

# Story and Meditation: Royal Contrasts

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2 Samuel 23:1-7

John 18:33-37

*by Eric Anderson*

The two flocks of mynas looked a lot alike. There was a noticeable difference – more on that later – but basically, they looked a lot alike. And sounded a lot alike.

For looks, you had the yellow beaks and legs, the distinctive yellow feathers below the eyes, the black and brown on the top of the wings and the chest, and that startling flash of white that appeared beneath the wings when the birds took flight. For sound, you had the on-and-off songs and the sudden explosions of the entire flocks scolding.

As well as looking and sounding alike, the two flocks had a distinct difference from other myna flocks. Each one had a monarch.

It's not especially common for mynas to take leaders, and these two flocks had done so at the same time when the local cat population had grown. A lot of people like cats a great deal, but mynas are not as fond of them. Cats, after all, rarely hunt people. They hunt for mynas rather a lot. Any flock has to take some precautions against a large group of cats. These two neighboring flocks chose to each appoint a chief bird, a leader, a monarch, a king, a queen.

That is, one flock chose a king and the other chose a queen.

The king, I'm sorry to say, seemed to forget why his flock had decided they needed a chief and a leader in the first place. He rapidly discovered that it can be very good to be the king, and had his subjects start bringing him food while he perched in a comfortable spot "on watch." Only he wasn't watching for cats; he was watching for the next bird bringing him a grub or a seed or a piece of fruit.

The queen, on the other hand – that is, on the other wing – took up a perch where she could see in every direction, even though it put her in the hot sun and, at other times, the pouring rain. She didn't send out birds to bring food to her, though a few did offer her tidbits from time to time. When she needed to eat, she asked another bird to fill in for her, and she was quick to eat and drink and grab a bath when needed. Then she'd be back to her post, watching for cats.

As I say, the two flocks looked very similar. You and I would hardly notice the solitary bird keeping watch in one flock and the small parade of birds feeding the king in the other. But there was a difference you and I could and would notice very quickly.

The queen's flock, the flock over which she kept watch, was a good deal larger than the other. The king's flock, the flock which served his comfort and his ego, well: I'm afraid it was rather a good food source for the local cats.

In John's Gospel, you'll find a number of people attempting to understand Jesus through long conversations. There's Nicodemus. There's the Samaritan woman. There's teachers and seekers and listeners in the crowds. There's religious authorities, priests and scribes, in Jerusalem. There's Mary and Martha. There's Jesus' own disciples. And there's Pontius Pilate.

During most of these conversations, even though they would get pretty convoluted and difficult to follow, you can read at least some interest on the part of Jesus to communicate, and some interest on the part of his listeners to understand. Even when Jesus was being rather harsh – and some of the things he said to those in religious authority were very harsh indeed – he at least seemed interested in reaching them.

Here with Pontius Pilate? No. He wasn't. Nor was Pilate really interested in anything Jesus had to say. If Jesus had come out with a simple confession, "I'm a rebel against Roman occupation," that would have simplified Pilate's day, but let's face it. Pilate didn't need a confession. He had testimony from Jesus' accusers, the priests of the Jerusalem temple, people whose power and authority even the Roman governor had to respect. He had no need for anything from Jesus.

And so arose this conversation in which neither Pilate nor Jesus really had anything to say to the other, and in which they really had no expectation that the other would say anything they wanted to hear. Pilate, in fact, walked away from it. As Samuel Cruz observes at Working Preacher, "This passage, in which Jesus speaks to power, shows how the powerful do not like it when they do not control the discourse."

Like those two flocks of mynas, the confrontation between Jesus and Pilate displays two different notions of leadership, of power, of royalty, of monarchy. Debie Thomas, commenting on the selection of this text for Reign of Christ Sunday, observes this distinction between Jesus and Pilate: "No, our king doesn't appear in any of those majestic guises. Instead, the Gospel of John offers us a picture of Jesus at his physical and emotional worst: arrested, disheveled, harassed, hungry, abandoned, sleep-deprived — and standing before the notoriously cruel Pontius Pilate for questioning. If I were going to write Jesus into a kingly scene, this would not be the one I'd write."

Jaimie Clark-Soles describes it this way at Working Preacher:

- "Pilate uses power and authority for selfish ends with no concern for the building of community, and certainly not a community guided by love and truth. Pilate hoards power and lords it over people even to the point of destroying them, on a cross or otherwise.

- “Jesus empowers others and uses his authority to wash the feet of those he leads. He spends his life on them, every last ounce of it; he gives his life to bring life.
- “Pilate’s rule brings terror, even in the midst of calm;
- “Jesus’ rule brings peace, even in the midst of terror (John 14:27; 16:33; 20:19-26).
- “Pilate’s followers imitate him by using violence to conquer and divide people by race, ethnicity, and nations.
- “Jesus’ followers put away the sword in order to invite and unify people, as Jesus does when he says “And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself” (12:32).
- “Pilate’s authority originates from the will of Caesar and is always tenuous.
- “Jesus’ authority originates from doing the will of God, and is eternal.”

It is a scene of royal contrasts.

So which kind of ruler would you rather have?

Before your answer, it’s worth noting that the witness of history is that people usually prefer the pageantry and pomp and power of the Empire that Pilate represented. At least, if by “prefer,” I mean “accept and acquiesce to.” The Roman Empire. The Egyptian Empire. The Chinese Empire. The Incan Empire. The British Empire. The Japanese Empire. So many empires that used force and violence and coercion to control more and more wealth and resources. Pilate may have been representing Rome, but he could have just as easily been Mayan or Aztec or Gupta or Mongol or French or German.

There’s a lot of individual pride that comes with national pride. Ask someone from China or from Russia. Ask a Saudi or a Brazilian. Ask an American.

But it isn’t pride that rewards the followers of Jesus.

It isn’t power, either. It isn’t riches or respect or rapture. It’s not even justice – it’s welcome. It’s welcome.

As Samuel Cruz writes, “The values of Jesus’ kingdom are so vastly different from those of this world that often we Christians fail to understand them. The church, which purports to—and should—represent Jesus’ kingdom, is here to serve in humility rather than to seek earthly power. Jesus is the king, yet he does not arrive in a chariot, but on a donkey! Jesus is a king who is killed by those with societal power, not a king who is victorious over his enemies by defeating them in war.”

This is our ongoing struggle, isn’t it? The values of empire – of power, of riches, of well-being – are so tempting. It’s not just that they look good, it’s that they look right. I mean, we don’t call it force, we call it self-defense. We don’t call it greed, we call it eagerness. We don’t call it luxury, we call it comfort. Then we write our laws such that someone can bring a visible gun to

a city in protest, kill two people, and have it ruled self-defense. We write our laws such that someone can work hard and not bring home enough to pay for food, housing, and medical care. We write our laws such that those with great resources can pass them on to their children, while those with few resources will exhaust them all in their last years and their children will start with nothing.

Jesus may not offer us the wealth of empires, but at least he doesn't offer us that.

There's your royal contrast. One comes with pride for many, luxury for a few, and poorly-compensated hard work for many. The other comes with self-sacrifice and deep commitment, but the greatest self-sacrifice has been made by Jesus himself, the one in leadership, not by one of his disciples. It comes with a promise of a new and better life, not a mere echo of the life we've known.

Give me the monarch who watches in the heat of the sun or the pouring of the rain, caring for her flock in a dangerous world. I've had enough of Pontius Pilate and his ilk. Give me Jesus.

Amen.