

A Moment Made for Questions

2026 03 15 Toronto United Mennonite Church

Lent IV Submission and Power

[John 18:28-40](#) - Jesus is questioned by Pilate

Jesus stands before Pilate. We must not forget that Jesus made this moment. He knew. Jesus made this moment out of all the material around - the imperial state, the striving factions, the earnest apostles, the endless hope. Jesus has woven together this moment of confrontation and friction, and it was for this that he came, just as much as for any moment of healing, or teaching, or suffering, or living.

In this moment that he has made, Jesus is alone. His friends have receded into the background, some fleeing, some following, but none close enough to be identified with him. While we might wish we were standing with him, he desires to stand alone. This has been his plan all along, after all. This is what he has chosen, even if the solitary moment is a painful loneliness.

Every gospel tells this story, shuffling the details, keeping the shape as Jesus made it. His body is hauled away from the garden of prayer and taken into rough confinement. His hands, which hours ago were washing feet, holding towels, blessing bread and passing wine, are now shackled. His hands will never again be free... until...

This is the Rule of Iron. Do to others what benefits you. Whoever has power has the right to use it. Might makes right. This rule makes a world of titans and tyrants, golden statues and thunderous falls. The Rule of Iron says that if we are strong, this is the signal for war! The Rule of Iron believes only in the present moment, in the power of violence to solve a problem. The Rule of Iron cannot imagine the future, and cannot question the past, and therefore it makes no space for wisdom.

Peter Haresnape

I have no love of the government of Iran. I have no reason to believe that they operate in good faith or from sound ideals. But the attack against them two weeks ago is rooted surely in the Rule of Iron. The attack by the United States and Israel without an international mandate proves that Iran was right. Countries are only safe if they have nuclear weapons. This attack justifies any nation in seeking weapons of mass destruction, because engaging in diplomacy did not keep Iran safe. And once the bombs start to drop, there is no easy way to stop the war and try something different. Iran must commit to war by all the means it can. This is the Rule of Iron, and Iran, Israel and the United States must all follow the rule that they have made.

But the Rule of Iron is not just swords and drones. It also makes a good show of being reasonable and civilised and rational and legal. The Rule of Iron provides wine for the rulers, vinegar for the vanquished, philosophy for the thinkers, and work for the desperate. Wherever possible, it covers its activities with fair linen and compelling stories. It gestures towards customs and principles, holy days and the rule of law, but always the guards are armed, the missiles are primed.

So Pilate goes through the motions. He hears the charges, quibbles legalities, consults, speaks. Everyone knows that Pilate is the man with the power. *They* come to *his* headquarters, navigate *his* guards, answer *his* summons. They manoeuvre within the lattice of power and knowledge that hides the edges of the Rule of Iron. But Pilate also has to manoeuvre. He is also trapped in this obdurate rule. He leaves his palace to talk to the Jewish leadership, returns to talk to Jesus, goes back to offer the strange Barabbas compromise. Pilate's power is conditional. It is questionable.

And it is for questions that Jesus has made this moment. Pilate has no interest in the faith of the Jews, and his fearsome reputation has urged the nation to sort out their own problems. But the prisoner is in his court and the lobbyists are at his door, and they demand action from him. To remain in control he has to resolve this situation. He has to step out of the world of iron facts and into the silver world of questions and ideas.

Jesus is consistent in how he speaks to people in power. To their questions he gives short, complex replies which do not satisfy. It is not the same with everyone. To the dispossessed and wounded, he speaks gently, kindly, deftly asking whether they seek healing of body or spirit. He says 'Do you want to be made well?' (John 5:6). 'Where will we buy food for these people to eat?' (John 6:5). He asks 'where are they? Has no one condemned you?' (John 8:10). He speaks to them about his own need for water, sustenance, and company. But with Pilate, with Nicodemus, with the religious leaders and political rulers, Jesus is self-possessed, defiant, and challenging. He gives nothing away except an invitation into deeper life, birth from above.

Pilate seeks clarity, but Jesus offers complexity. Pilate wishes to resolve the situation, but his simple interrogation gains no momentum. While Pilate moves back and forth between the power blocs, concerned with remaining at the centre and maintaining his iron rule, Jesus introduces a new dimension - a different kingdom, a higher power. Pilate cannot categorise him, and he finds that he cannot ignore him.

