

Words matter

Rev 1:4-8; Jn 18:33-38

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Lenny Bruce is long dead now. He was billed as a comedian but he really wasn't. He was a social commentator. His stand-up routines turned a mirror on the society of the 1950s and believe me, they didn't like it. He was the trail blazer that opened the door to social commentary from the likes of Adam Hills, Will Anderson & Rove McManus. These guys don't tell jokes – they talk about real things and real people. Although Bruce did it obscenely – mostly as a protest against a very prudish society.

One of Lenny's routines – one of the ones that got him in trouble, was he just stood there and said raciest words. He just said them over and over and over. People got uncomfortable. Then they got *really* uncomfortable. Then they got mad. You could feel the tension in the room rising...and rising. But eventually, people just got bored. And when they were beyond even hearing the words, when it became a flood of syllables and sounds, he stopped. The point was, words only have the power you give them. He thought that by watering them down into a flood – they had no power to hurt anyone.

He wouldn't be allowed to do that today.

Words are powerful not just for the meaning you give them – but also for the meaning heard. That can be totally different.

Today's readings are all about Kingdom and kings: All about empires and power but to each character in the story, what they hear and what they mean when they say (...pause) is entirely different.

To Caesar, there can only be one King. That is, as in the Temptation, the person who rules over all the lands and the people. He is held in power by armies, laws and oppressive overlords who keep him in place by keeping the 'peace'.

Anyone, with aspirations, is a threat and therefore must be dealt with early on, before they gain momentum – or followers, or an army.

The image of a king in a Roman's mind is a lion. That's why it was symbolic important to punished dissidents, especially Christians, by feeding them to the lions. It was a visual and unforgettable symbol of power. A message.

Jesus appears as a shepherd. Kingdom to Jesus is the lamb. His kingdom is relational and therefore across boundaries, time and space. He says, "My

Kingdom is not of this world” and so it is possible to co-exist: two kingdoms-one place. The lion *can* lie down with the lamb. But all this is a little too sophisticated for Pilate.

Pilate is explicitly about political power, empire and politics. He sees what he understands...or should I say, he hears what he understands.

Interestingly, the Gospels give us different reasons for Jesus’ arrest. In one, he is standing up for the unconnected, (poor, disabled, widows) which is very political and in another, it is because he raised Lazarus from the dead which is all about power.

And if you are confused, think of His followers. They expected a Lion to rise up from Judah to cast the Romans out and instead got a slaughtered lamb who said Rome is ok. It is worldly and Rome too will pass. We live in a different world and time is a different concept. We belong to another kingdom.

Now you get the picture that ‘kingdom’ can have many meanings.

Meanwhile, the priests as I have said before, had an arrangement with the Romans that was comfortable. They were not willing to jeopardise security for something so ‘unworldly’. Parallel universes? co-exist? Relational? Bah! Too risky.

This is such a dramatic passage. It is worth acting it out on a stage. The Jewish leaders outside, Jesus inside and Pilate nipping in-between feeling powerful but acting like a servant. It’s undignified and he doesn’t seem to notice.

And the conversation inside is like one is speaking Greek and the other Latin. Pilate believes if there is a kingdom, there must be a king but when he asks directly, Jesus does the Jewish thing: ask a question and you’ll get a question in return.

Grandmother, “is this pastrami fresh?” Grocer, “does it look like chopped liver to you?”

Are you a king?

Is that your idea or what you’ve been told?

Two things are happening here. They have entirely different ideas of what a king is and at the same time, Jesus challenges Pilate to trust his eyes, not what he’s been told. Jesus knows they are on different plains. I wish he had simply

said, ‘do I look like a king to you?’ It still would have been the Jewish response but at least it would have opened a different conversation.

Never the less, Jesus comes back with if he was a ‘king’ he would have an army (or servants) to fight for his freedom.

Good work...

Then he muddies it again with ‘my kingdom is in another place’. And we’re back to ‘So you are a king..., eh?’

Ambiguity is a powerful tool. Words operate on different plains just like Jesus is operating with another world but in this one.

Pilate then lays the ultimate existential question, bam! What is truth?

Again, we are operating on two levels. Is what the mob outside are saying true? **AND** is there a deeper truth that makes sense of all of this? Which of course, as followers of Christ, we know is true. There is a bigger truth.

Words do matter. John’s Gospel is the only one to be explicit about the power and politics. He does that for a reason.

Today is the feast of Christ the King. It is a formal part of the liturgical calendar accepted by almost all the churches. It was introduced by Pope Pius XI in 1925 as his response to growing secularism, nationalism and to resolve a territorial/political problem with the Italian government¹. Its liturgical base was Matthew 28:18 when Jesus says, “All the power in heaven and earth has been given to me”.

What it was used for was to gain ultimate sovereignty over Vatican City – as Jesus representative, the Pope claimed the right to reign. The Vatican gained independence in 1929.

When we are diving into the gospels, we need to remember we are studying translations of translations of translations and each editor has his own agenda. Each translation era had its own politics. And each ‘kingdom’ as in institution invested power in its agenda.

Our challenge is to hear the truths in the text but not let the words get in the way.

¹ Don’t see this as a land grab. Benito Mussolini came to power in 1922 and by 1929 was a full-on dictator. The Pope may well have been protecting the Vatican (and the church) from corruption.