

ALADDIN, OZYMANDIAS, AND THE CRUCIFIED KING

JOHN 18:28-38A

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Then they took Jesus from Caiaphas to Pilate's headquarters. It was early in the morning. They themselves did not enter the headquarters, so as to avoid ritual defilement and to be able to eat the Passover. ²⁹So Pilate went out to them and said, 'What accusation do you bring against this man?' ³⁰They answered, 'If this man were not a criminal, we would not have handed him over to you.' ³¹Pilate said to them, 'Take him yourselves and judge him according to your law.' The Jews replied, 'We are not permitted to put anyone to death.' ³²(This was to fulfill what Jesus had said when he indicated the kind of death he was to die.)

³³ Then Pilate entered the headquarters again, summoned Jesus, and asked him, 'Are you the King of the Jews?' ³⁴Jesus answered, 'Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?' ³⁵Pilate replied, 'I am not a Jew, am I? Your own nation and the chief priests have handed you over to me. What have you done?' ³⁶Jesus answered, 'My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here.' ³⁷Pilate asked him, 'So you are a king?' Jesus answered, 'You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.' ³⁸Pilate asked him, 'What is truth?'

Occasionally I've been know to exaggerate. But what I'm about to say is absolutely true. Between 1992 and 1995 I watched Disney's Aladdin at least, at least 150 times. I had three copies on VHS. Add to that two copies of the cassette soundtrack and about 35 self-recorded copies of me and my cousin singing over the cassette, auditions for a shared future as Disney actresses.

I woke up at 5:00am just about every Saturday, sat myself down eight inches from the TV, and pressed play. I knew every line, rehearsed every bit of Robin Williams's genius Genie dialogue. I recoiled at Jafar. And I aspired to the life of the riff-raff turned imposter Prince, the titular Aladdin.

Aladdin saw the grandeur of the Sultan's Kingdom and he wanted to be the King. So he had the Genie give him the trappings of royalty: wealth, beauty, adoration, a menagerie of servants, they were all his. The world was laid out before him.

Whatever I am today, I'll tell you it's *Aladdin's* fault. And it's not only me.

In 1999 Disney hired a Nike marketing executive to launch them into the millennium. His task was to mold and monetize the American dreams of a million youngsters. How'd he do it?

Princesses.

No more sewing together your daughter's Disney Princess costume, now you could buy one ready-made. Get her a custom glass slipper too, Barbies for each Princess, heck even an on-brand wedding dress. Every little girl in America could become a queen.

In 2001 sales for the Disney Consumer Products division, which controlled the major Princess brand, were topping out around \$300 million a year. By 2012, with the Princess brand steamrolling America, Disney sat atop a \$3 billion dollar empire.

What were they selling? Not just sequins and polyesters, Disney sold an identity: the promise of wealth, of beauty, of security in the happy ever after.

Disney sold an entire generation the myth of *Aladdin*: the money, the power, the glory, *and the prince!* — with a little scheming and a little dreaming it can be yours.

Perhaps it seems silly. But you are no less immune than I to the charms of that very same dream. Each generation has its *Aladdin*. From our early days we are bombarded with images of power, inculcated to its myth.

Tell me you haven't craved *power* at one point or another in your life: laid out your war games, crossed your Rubicon.

Tell me you haven't seen the trappings of *wealth and glory* and felt they were your destiny, hoped they might be yours. That you haven't dreamt of a bigger bank account, of the happiness and ease "a bit more" brings?

Today's word is *power*, a word associated with Kings and their Kingdoms. We say it and sing it every Sunday. It's in more hymns than I can think of, more prayers than I can pray. It is an enshrined part of our religious and secular lexicons.

But I'm worried we don't have an idea of what it means, not, at least, when it comes to God. More specifically I'm worried that we've confused the *power* we seek with what God has revealed to us in Jesus Christ, and that in so doing we have made for ourselves an idol of sheer will where we have been called instead to the power of the cross.

"The god of cannibals will be a cannibal," wrote Emerson, "of the crusaders a crusader, of the merchants a merchant."

Our question today: whom will the God of the Christians be? And what does that make us?

Imagine: it was six in the morning. Before Pilate, Rome's emissary in Judea, stood Jesus, a bruised husk of a man. He'd been arrested the evening before, questioned in front of the religious authority, and beaten.

How strange it must've been to see him in the halls of Roman power. Stranger still to hear the charges against him. Not theft (though he looked like a thief!), not quarreling (though certainly someone had a quarrel against him), not really anything. The Authority simply wanted him dead.

Now imagine a King, any king. Aladdin atop the royal elephant. Elizabeth at residence in Balmoral. The Czars before the Revolution, Louie the XVI and Marie Antionette.

Return your gaze to the shadow of a man detained in Pilate's headquarters. Pilate's question is reasonable enough—"are *you* the King of the Jews?"

The Jewish people had long waited for a messiah. A political savior who would bring peace and prosperity to Jerusalem and lay waste to Imperial Rome.

What would it say of them if *this* were their Messiah? Shackled, powerless, imprisoned by the State.

“Are you the *King* of the Jews?” Certainly someone is mistaken.

What follows reads more like a philological puzzle than a trial. Pilate, who has Rome’s authority at his hand, is outwitted by weak, wily Jesus.

Where Pilate inquires after a King, Jesus speaks only of a Kingdom. A Kingdom though not of this world, definitively *in* it. Jesus is determined to draw a contrast between kingdoms from below, Kingdoms like Rome, whose power derives from violence, and the Kingdom from Above, whose authority flows from the God of the universe.

