

4th W in Lent (3/6/24) SM

John 18:33-40 - Pilate then went back inside the palace, summoned Jesus and asked him, "Are you the king of the Jews?" ³⁴ "Is that your own idea," Jesus asked, "or did others talk to you about me?" ³⁵ "Am I a Jew?" Pilate replied. "Your own people and chief priests handed you over to me. What is it you have done?" ³⁶ Jesus said, "My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jewish leaders. But now my kingdom is from another place." ³⁷ "You are a king, then!" said Pilate. Jesus answered, "You say that I am a king. In fact, the reason I was born and came into the world is to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me." ³⁸ "What is truth?" retorted Pilate. With this he went out again to the Jews gathered there and said, "I find no basis for a charge against him. ³⁹ But it is your custom for me to release to you one prisoner at the time of the Passover. Do you want me to release 'the king of the Jews'?" ⁴⁰ They shouted back, "No, not him! Give us Barabbas!" Now Barabbas had taken part in an uprising.

Dear citizens of Christ's kingdom:

What is truth? This question has rung throughout human history. What is truth? We know that the truth is important. A mom asks her little boy with chocolate smudges on his cheeks, "Did you sneak a cookie?" When he shakes his head and quietly says, "No," she says, "Just tell the truth." Truth is important in all our human relationships; in fact, you can't have a close relationship if you don't tell the truth. Truth matters in every aspect of life from our work to the rules of the games we play.

Truth is especially important in the courtroom. Witnesses must swear that they will tell "**the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.**" Jurors take an oath to "**well and truly try the case and render a true verdict.**"

It doesn't surprise us, then, that as the Son of God stands on trial before a Roman governor, the subject of truth comes up. Pilate and Jesus took very different paths to arrive at this meeting. Pontius Pilate was probably born in Italy, in the heart of the powerful Empire. Jesus was born in Judea, in Bethlehem, an insignificant village in a backwater province of Roman rule. As Jesus was learning the skills of a carpenter or mason under his father's guidance, Pilate was probably training as a soldier. When Jesus began calling disciples to follow him, Pilate had already worked his way up through the Roman bureaucracy to be appointed governor of Judea.

Governor of Judea. This was not an easy job. Since the time Rome had taken control of Judea, there had been many uprisings, rebellions, and self-proclaimed kings and saviors. Pilate may have heard of Jesus before; the stories of miracles, the large crowds, and the disturbances in the temple must have come to his attention. Perhaps more recently he had heard about the shouts of the crowds in the streets: "**Hosanna, save us now, Son of David!**"

This would have concerned Pilate. It was the Passover. Hundreds of thousands of people were crammed into Jerusalem for this festival that celebrated how God had delivered his people from a foreign oppressor. To Pilate, the Passover celebration must have felt like a powder keg waiting to explode.

So when the Jewish leaders drag Jesus to Pilate's palace early Friday morning, the governor wants to know what he's up against. Let's pick apart the conversation as we ask ourselves:

What is truth?

1. Jesus testifies to the truth
2. Jesus is the truth

1. Jesus testifies to the truth

"Are you the king of the Jews?" Pilate wants to know whether Jesus is a threat. A simple yes or no will do. But Jesus would like to have a different conversation. *"Is that your own idea, . . . or did others talk to you about me?"* Jesus would probably like to talk about what it means for him to be the King of the Jews—without the baggage of whatever Pilate had heard. But Pilate wants to get to the facts of the case. **"Am I a Jew? . . . Your own people and chief priests handed you over to me. What is it you have done?"** Jesus, you are the one standing in front of me. I'll ask the questions here! Jesus replies, **"My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jewish leaders. But now my kingdom is from another place."**

Pilate seems intrigued. **"You are a king, then!"** Now we're getting somewhere! Jesus answers, **"You say that I am a king. In fact, the reason I was born and came into the world is to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me."**

You care about truth? So do I. That's why I'm here in this world. Then Pilate asks his famous question: ***"What is truth?"*** Considering Pilate's background, it's unlikely he was asking some abstract philosophical question about the nature of truth. Pilate was a military man, a practical guy who had negotiated his way up the ranks of the political system and had a job to do. He knew how truth could be manipulated and used to one's own advantage.

