

Connected

Speaker: Ben Whitnall

Date: Sunday 24th March

Talk title: Jesus and Pilate

Bible verses: John 18-19

What are the main points?

1. **Pilate (here representing empire in general) craves steady ships** – 'just leave things to keep running as they are, because it benefits me and I don't have to see the oppression it causes others'
2. **But 'neutral' isn't neutral, and God's way rocks empire's boat** – staying neutral in a situation of injustice is to choose the side of the oppressor. God is not neutral on injustice or oppression.
3. **Our empire boat needs rocking, too** – so as far as we see traits of selfish greedy grasping conquering empire (of which there are plenty in UK life in 2024), at odds with God's way of radical loving inclusive generous grace, please can we actively resist them

Questions to prompt conversation...

I think there's probably a danger in these conversations that some of the language takes us to unhelpfully rigid or binary places, which (ironically) suit the 'empire' state of mind – for example, talking about how 'God isn't neutral' (which I mean like 'God cares about injustice and oppression') can easily collapse into 'Aha! Yes! God dislikes all the same people I dislike!' (which I would say is actually a form of injustice and oppression in itself)

So it might be helpful to give a starter reminder that the sides God takes are not gonna be the same way we divide up sides (like, it's less about is God a Chelsea fan or an Arsenal fan, and more about how is the match being played).

And, more importantly, to try and keep the discussion about the *traits and character* of power-grasping 'empire' (as contrasted with the *traits and character* of power-upending God) rather than specific worldly A vs B issues. Like, it's not 'should we 'rock the boat' [upset people] by shouting at them that God hates the sex they're having' – it's more 'where do we see the *ways* of empire playing out in *all* our interactions and bits of life'

Anyway, enough caveats! Some **QUESTIONS:**

- The portrayal of Pilate is intriguing and complex – I think you could get probably a dozen different takes on what he's like and where he's coming from.
What's *your* read on his motivation and character, from the bits we see here?

- Ben said *he* sees Pilate as trying to stay neutral, wanting to 'stay out of it', here. If that's the case, do you think it's fair to apply that Desmond Tutu quote to Pilate's actions – 'staying neutral in a situation of injustice is to choose the side of the oppressor'?
- Who do you see as victims of injustice and oppression in our society as it is today? Small examples welcome as well as big! i.e. 'the receptionist at my school who gets shouted at by all the parents, and that's really unfair' is just as good an answer as 'the homeless'
- Ben gave a quick list of examples of ways our 'empire' operates that create and perpetuate injustice and oppression (everything from 'might is right' to 'relentless growth' and 'total individualism'). What other traits or patterns or characteristics would you add to that list? (i.e. general ways that our society operates by default that don't sound like the general gracious merciful loving character of God? There's no shortage!)
- You can do the same exercise in reverse – i.e. what traits or patterns or characteristics do you see in God that we don't see very often in the way our society operates generally?
- Do you agree that we need to be making 'continual capsizings' – actively taking steps and choices that upend the way of empire in favour of the way of God? Or, to put it more positively, that we are continually presented with *opportunities* to do that? (If it's true that this stuff works its way into every corner and crevice of life, there will be hundreds of ways for us each to flip the ship every day!)
- Ben gave a couple of hurried examples of tiny ways of 'rocking the boat' of power-grasping empire, in favour of God's power-upending way – right down to how a school performer chose to take their bow (with solidarity and humility instead of ego and glory)! Look at the lists of 'the ways of empire' and 'the ways of God' – what are some examples (huge or tiny or anything you like) of ways we could 'capsize' one into the other?