

What is Truth?

This morning, we celebrate the Feast of Christ the King, the last Sunday in our liturgical year. Thanks to the Hebrew Scriptures, we've spent a fair bit of time talking about kings over the past months, seeing how Saul, David and Solomon all came to the throne with Adonai's blessing but were undone by their human weaknesses. David was right that "[o]ne who rules over people justly, ruling in the fear of God, is like the light of morning." Sadly, though, Lord Acton was also right when he famously observed that absolute power corrupts absolutely. Again and again, we saw that only God can be trusted with the immense authority that ancient kings once enjoyed.

That unfortunate fact may explain why Pontius Pilate so completely misunderstands Jesus when he questions him in the Gospel of John. Pilate served as prefect of Judea at the pleasure of Caesar Tiberius, an ambitious and violent man reluctantly chosen by the first Caesar, Augustus, as the best of a bad lot of potential successors. Having swum in the cesspool of Roman politics, Pilate would have known how corrupt and dangerous powerful men could be. As prefect, he certainly would have been warned about the prophecies of a coming Messiah king who would liberate the Hebrew people from their Roman overlords by force of arms. It was Pilate's job to make sure that the messianic prophecy was never fulfilled, and he crucified thousands of would-be revolutionaries to maintain Rome's stranglehold on Israel. Pilate must have been puzzled, perhaps even amused, when the Temple authorities brought him a nondescript country rabbi, bound and beaten, to be executed for treason against Rome. By Roman standards, Jesus couldn't possibly have been taken for a king.

So, perhaps Pilate scoffs when he asks Jesus, "Are you the King of the Jews?" Jesus neither confirms nor denies his kingship because Pilate is asking the wrong question. Pilate wants to prevent a secular uprising. Jesus wants to correct long-standing human misconceptions

by revealing the nature of God. Pilate and Jesus are talking past each other, and it doesn't help that their ideas about truth are not the same.

When Jesus says he has come to testify to the truth, he uses the Greek word *alétheia* (ἀλήθεια). Pilate might translate *alétheia* as “truth,” but the closest word in Latin, the language of Rome, is *veritas*, and the two words mean something quite different. *Veritas* refers to provable facts. *Alétheia* is, to quote Dr. Stant Litore, an activity, and it's best understood as revealing what's hidden, or “unforgetting.” Litore explains *alétheia* as “the daily act of holding a promise present in your mind and heart, of letting that promise drive all that you do.” *Alétheia* is, “[i]n a sense, resurrecting your heart, day by day, hour by hour, from the underworld of forgetfulness where life is expressed in hues of gray, without the constant awareness of joy.” Jesus came to testify to *alétheia*, so that his followers could resurrect their hearts day by day and hour by hour with the divine truth of God. It's hardly the sort of truth a Roman imperialist would understand.

Christianity has sometimes presented Pilate as a weak but decent man who got caught up in an impossible situation and made an understandable mistake. He was nothing of the kind. Pilate was so vicious to the Hebrew people that the Emperor Caligula, hardly a model of compassion himself, condemned Pilate to death by suicide. Still, I'm sorry our reading stops short of Pilate's response to Jesus. “What is truth?” Pilate asks. You can hear that as the question of a cowardly bureaucrat who has no wish to make waves back home, or the retort of a heartless bully toying with a victim he never intends to release. But I hear in it the despair of a man who has learned cynicism the hard way and who no longer believes that any kind of truth, *alétheia* or *veritas*, can stand up for long to the pressures of human corruption, ambition and greed.

In post-modern America, our understanding of truth bears a far greater resemblance to *veritas* than it does to *alétheia*. We like our truth factual, quantifiable, and supported by scientific

evidence. We mistrust each other's objectivity and dismiss honest differences of perspectives and values as moral relativism. But that hard-nosed, "just the facts, ma'am" attitude toward truth leaves little room for *alétheia*. And that's a shame, because *alétheia* is the truth that Jesus incarnated, suffered, and died to share with us.

Christianity rarely acknowledges, much less addresses, two difficult questions. Why did Jesus let himself be crucified? And why doesn't he just fix us? Jesus is quite capable of turning us all into sinless little saints who are totally devoted to the Father and content to spend our every waking moment singing him songs of gratitude and praise. Why doesn't Jesus do that? The answer, I think, lies in a story originally told by Danish theologian Søren Kierkegaard and recounted by the Reverend Bertie Pearson in his sermon for this morning. Once upon a time, there was a great and mighty king, powerful beyond challenge and rich beyond the dreams of avarice. Everywhere he went, the king's obedient subjects fell to their knees before him. One day, while riding through his kingdom, the king looked out the window of his royal carriage and saw a woman laboring in the fields. Though dirty with toil and dressed in rags, the woman was more regal than any princess he had ever seen, and the king instantly fell in love with her. In the next instant, however, he realized that he could never approach her. She would certainly consent to be his queen if he asked, because no one ever refused him. But he would never know if she married him out of duty or out of love. The king fretted for days, turning the problem over and over in his mind until, suddenly, the answer came to him. He put aside his golden crown, removed his fine leather boots, his ermine cloak and velvet robes, dressed himself in the ragged homespun of a beggar, and left the castle to find his beloved, his hands and pockets empty but his heart filled with hope that, with all his kingly finery stripped away, the woman he loved would see him as he was and love him for himself alone.

Kierkegaard's story may not be *veritas*, but it's brimful of *alétheia*, the truth that Jesus came to share with us. Almighty and awesome, God doesn't want our fear or our obedience. God wants our love, freely given, and wants it badly enough to put aside immortality, omnipotence, and eternal splendor to get it. God came to us not as a king but as a helpless infant, a wise teacher, a gentle healer, a victim and a sacrifice, no one to fear, but someone very much to love.

In a time of savage partisanship, brazen online fictions and shameless "alternative facts," truth can be hard to come by. There are many would-be kings who are eager to prey on our resentments, prejudices and fears to take whatever they want, heedless of whom they hurt. We must never let them deceive us into mistaking empty bombast or physical violence for legitimate authority. And we must not be misled by "truthiness," that clever word coined by Stephen Colbert to characterize situations where something is believed to be true because of whatever the believer wishes or feels, regardless of the facts. *Veritas* matters, and we jettison it at our peril. But *veritas* alone is not enough. Divine truth, *alétheia*, calls us to un-forget over and over again whatever fear or skepticism deceives us where the goodness of our God is concerned. The King of Kings and Lord of Lords loves us enough, and wants our love in return enough, to live, suffer and die as one of us, and that's the God's honest truth.

Next week, we'll begin a brand-new liturgical year. Our devotions will begin with four weeks of contemplative Advent waiting for the birth of our Lord and Savior. We'll focus on Jesus as the Prince of Peace, the one who brings divine truth and comfort no matter what worldly dangers seem to threaten us. If you can, look away now and then from the jangling, secular circus that surrounds us this time of year. Take a breath, enjoy some quiet time, and let yourself fall more deeply in love with that tiny, vulnerable baby in the stable. Our King of Kings, Lord of Lords, and Friend of Friends is waiting for you, eager to love you right back. Amen.