

## **Why Not Me?**

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In John's account of the Passion which we hear each Good Friday, we hear Pilate say "So you are a king then?". "It is you who say it" answers Jesus. "Yes, I am a king. I was born for this, I came into the world for this: to bear witness to the truth; and all who are on the side of truth listen to my voice."

Pilate called Jesus into the Pretorium – a kind of High Court. Isn't it rather ironic that the Jewish leaders wouldn't enter it themselves because they would become unclean, defiled and therefore unable to eat the Passover? But they had no problem about this fellow Jew, Jesus, having to enter Pilate's place. It seems that, as far as they were concerned, the end they wanted justified any means. Sheer malice.

Being human, Jesus would have been anxious about the verdict Pilate was going to give. John paints for us quite a dramatic scene. The representative of the power of imperial Rome confronts a helpless prisoner. But Pilate finds himself in a dilemma. The man before him stands accused of claiming to be "the King of the Jews", a title that has clear political, rebellious overtones. Yet the man who stands there doesn't look like a political hothead. He radiates serenity, dignity, wholeness and, above all, innocence. Jesus is in a position of complete powerlessness, yet he commands the conversation. He leaves Pilate in no doubt that his kingdom is not of this world.

We also see in this passage that power can corrupt. Pilate should have used his power to see justice being done. Instead he is afraid of losing his power and gives in to the wishes of those who schemed Jesus' downfall.

"My kingdom is not of this world". Jesus doesn't deny that he is a king. But as he stands there, alone and without the protection of guards and soldiers, he is making the point that his kingdom will not be built on power and force. His kingdom will be built on the truth he has come to reveal, the truth that can set us, his followers, free. His kingdom will be a kingdom of justice, love and peace.

In the Book of Daniel we read how in a troubling dream, Daniel sees the future destiny of his own people and of those foreign powers who will oppress them. However, the oppressors, seen in the dream as terrifying beasts, will be destroyed and the holy ones of the Most High shall receive the kingdom and shall possess it forever. Within this vision come the two verses (Dan.7:13-14) concerning a strange figure named the "Son of Man" (or in some translations "one like a human being") to whom God (the Ancient of Days) entrusts dominion over the world. Under his kingship all justice and peace can be achieved for God's people. Daniel's consoling message for his fellow-Jews was "God will send salvation to our people". This passage gave great consolation and strength to the persecuted early Christians. They interpreted it as God, "the Ancient of Days", handing over to Jesus Christ, the Son of Man, the task to save his people.

Jesus wants to save us. But what is our response? Jesus told Pilate "All who are on the side of truth listen to my voice". He stands at the door of our hearts and knocks. This time is an opportunity for each one of us to renew our own desire to submit our personal life more fully to the wise and merciful teaching of Jesus.

This may require some change of heart, some shift in our priorities, a willingness to let the spirit of Christ prompt us in the direction of generosity, gentleness, helpfulness towards others, often quite simply nothing more than giving them a bit of our time and a listening ear.

This reminds me of Truus, a friend of my family at home in Holland. Truus was married to Henk and they had four sons and one daughter who was the youngest. It was a very happy family, especially because Truus herself possessed such a bubbly, joyful personality. Like their father (and actually like myself!) the sons were mad on soccer and whenever possible Henk went to watch them play. At one match he became very excited – as a matter of fact too excited. Unfortunately he had a heart attack and died there and then. Truus couldn't get over it. She was very angry with God and for months on end asked herself, "Why me? God, why did you let this happen to me? Why me?" She became depressed and snappy, difficult to live with. The "Why me?" went on and on until one morning she found herself asking "Why not me? Why should awful things like this happen to others and not to me?" It changed her completely and she became once again the lovely person to have around.

She told me this herself and her example has greatly helped me personally. In the last eight years I have buried three of my five sisters. They died either of cancer or a heart attack. Just over a year ago one of my confrères died at the age of only 43 in a horrendous fire in the U.S.A. It was alleged that he had unwittingly been the cause of the fire. The whole large retreat/conference centre went up in flames. Fortunately no other lives were lost. Being his provincial I received very quickly the first fax telling me of the possibility of being sued, even before his body had arrived home! Recently I spent almost four hours in the High Court in London concerning this case. When will it come to an end? And yet, because of Truus, I have the courage to say: "Why not me?"

To me the person who really had the right to ask the question "Why me?" was Jesus himself, the Son of God. At his baptism the bystanders heard, "This is my beloved Son, listen to him". Yes, Jesus did ask, "Father, let this chalice pass me by", but then added "Not my will, but yours be done". Jesus had every right to ask "Why me?", but he didn't.

Jesus stands at the door of our hearts and knocks. He wants to be our Shepherd-King, our Servant-King, for he came not to be served, but to serve. The renewal of heart can be accomplished by taking his words more seriously so that he can be for us more readily and more fully our Alpha and our Omega, our beginning and our end.

Through our baptism we were dedicated to him who wants us to help him to build up his kingdom — a kingdom of truth and life, a kingdom of holiness and grace, a kingdom of justice, love, and peace. So be it. Amen.

P.S. At the beginning of this New Year I spent a couple of weeks at home in Holland. One afternoon coming towards the end of my walk, Truus caught up with me on her bicycle. We walked together for her while. She told that she is a grandma now and that the children are doing very well. I reminded her of her "Why not me?". She remembered it well. I thanked her for the inspiration it had given me and probably many others too.