favorable report goes back to his imperial master, Caesar.

A peaceful land, a quiet people—until Pilate's calculus of power was shattered by the God made man, come to set a fire on the Earth.

Who is Jesus to Pilate? Another would-be revolutionary, he fears, here to stir up the Zealots and ferment rebellion against Rome. Or, more likely a harmless crank, some Jewish street preacher who made enemies out of the wrong people. Pilate can sense that Caiphas and the High Priests are using him to kill an innocent man and he has enough of a conscience to try to release Jesus.

But the calculus of worldly power traps anyone who wields it. Pontius Pilate was the most powerful man in Judea, but he couldn't stand up for his own conscience for five minutes against an angry mob once they threatened him with his own master, Caesar.

And who is Pilate to Jesus? Another lost soul, another Gentile to be brought into the Kingdom of God. In this encounter with Jesus, Pilate reminds me of the Samaritan woman at the well. Just

like he did with the Samaritan woman, Jesus takes everything Pilate thinks he knows about the world and offers him something greater.

The woman spoke of water, and Jesus offered her living water.

Pilate spoke of kings and kingdoms, and Jesus offered him the truth of a heavenly kingdom greater than anything made by human hands.

The Samaritan woman, shaped by a life of rejection and powerlessness, could open her heart to the living water Jesus offered her. Pilate, his heart hardened by his fixation on the powers of this world, looks truth incarnate in the face and offers only the cynical rejoinder, “What is truth?”

“What is truth?” We must all face that question in our encounters with Christ. Jesus offers to change our lives, to transform our worldly preoccupations into something greater and wonderful. He is not in the business of coercing with force or sanctions or tax incentives or social stigma—that is the way of this world. Jesus makes the way of life available to us. It is up to us to accept or reject it.

But we cannot judge Pilate without taking a hard look at ourselves and our own allegiances. Far too often the Church has chosen to be like the princes of this world instead of like the King of all Creation. When we dilute the word of God, afraid to rock the boat or cause offense, we are Pilate, washing our hands of the hard choices and difficult decisions. And when we put our trust and faith in the principalities and powers of this world, we are the crowd proclaiming that “We have no king but Caesar.”

Christ’s Kingdom is not of this world. The kingdom of God is bigger than any political party, country, or international assembly. The Kingdom of God is not a malleable force to be swayed by worldly power—God is not a cosmic Caesar to be bargained with or swayed to our side against those we disagree with.

To quote C.S. Lewis, "He is not a *tame* lion."

Instead, our allegiance to Christ and the Kingdom of God is achieved by growing closer to a divine identity immensely and joyfully removed from our worldly desires. Salvation is achieved not through exalting ourselves or seeking power or victory or success in this life, but in humbling ourselves and seeking to follow in Christ's example by becoming servants rather than Caesars.

Christ stood before Pilate, bound and defeated, and yet he still held the keys to true power. Perhaps it is in defeat that we truly become Christians.

But we must strive for justice. We cannot simply accept the injustices and inequalities of this life, particularly those that benefit us at the expense of our sisters and brothers. But we must do so without making idols of power, success, and pride.

There are always battles to be fought in the name of justice. Some will be won. Others will be lost. There is a cost to discipleship, and that cost is success in the eyes of this world. Jesus never said that our cross was an easy one to bear. But as disciples we carry on joyfully, assured by the faith that God's eternal kingdom outlives the principalities and powers of this world.

We have no king but Christ.