

“If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would struggle so that I not be handed over to the Jews.” John 18: 36 November 22, 2009 Christ the King Sunday, Roy A. Harrisville III

Have you ever played king of the hill? It’s an old game that many of us played years ago in our youth, and it was mostly boys that played it. You find a small hill or mound and get a bunch of guys to stand at the bottom. All of a sudden you rush up the hill together and try to be the first to the top. When you get there, however, you will be assaulted by the rest of the group and thrown off the summit to tumble down below as far as possible. Then you’ll have to get back on your feet, run, or crawl up the hill, and try to drag, bump, or tackle the guy at the top and toss him off the hill and so forth and so on, until only one person is left at the top and everybody else is out of breath and too tired to attempt another coup d’état, revolution, or change of governance. Some mothers are not particularly fond of this game since it usually results in large wash loads with trousers full of grass stains, or worse. But boys love it and we used to play it at my house since there was a nice gentle hill on which the house stood and it was actually fun to roll down the hill if you got tossed off of it. Sometimes we’d get a little rough and somebody would start to cry. Somebody’s glasses would get broken or bent and one or two of us might even start a real, honest to goodness fight because one or the other was a little too rough. But mostly it was all in good fun and since we were kids and closer to the ground, we didn’t have that far to fall anyway. But every now and then it got out of hand, as they say. Friendships were lost, relationships got worse, and lasting animosities were forged.

This game has taken many shapes and has been played by young and old, male and female, rich and poor, high and low-born ever since the world began. The summits have been large as mountains and small as mole hills, but the game has been played and is still being played in many disguises all across the globe. It may be a political hill, a religious hill, a social or economic or racial hill, but King of Hill has been played by many people, some without even

knowing it. If you look at the political landscape in this country and listen to the TV shows and radio and read the newspapers it's hard not to think of all the struggles back and forth between the parties and groups as a sort of King of the Hill game.

Pontius Pilate was at the top of a small hill in the Roman province of Palestine. It was not a particularly important hill, but it had a significance all its own. The province was not nearly as wealthy as say, Egypt, or Greece, but it did have military significance. It was the last province on the eastern border of the Roman Empire and if it were lost to Rome's enemies in the east, it would have split the eastern empire in two. That would have constituted a threat to the province of Egypt and the province of Syria, both important for their wealth and strategic locations. Egypt was the breadbasket of the empire and was ruled over directly by the emperor himself. Syria was the gateway to Asia Minor and had one of the largest cities of the empire as its capital. In between was this little province of Palestine that had seen revolt after revolt and trouble after trouble. The Jews had agitated ever since the Romans took over the land in 63 BC. In 40 BC the eastern enemies of Rome had invaded Palestine and Herod the Great had to flee for his life. The threats to the political stability of Palestine were real. Pontius Pilate, as the prefect of the region, was charged with making sure that nothing got out of hand. He was supposed to collect the taxes and keep the place quiet and secure. He was given a hill to stand on top of and told to hold on, or else.

That is why his encounter with Jesus was so important. Jesus came to him as a prisoner. Jesus had been arrested on the Mount of Olives, taken to the high priest and then transferred to Pilate for final sentencing. John does not tell us very much about the trial of Jesus before the high priest, only that the high priest questioned him about his teachings to which Jesus replied that he could ask the people who had been taught. It wasn't like he had been teaching in secret.

Then they brought Jesus before Pilate. But Pilate didn't know why they had brought Jesus to him and asked what charges there were against him. Curiously, there were none mentioned. The accusers just said that if there had been no reason to bring him before Pilate, they wouldn't have bothered. But they didn't answer the question about specific charges. Pilate tried to push Jesus back onto his own people and let them deal with him but they said that they wanted the death penalty and they didn't have the authority to carry that out.

Then came the discussion between the two men. Pilate thought he'd have a little fun with Jesus so he asked him if Jesus were the king of the Jews. Jesus shot back with his own question to find if Pilate had come up with that one himself or if he had help. It was as impertinent as question as Pilate's. So Pontius protested that he was no Jew and that Jesus' own people had handed him over. "What did you do?" asked Pilate. The prefect had still not heard any charges or accusations against Jesus. Jesus replied that his kingdom was not of this world. It is not of this world. It is not from the earth. It is not from people. It is not like Rome or China or the Mayan kingdoms. It is not like England or Scotland or Wales. If it were, then Jesus' supporters would rush to his aid, storm the courtroom and forcibly rescue their leader from the clutches of the unrighteous. But Jesus' kingdom, and he has one, is not from down here. It is not from below. It does not derive its power from the consent of the governed. It is not a democracy. It is not of human invention or design and has none of the character of humanity. It is wholly other and different in its kind and purpose and cannot be understood in terms of conventional wisdom.

