

The scene depicted in today's gospel reading is a really hard one to imagine playing out today. A lone, demonstrably non-violent person, unarmed and bound, has already been repeatedly questioned and passed from one worldly power-base to another, until finally reaching the one holding most the worldly power, the representative of the Empire. That this seemingly non-threatening and unarguably physically vulnerable prisoner is invited to speak and be heard by the folks in charge is unimaginable today. That the Roman Empire was willing to engage with an empty-handed, non-violent, healer, preacher and teacher is remarkable; and it strongly suggests that the folks in charge considered this Jesus to be an actual threat, despite the very obvious power imbalance between them.

Our task, as has been the task of hearers of the Good News for the past 2,000 years, is to understand how exactly Jesus is a threat to the folks in charge.

Imperial and Colonial ways of being, as Jesus would have experienced it, and a version of which is still very much alive today, the Imperial/Colonial system does a great job of defining power as something formidable, imposable and enforceable, something that's undergirded by massive institutional wealth, and that's made most clear in the ways it claims/takes physical control of bodies, through its use of violence and incarceration, and execution. The scene between a high-ranking and possibly flustered Pilate and a low-ranking, yet measured and responsive Jesus, reveals something of the truth about power: that despite the ways society organizes itself, power, true power, is actually something within and inherent to us all.

The existence of this true power is not only the hopeful belief of those grounded in spiritual practice or theological reflection, this deep truth, is also being explored by contemporary scholarship in the social sciences.

Psychologist Leticia Nieto and her team have developed a way of thinking about status and rank in society, and how the use of our true, inherent power is our way to get free, and I think their model can help us understand this Gospel.<sup>1</sup>

Rank is used by these scholars as a way of understanding the unjust system of unearned privilege and oppression that remains very real in our own context. They describe rank as that which our society has long been deeply conditioned to assign each of us, rank is not chosen. We're assigned our rank, in this model, by accident of birth and life story; it's based on 9 different categories: our age, disability, religious culture, ethnicity, sexual orientation, social class, indigenous background, national origin and gender. We have no choice about our rank, how we identify in each of these categories means we are either empowered or disempowered, we either have agency or we are "targets" within the system. The real-life impact of being categorized this way, unchosen and yet very real and present, is that some small groups (by accident of their birth and life story) are highly and overly valued, they have the highest rank, and *most*, most folks are undervalued, and some massively so.

Is all this true? Nieto and her team would say no, it's not true, it's actually an utter nonsense, none of us can be so meaninglessly categorized – yet it is real, it certainly does exist, and it has a very real impact on the real lives lived by all of us who are part of a system like this.

What these scholars do believe is true is we each have internal source of great power, that is the core of our being. Nieto and her team describe this power as our "connection to that which is greater than ourselves, to the numinous, or to the divine.

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<sup>1</sup> See here for lot's more information on this: <https://beyondinclusionbeyondempowerment.com/about-the-book/>

It signals our connection to ancestors and loved ones, and [is made real] through anything that allows us to move from a genuine center.”<sup>2</sup>

These scholars have picked up on what the Gospel teaches, that the truth of our human-ness, for all of us, is our binding to a power that *is* so much greater than any system of worldly power devised by people ... and that the ranking system that benefits only the few is fundamentally and irredeemably unjust.

Our world can never be fully liberated or healed as long as a ranking system of any sort is in place. For sure, some leaders will be better than others, more just than others, we might have better Presidents, we might put our hope in a new administration, or a new generation, but as long as a system of rank, a system of value or worth that makes some lives more valuable or worthy than others, as long as any system like this remains in place we cannot all be free.

Pilate asks Jesus, “So, you are a king?” – it’s a short and loaded question. How might Jesus as King, change the power balance in this exchange. How might Jesus as King transform this world. How might his power be known and experienced. As formidable, imposable and enforceable? Will it be undergirded by massive institutional wealth, will it be made clear most often in the ways it claims actual physical control of bodies, through its use of violence, incarceration, or even execution? Surely, we’d not see any abuse of power like this in Jesus’ name!

The persistence of injustice and oppression and violence and suffering, especially under the leadership and governance of generations of “Christian” leaders tells us we have failed to grasp Jesus’ message.

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<sup>2</sup> [https://my.lwv.org/sites/default/files/leagues/wysiwyg/%5Bcurrent-user%3Aog-user-node%3A1%3Atitle%5D/understanding\\_oppression\\_part\\_1\\_-\\_strategies\\_for\\_addressing\\_privilege\\_-\\_nieto\\_boyer.pdf](https://my.lwv.org/sites/default/files/leagues/wysiwyg/%5Bcurrent-user%3Aog-user-node%3A1%3Atitle%5D/understanding_oppression_part_1_-_strategies_for_addressing_privilege_-_nieto_boyer.pdf) , 30 (this is a short, abridged article framing Nieto et al’s thesis)

We've lacked imagination and courage and creativity in our thinking of what could be, instead we've gone on trusting the way we've always done it, believing things will get better if we just have better leadership. Better might be possible, but while the ranking system is still in place in society, this world will not be transformed. Making Christ the King of an inherently unjust and oppressive system rooted in unearned rank and privilege is not what we're called to do.

Instead, Jesus, through his actions, shows us a powerful and mighty way of being that's possible, for all of us, when we connect to the source of our true power, and it has nothing to do with rank. It has everything to do with the way we choose to live: building a life that's centered on prayer, taking seriously our commitment to spiritual practices and disciplines, asking questions, studying and reflecting on Scripture, consistently and intentionally stopping multiple times each day to seek out and reconnect to the life-force that emanates from the very heart of God. *This* way of being will come to shape our thoughts, decisions and actions in the world.

It's hard work to break free of the ideas and belief systems of this mainstream culture, it absolutely takes consistent practice and commitment ... and it's the proven way of ages to find that source, that when trusted and lived from .. changes everything!

As we follow Jesus, through prayer and practice, as we begin to more fully connect to the source of our true power, find and live from our genuine center, our transformation begins and we will undoubtedly begin to think differently about risk, and about possibility, and about truth.

This scene, between Pilate and Jesus, is so well placed as our Gospel text for this last Sunday before Advent. As we enter a season of expectant waiting, of longing, of hopeful anticipation— what is it that we're waiting for, what is it that we're we hoping for? What kind of a King is this, and what kind of a Kingdom do you imagine?