Pilate persists, but Jesus presses and turns his questions back on him. Jesus speaks of truth, of following, of listening. Puzzling powers for a king to wield.

Outside the religious folks could be heard calling back and forth: “crucify him! crucify him!”

Inside Pilate and Jesus are locked in struggle of will. Pilate is forced to choose between **the** Kingdom and **a** power.

You know, it wasn’t only Disney that shaped my understanding of Kingdoms and Powers. As I grew I learned the stories of far away Pharaohs, Caesars, and Czars. Genghis Khan struck fear in the hearts of a million men. Cleopatra wore the diadem, and the Pharaohs carried the world on their backs. What a dream! Absolute power, absolute wealth, absolute freedom.

That is what the Religious Authority hoped for in their Messiah. That is the power Pilate hoped to keep.

But Jesus knew something Pilate didn’t. Jesus understood, and it’s equally true in the praetorium and the sanctuary, that kingdoms from below, kingdoms built on human backs, on domination, violence, and economic exploitation, on the strength of the dollar, though common in the pages of world history, are each equally destined for collapse. With every rise comes a fall. Earthly power is always “only for now.”

As the British Empire began its slow decline and the American dream took root, the great poet Percy Shelley looked to history to inquire after the fate of human power. Reflecting on Rameses II, whose name in Greek was translated Ozymandias, Shelley painted a picture of power’s ultimate fate:

I met a traveller from an antique land,
Who said—"Two vast and trunkless legs of stone
Stand in the desert. . . . Near them, on the sand,
Half sunk a shattered visage lies, whose frown,
And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read
Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,
The hand that mocked them, and the heart that fed;
And on the pedestal, these words appear:
My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings;
Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair!
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal Wreck, boundless and bare
The lone and level sands stretch far away.

An image of power wasted by time, Ozymandias stands alone in the desert pointing to the glory of a Kingdom long gone. No one fears him now. Such is the fate of earthly power. The Golden Calf, an image of security which the Hebrews in the desert worshipped when they felt God absent met an equal fate. Aladdin is no longer Sultan over Agrabah. Even Rome fell.

The many gods we worship, the things we idolize, that we allow to define us, they will fade away. Their power is derived from the world and is laid low by the world.

Neither the market, nor the promise of youth, nor the happily ever after can save us. The power of the world, packaged up neatly by corporations, given to us as a wild dream, a will-to-power, a deserved inheritance, will indeed come to an end.

Who will be left when worldly powers fail?

Each week we pray together "for thine is the Kingdom, and the Power, and the glory forever." Whose kingdom? Whose power? On whom do you cast your gaze when you recite those words?

Do you see in your mind's eye the one whose throne is a cross, whose head is adorned with a crown of thorns?

Or is your kingdom, the god whom you worship, nothing more than a reflection, an image of fleeting human possibility over and against the revelation of God in Jesus Christ?

“The god of cannibals will be a cannibal, of the crusaders a crusader, of the merchants a merchant.”

I don't mean to be dour, but it's a truth with which we must reckon:
human power is a mighty thing:
it is the power of division,
of naming who we are over and against who we are not;
of fanatic nationalism, which seeks to enshrine cultural difference, and exclude otherness;
of racism, which refuses to acknowledge God's image in our neighbors;
of xenophobia, which fears the other;
of homophobia, misogyny, mistrust,
of violence and domination,
of accusations and self-interest.
Human power is the will-to-power which crucified the Messiah,
and the ignorance which fails to see the Messiah today at work in the world.
Human power is a mighty thing.

But it is not God.

We play at pollyanna worlds of power, the dream of *Aladdin*, but have failed to see how utterly our vision has become corrupted, how unsatisfied we are in our perpetual striving, how far from the Truth we have strayed.

Merchants worship their merchant, crusaders their crusader. We want power and we have made for ourselves a god whose power looks very much like our dreams.

But we, each of us, were made in the image of God; we were made for so much more than petty competition, destructive living, ambivalent faithfulness. We needn't look to the world to tell us who we are, to tell us what possibilities lie within us. We need only look at God.

Turn your eyes to the man standing bound in Pilate's headquarters. Consider what power he shows us!

His is the power of service, a power for the suffering, with the suffering; it is lived out at table with tax collectors and sinners; it offers a reality against the powers who wield weapons of war, who drive nails into the flesh of the Messiah.

His is the power that works to transform and create anew, to give life where there was none.

His is a Kingdom for sinners and outcasts, for whomever might seek Truth, whomever might hope still, hope in the face of all the world's might, for a better way.

The God of the sheep is a shepherd, the God of the suffering has suffered, the God of the beloved is love.

Our God is *power*, true power, but it is nothing like we imagined it; our God is a King, indeed a King above Kings, but like no other King we know.

At the trial's end Pilate asks the right question. *What is truth?* But he doesn't stick around for the answer.

Truth, he may have learned, is not an abstraction to be mastered, it is the King before him, embodying the power of weakness, the power of servanthood, the power of the cross, embodying and giving life by the gift of his death and resurrection.

Truth, he might have learned, is a person. And that Truth is followed, not recited; lived, not acquired.

This is our God, and we are his people. This is better than a Disney fairy tale. It's real life. Our shepherd calls us to follow, the one who loved us into being calls us to love, our servant calls us to serve, to sacrifice, to rejoice, and to go and be with and for those unlike us, those who crave and seek and hope to follow Truth. We have been called by Good News to a world of bad news, called to be, to embody Good News.

Our God, eternity in this moment, walks with us, leads us, shepherds us, until that time that we are bought to the true kingdom, met with the true power, forever and ever amen.

—Leigh Stuckey