

When Jesus is brought before Pilate, he and Pilate engage in a verbal sparring match. "Pilate 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."

Pilate asked him, "What is truth?" After he had said this, he went out to the Jews again and told them, "I find no case against him. (Joh 18:37-38 NRS)

"What is truth?", that is the \$64,000 question, isn't it? We have certainly heard and seen and read all kinds of approaches to truth in the public arena in politics, during the Covid pandemic, and in a myriad of other concerns and issues. Distortion, obfuscation, and downright lying have been used to pervert the truth. In theory those truths relate to concrete, tangible facts that can be proved or disproved by the use of data. At the same time social scientists talk about "motivated reasoning" which says that our willingness to accept something as true is based on whether or not we want to believe it – whether or not it is in synch with our values and our understanding of how the world works. That willingness to believe comes from our hopes, and fears, our wishes, and our motivations.

(<https://www.apa.org/monitor/2017/05/alternative-facts> by Kirsten Weir)

Jesus and Pilate are talking about truth from totally different perspectives and Pilate has no interest in Jesus' understanding of truth. Pilate's truth was based on his role as governor of Judaea, to represent the Roman Empire and to suppress any signs of rebellion. Moreover, he had no sympathy for they people or the leaders of the people over whom he ruled. Pilate, well Pilate just didn't want to be bothered. His job was to collect taxes and keep the populace subdued. He had no interest in a philosophical conversation with a shabby preacher from Nazareth - even when it might have been for his own good. After Pilate asks his question he leaves to speak with the Jewish leaders.

The Jewish leaders had every reason to disbelieve Jesus's claims of truth. After hearing about Jesus Nathanael said, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" (John 1:46) and even the crowds knew that the Messiah was supposed to come from Bethlehem and not Galilee. (John 7:41-43) The Pharisees themselves said that according to scripture "no prophet is to arise from Galilee" (John 7:52). Furthermore, the Jewish leaders were collaborating with the Roman leadership and their positions, their security, was based on that collaboration. They were also desperately afraid of Jesus' successful ministry, of the crowds that he was attracting. They were afraid that the Romans would see his movement as a revolution and would respond by destroying the temple and the nation. The high priest Caiaphas says that it is better to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed. (John 11:48-50) Lastly Jesus' claims about his relationship to the Father were improbable and downright blasphemous and challenged the religious leaders' truth of God's relationship with the people of Israel. They were thinking of the passage in Deuteronomy which reads, "*When someone is convicted of a crime punishable by death and is executed, and you hang him on a tree, his corpse must not remain all night upon the tree; you shall bury him that same day, for anyone hung on a tree is under God's curse. You must not defile the land that the LORD your God is giving you for possession.*" (Deut 21:22-23 NRS) Such a death would then prove that he was not the messiah.

Jesus, the Word of God, came into the world to testify to the truth – the truth of his identity as the Son of God, the truth of his relationship with God his Father, a relationship in which we too can share, and the truth of how this relationship can reorient our lives and the promise of eternal life. Jesus talks constantly about truth.

“Then Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in him, “If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.” (John 8:31-32 NRS)

“Jesus said to [Thomas], “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him.” (John 14:6-7 NRS)

“So now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had in your presence before the world existed. “I have made your name known to those whom you gave me from the world. They were yours, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word. Now they know that everything you have given me is from you; for the words that you gave to me I have given to them, and they have received them and know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me.” (John 17:5-8 NRS)

There’s no way to validate his claims as fact– it’s not like we can ask God to provide a reference, “excuse me God, can you say for certain that this is your son, your only son?” Even when God did speak, even when God says in response to Jesus’ request “Father glorify your name. “I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again” All those gathered around him only heard thunder or perhaps the voice of an angel. No, Jesus’ claim to truth will rest upon the record of his actions, changing water into wine, healing, walking on water, and raising the dead, asking questions that provoked deep reflection, teaching, and modeling his relationship with God the Father. In the end however, it is his willingness to go to his death, to be publicly humiliated, and tortured, and crucified in order that God may be glorified through him that is the ground for his truth and our belief.

It is the last of these that defies logic, the logic of a God who would send his son to certain death on behalf of all creation. And yet here we are on Good Friday. We are here to remember the perversion of truth that sent Jesus to his death, we are here remember how he was abandoned and denied by his followers, and the triumph of the moment in which he can declare “It is finished.” (John 19:30) We are here because we believe in one God who made heaven and earth. We believe that Jesus Christ is the son of the Father, that he came down from heaven for us and for our salvation. That this son of God became incarnate from the Virgin Mary by the Holy Spirit. We believe that after his death he rose and ascended into heaven and that he will come again. This is the “motivated reasoning” through which we are to live in the world.

What then is truth?

“... the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.” (1 Corinthians 1:18)

Amen