You can sense his frustration. What is this kingdom - is it a threat to his rule, or just another Jewish myth to keep his rivals divided? What is this power that Jesus has, to be so hated and so loved? Where is his rumoured army of fanatical followers armed to the teeth? Is there any truth in his claims? What is truth?

There are, sometimes questions without answers. The Bible holds a small but powerful collection of questions which the text does not answer.

- After his murder of Abel, Cain asks "Am I my brother's keeper?" (Genesis 4:9). The text provides no answer to this. We are asked to think about the limits of brotherly concern. If Cain does not care for his brother, why should God? God commissions Cain to serve as a living memorial to his brother's untimely death, and God takes on the role of Abel's keeper.
- Psalm 8:4 asks God 'what are humans that you are mindful of them?' and God makes no reply. The psalmist continues in praise, leaving the question to remind us of the gulf between us and God - and of God's decision to bridge the gap.

- God asks questions too: “Where were you when I laid the earth’s foundation?” (Job 38:4). Job speaks with God, but this question goes unanswered. God is beyond accountability. God has no need to explain - and yet, God speaks with Job. God replies to Job’s question, whether or not he can accept the answer.

Questions which go unanswered provoke our thinking. They invite us to imagine and consider. Perhaps you have different answers than I do. Perhaps you feel these questions require no elaboration. Pilate’s question is ‘what is truth’, and you can read this question in many ways. As frustration, as confusion, as boredom, as anger. Deciding how to read it is hard enough, but answering it takes us beyond.

I was recently invited to talk with a young pacifist from a different Christian tradition. Three different chaplains had encouraged her to get in touch with me as someone they knew to be grounded in a pacifist Christianity. I agreed to meet with her, thinking that even if I couldn’t help with her issue, I could offer a listening ear. And then, she wrote about her gratitude for the chaplains and their skills of empathetic presence and active listening, which were great, but were not enough. I realised that when we met, I needed to do more than affirm her questions. I needed to offer some answers. I would have to tell her what I thought.

This is not my normal way of interacting. I like to listen first, speak seldom. I try to think carefully before speaking, and I rarely give my opinion without being asked directly. And yet there are times when you need to speak. I went into our conversation prepared to speak, however reluctant and cautious. That willingness, including the things I said that were not quite right, allowed us to dig into the questions she brought, and I have no regrets about our conversation.

By the time we said goodbye, we had agreed that the work of the pacifist is preparation. In times of crisis, people act in whatever way they have prepared to act. If they have practiced the skills of peaceful presence, they use them. If they have practiced nonviolent intervention they attempt it. If they have worked out how to

leave the scene, they can try that. But if they have not prepared for a crisis, they might freeze, or react dangerously, making a bad situation worse.

In the gospels, Jesus tells his friends that they will experience persecution. He is encouraging them to prepare for their chance to speak the truth to the merchants of war and conquest. Although his body will be gone, the Holy Spirit will be with them, giving them the words that they need. Since that day, we have made moments in places like this to practice the presence of the Holy Spirit - speaking words of life and peace to one another, practicing the rituals of care and service, and calling one another towards faithfulness. This is enough to make a good life. This is faithful preparation for days of distress or blessing.

Communities like the church allow us to live in the in-between, where we know the question but not yet the answer. Or perhaps when we know an answer but not how to make it convincing for our neighbours who put their trust elsewhere. Pilate sought simple answers, and he failed to understand what Jesus was proclaiming. The delusion of his power prevented him from understanding. All he could do was leave the presence of Jesus and attempt a deal with the blood of Barabbas.

Pilate asks Jesus human and political questions. Jesus responds with human and divine answers. Through his words, in his moment that he made, the dimension of truth and love intrudes on Pilate's world of power and control. We can also make moments. The harsh reality of the Iron Rule will show its false nature when we make a moment to refuse its terms, and share the truth that we know.

What is truth? It is love, and mercy, and freedom from lies and control. Truth is revealed in the life and teachings of Jesus, in how he went to Jerusalem, and everything that happened there. Pilate's iron power hides from truth, cannot face it, cannot see it. So let us practice being people who reveal the truth. Let us prepare our words to speak the truth. Let us prepare our hearts to show the truth. Let us prepare our bodies to act the truth. Let us prepare our community to live the truth. It starts with questions. It starts with preparation. It waits for a moment.