But Pilate doesn't get it. Why should he? He's just worried about political power. He's worried about a rebellion or a disturbance and what the emperor would think if he let things get out of hand. Pilate only cared for his own earthly power and position. He was worried that he might get knocked off his little hill and he wanted to know if that's the game Jesus was playing.

He wanted to know if Jesus was one of those boys who was coming up the summit to toss the top guy off and take his place. “So then, you’re a king?” asked Pilate. All he wanted to know was if Jesus was a threat to his game of king of the hill or not. He never got a satisfactory answer, or at least, not one that he could understand.

Jesus does not play the games that people play. He does not play king of the hill. He does not play the games of one-upmanship that so many offices and businesses and companies have going on inside them. Jesus is not interested in protecting his own power or trying to get more so that he can feel safe and secure. There are people in this world who relish the chance to bring somebody else down so they can ascend to the top of the hill. Jesus was the victim of character assassination and Pilate wanted to know if Jesus was going to hit back and maybe accuse his accusers and cause a riot or something. Pilate wanted to know if Jesus was going to play king of the hill.

The Pontius Pilates of this world always want to know what Jesus is up to and if his followers are a threat. Our president, Barak Obama, took a trip to Asia this past week and visited a number of countries. One of the countries he visited was China. China is a very important country in relation to the United States because they have 800 billion dollars worth of our debt. It makes us nervous that one country should hold that much of our national debt but the Chinese are also worried about Jesus. They are worried like Pilate was worried and they have been using Pilate’s tactics to allay their fears and make sure that while President Obama was there that no agitation by Christians should take place. The Christian Church in China is under the control of the communist party. The Party allows only two kinds of churches, Catholic, and the Three-Self church. Each of these churches must be independent of any outside influence and no church may meet in public if it is not registered with the state. But all around the country there have sprung

up independent unregistered churches that have become large enough to be noticed by the Chinese officials. In recent weeks the largest of these so-called “house churches” have been evicted from their buildings in the cities of Beijing, Shanghai, Chengdu, and Linfen. A number of their leaders have been questioned, detained, or arrested. You see, the Chinese government, like Pilate, didn’t want the Christians to make any fuss while a state visit from the President of the United States was taking place. Just think of the embarrassment it would have caused had our president actually been able to hear from one of those people. A prominent church leader by the name of Fan Yafeng, who is also a scholar and civil rights activist, says that the crackdown on Christian house churches is more important than the earlier attempts this year to crack down against lawyers, the media, and the internet. That’s because the house churches are able to mobilize within China and abroad. “This is the Communist Party’s battle of life and death,” said Professor Fan. China’s Christian population has grown, even under this kind of persecution, from around 3 million in the 1960s to as many as 130 million today. No wonder the Chinese are worried. No wonder Pilate was worried. No wonder people the world over are worried that Jesus or his followers will cause trouble. Why? Not because Jesus could call on his armies to destroy Rome. Not because Christians are called to acts of violence and raw power. Not because the church is charged with enslaving its enemies. That’s what Pilate was worried about. That’s what China is worried about. They are worried that Jesus will play their game and they might lose. But it is precisely because Jesus doesn’t play the game that makes him a threat to human power.

He is always a threat to lies, deceit, and the pretense of power. Jesus said it himself that he came to testify to the truth and anyone who is of the truth will listen. No guns. No bombs. No swords. Just the truth; the raw Truth; the plain truth. That is enough to threaten Pilate and every puffed-up potentate, past, present, and future. Because the threat Jesus poses to human pretense

is the threat of redemption. It is the threat not of replacing one king with another, but of replacing one life with another. It is the threat of altering one's life so completely that all thoughts of playing king of the hill vanish and all thoughts of establishing one's power and position vanish, all fears of ascendancy over one's neighbors vanish and in its place is the truth of new life that does not seek its own good but the good of others. It does not worry about its own security, but that of others. Its thoughts and motives are different from the world and Pilate and political parties and nations and rulers.

Christ the King doesn't need to play king of hill because he is already King. King of the universe and king of our hearts. Let him rule in your hearts and you'll stop playing the games that people play and you'll know what it is to live free and redeemed and with hope for tomorrow. For this king rules not from the top of a hill or from an ivory tower but from the cross on which he ended all human games and pretense and gave to us a whole new life. Amen.