

"What is Truth?"

Date: 10 April 2020 Good Friday

Text: John 18: 28 - 19:2, 19: 13 - 19

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"What is truth?" In the conversation we read between Pilate and Jesus it seems like this line – "what is truth?" – is simply tossed off by Pilate. It seems rhetorical. It doesn't look like he wanted an actual answer to the question. He just wanted to close off discussion – which he did – to go out to tell the Pharisees "I can find no case against this man". But what was the truth? The people around the story of that terrible day had many different ideas about what the truth was. And if we are truthful with ourselves, we might hear in their stories a sense of our own complicity. For we too have held truths which denied... and even crucified our Lord. In our own way we too stand in the crowds of Good Friday. In our own way the sin of our life helped put Christ on the cross. Where are you in the crowd, among the different truths of that day?

The Pharisees were scared out of their wits by the impact this story of Lazarus coming back to life was having on the Jewish people. They feared that the people would turn towards Jesus. The spectacular reception Jesus received upon entering Jerusalem only heightened their anxiety. "Look!", the Pharisees said, "the whole world has gone after him!" Jesus had to be stopped, for he was threatening their position and power, and challenging everything they stood for, not the least was their beliefs. To them, the truth was that Jesus was dangerous. What he talked about would change their lives. To them, the truth was that holding firm to past beliefs was more important than exploring the possibility that God indeed was doing something new through Jesus. Such a common sin: to want things to go my way rather than God's way.

Then on the other end of the spectrum, those closest to Jesus, his disciples and followers, in the end they did not support Him. For them, the truth was that their association with Jesus now put them in a dangerous position. Judas is cast as giving in to greed, betraying his Lord for cash. Peter denied his association with Jesus, apparently to avoid Jesus fate and to save his own hide. Nine disciples go unaccounted for after Jesus arrest — they seem to have drifted anonymously into the dark corners. The truth was that they didn't want to be known to be followers of Jesus. Such a common sin: to question faith when the cost seems too high.

Even those loyal to the very end — four women and one disciple standing at the foot of the cross — in a way they too abandoned Him, for they stood helpless, immobile, feeling powerless to do anything. They became complicit, through inaction, with the will of the civil authority. They must have watched in absolute terror as their Lord died, as if being trapped in a horrible nightmare. For Jesus followers, the truth was this: when push came to shove they really didn't believe that Jesus embodied the power of God. They didn't believe it enough to stand by him. Such a common sin: to question God's capacity to work God's will in the world.

Pilate's soldiers dressed Jesus like a king to mock him and beat him. To them he was no king... to them he was a momentary diversion, someone to make fun of, someone to be the butt of a

good laugh! While Jesus hung on a cross, the soldiers divided his clothing — Jesus only possessions — even while Jesus looked on. To the callous soldiers, the truth was that this event wasn't remarkable — crucifixions happened all the time. Jesus was run of the mill. Such a common sin: to not see in Jesus the very Son of God.

The crowds, earlier, turned out in droves to see this miracle worker who raised Lazarus from the dead. As Jesus entered Jerusalem, they proclaimed him the one "who comes in the name of the Lord — the King of Israel!". Yet five days later they were back again, still shouting his name, but this time shouting for Jesus death. "Shall I crucify your King?", Pilate asked, to which the Pharisees responded on behalf of the crowd, "We have no king but the Emperor!" From adulation to condemnation, in five brief days. The people of God, it seems, were fickle, going with the winds of popularity where ever they blew. What was the truth? To them the truth changed all the time. What's here today is gone tomorrow. Another sin so common: beliefs that shift with the times.

But not all turned away to condemn him. John wrote that many did believe — even some of the Jewish leaders — but they kept that belief quietly to themselves, for we read: "because of the Pharisees they did not confess it, for fear that they would be put out of the synagogue; they loved human glory more than the glory that comes from God" (John 12:42, 43). For these people the truth was that one's reputation and public opinion mattered more than standing up for what was right. Another common sin: believing that what people think about you is more important than what God thinks about you.

And then, finally, here was Pilate. He found no case against Jesus, and wanted to let him go. But the crowds were growing unruly, and they had painted Pilate into a corner by suggesting that it would be an act of treason for Pilate to let Jesus go — Jesus aspired to be a King! That stood in the face of the power of the Emperor. Caught in a tight political spot, Pilate gave in to the wishes of the Pharisees. Wasn't it better to have one man die than to deal with a riot? For Pilate, the truth was that expediency served him best, not justice. Another sin so common: doing what's best for me rather than doing what is right.

"What is truth?" In the midst of the different opinions, speculations, fears, interests and ambitions, we find among all these people a number of different truths that they clung to at the end. And every one of these truths challenged, denied or ignored Jesus and what He represented. These truths point to the sin of the world.

Jesus, very very much alone, did give Pilate the answer to that question — "What is truth?" — though Pilate, it seems, did not realize it. Jesus answer, "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" (John 18:36). Boy, people sure weren't putting up a fight — absolutely no one! Quite the contrary, to the people in the story Jesus was someone to mock, to rob, to ignore, to be jealous of, to use, to make money on, to flee from. People didn't want Jesus to taint their reputation, or to get in the way of their

position, or to start something they couldn't control. "My Kingdom is not of this world", Jesus told Pilate. That may be the greatest understatement of all time.

But what was Christ's Kingdom? This passage implies that Jesus saw himself as having a Kingdom that did exist right then and there. His presence on earth and his ministry of teaching and healing was the first sign of that Kingdom's presence among us. But it was, as of that moment, still a Kingdom without people. Jesus said, "If my kingdom were from this world, *my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews*". Not a soul was fighting. And here, in Pilate's chambers, Christ was giving a small warning that within hours his Kingdom was going to explode into a more dramatic presence. Pilate... he really didn't pick it up... Pilate was thinking about civil power. Jesus was talking about something more fundamental and more profound.... He was talking about ruling over the very hearts and souls of humanity! You see, Jesus came to inaugurate a new reign — he called it the "Kingdom of God". He was going to gain it by insurrection: by destroying death, by overcoming sin, by overthrowing those in control now. And who was he targetting to disempower? The Pharisees, the Pilate's, the Jewish crowds, the soldiers, his own followers..... *and you.... and me.*

A new truth was about to be born on the cross!

Jesus declared to Pilate, "For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to witness to the truth". And it took his death to make that Kingdom, and its truth, something which could be ours. It took his death so that sin – so common to us all – could be forgiven and set aside in the eyes of God. It took his death so that this new Kingdom could become a Kingdom finally filled with people – a Kingdom to which we could become citizens.

On Good Friday, we remember and confess that we are like all those folk in the Good Friday story. That we too have had... still have our own truths that we hold up and against Jesus. Perhaps we sense some resonance with one or two of the characters in this story, and so recognize that in our own way we helped put Christ on the cross. Let us never forget the words Paul wrote to the church in Rome, "for all have sinned and all fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3.23). But here is the grace offered in that moment. Jesus told Pilate, "Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice" (John 18:38). Hallelujah. We have heard Christ's voice. We have heard that truth. Belonging to it we belong to Him. Despite sin. Now we are a part of that Kingdom... a kingdom that we forced him to die to create.

What is the truth? A new truth was born on the cross, for our sake. Jesus, years earlier, in conversation with Nicodemus, put it this way: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him". He died, for you and me, that this could be ours.

That's the truth.