Pilate looks at Jesus and says, ***"What is truth?"*** Your own people—your own religious leaders—are saying one thing, and you are saying another. Whom am I supposed to believe? ***"What is truth?"***

During Lent, especially during Holy Week, we think a lot about the physical suffering that Jesus endured—the beating, the scourging, the crown of thorns, and the cross. We may not consider as much his emotional pain—the sadness he felt. Jesus came to testify to the truth. No one understood better how fallen the people of this world were and how much God loved them. There is only one way to God, one way to live—through Jesus. And Jesus wanted that for everyone. He wanted the crowds in Galilee to see that he brought more than earthly bread. He wanted the woman at the well in Samaria to know that he came to bring living water. He even wanted Pilate to see who he really was. Jesus came to testify to the truth.

2. Jesus is the truth

Have you ever wanted people to believe something because you knew that if they did, it would change their lives? Maybe you know some people with addictions who are destroying their lives. Or others who face all kinds of problems and refuse to admit that some of them are self-inflicted. You only want these people to see the truth! Now multiply that feeling by a million. Jesus knew he had what Pilate needed—what the world needed—more than anything. Pilate, if only you were interested in the truth. Not the kind of truth that is distorted by humans in their selfish power plays but truth from God the Father, truth that reveals his heart of love for you!

But Pilate could respond with only a feeble question: ***"What is truth?"*** Whatever his intent, whatever his tone, it seemed to end the conversation. If Jesus answered Pilate, we don't hear about it in the gospels. Maybe he just looked at Pilate with eyes that seemed to recede into eternity and with love that reached into the depths of his heart. What is truth? He's standing right in front of you! "I am the truth!"

Truth is not a fact, a formula, or a theory but a person. The Word made flesh. God made man. The final word from God and the source of salvation.

We live in confusing times. Facts are spun to get us to buy a product, support a cause, or vote for a candidate. Maybe we've trusted in people who presented themselves as someone other than who they really are, and we wonder, ***"What is truth?"*** Even the experts—scientists, doctors, economists, judges—often disagree about the best path forward. What is truth? We've asked this question in so many different areas of our lives that, sadly, sometimes it's even affected our faith: How can I know this is true? With everything else being so uncertain, how can I be sure of Jesus?

In this life, there are many things we can't know for sure. But we can know this: Jesus was born into this world to testify to the truth—to *be* the truth—to reveal that the very heart of God is love. How can you be sure? Watch as Jesus willingly goes to the cross to pay for your sins so that you can be sure there is no more penalty. Walk to the tomb on Easter morning to see Jesus declared the King of kings—to see life triumph over death. Jesus wanted Pilate to see. He wanted Peter and all the others to see. And he wants you to see. He is the Way, the Truth, and the Life—for you.

And Jesus still longs for others to know him too. Perhaps he'll give you opportunities to have a conversation like the one he had with Pilate. When the people of the world put you on trial—when they ask who you are and want to know what you say about the truth—you can love them enough to speak to them like Jesus. Is that what you believe or something you've heard? What do you know about Jesus and his kingdom? In times like these, when truth seems to be whatever anyone wants it to be, the otherworldly truth to which Jesus testifies may be just the thing people are looking for. We know it's the thing they need.

What is truth? It is Jesus! Amen.

Now to him who is able to establish you in accordance with my gospel, the message I proclaim about Jesus Christ, in keeping with the revelation of the mystery hidden for long ages past, but now revealed and made known through the prophetic writings by the command of the eternal God, so that all the Gentiles might come to the obedience that comes from faith—to the only wise God be glory forever through Jesus Christ! Amen. (Romans 16:25-27)