

# THE TRUTH, THE WHOLE TRUTH, AND NOTHING BUT THE TRUTH

Sunday, April 4, 2004  
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You have already heard that today is Palm Sunday. Most of us are familiar with that. But today is also Passion Sunday. We have the choice in the church year of celebrating one or the other or combining the two. Today we begin our service by celebrating the triumphal entry of Jesus riding on the back of a donkey, with people waving palm branches in the air and placing them on the on the road before him. But we also move now to the passion of Christ, for it was only a few days later when the people turned against Jesus. He was betrayed, denied, his followers fled from him. He was arrested, and taken to be tried before both the Jewish leaders and the Roman leaders. He was beaten severely, tortured, and crucified.

And we have to go through all of that if we are going to get to Easter. We will hear most of the story read on Thursday evening in our Maundy Thursday service, but for our purposes today I have chosen just one small piece from John of the trial of Jesus, where Jesus is before Pilate, who was in charge of Roman affairs in the area. The Jews have brought Jesus to Pilate because they cannot give out the death sentence, and they want Jesus to die. They have charged Jesus with any number of things; they just want to get rid of him. And so Pilate is trying to figure out just what is going on. Beginning with the thirty-third verse of the eighteenth chapter, we read:

*Pilate entered the Praetorium again and called Jesus and said to him, "Are you the King of the Jews?" Jesus answered, "Do you say this of your own accord, or did others say it to you about me?" Pilate answered, "Am I a Jew? Your own nation and the chief priests have handed you over to me. What have you done?" Jesus answered, "My kingship is not of this world. If my kingship were of this world, my servants would fight that I might not be handed over to the Jews. But my kingship is not from the world". Pilate said to 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 bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth hears my voice." Pilate said to him, "What is truth?"*

This is the word of our Lord. Thanks be to God.

Do you swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth? Some version of that is used in courtrooms across the country, as witnesses are sworn in before they testify. It's an attempt to get at the truth, at least the truth as it applies to the facts. But most of us know that the facts don't always lead to the truth. They might get us there, and they might not.

Take for example the person who is caught speeding. Going down the road, he is clearly speeding. The officer stops the person, walks up to the window. And the man says "Officer, my wife is in labor. She is getting ready to have a baby. I'm on my way to the hospital." Well, was he speeding? Of course, he was. Those are the facts. But there is a

truth here that is larger than the facts at hand.

Or take the father who wakes up in the middle of the night, and he hears a humming from the computer room. He goes in; the computer is on. He knows that he shut the computer down earlier. He knows that, but he looks around and sees evidence that his daughter has been on the computer. And so the next morning, realizing that they have been trying for weeks to institute some sort of a reasonable policy on computer use. And that their daughter is fully aware of how late she can stay up, and how often she can be on the computer. He takes the issue up with her. "Were you on the computer last night?"

"Well, yes. I was late after everyone had gone to bed. Yes."

"And what were you doing on the computer?" "I can't tell you."

"You can't tell me? Oh, well, do you realize what the rules are of the house, how often you are allowed on the computer. And then you are supposed to be in bed at a certain hour?"

"Yes."

"And you still don't want to tell me what you were doing?"

"Right."

"Well, then, I guess you are grounded."

Which is a reasonable response to the facts at hand, except that later on in the day when the family gathers to celebrate the father's birthday, his daughter presents him with a collection of poetry nicely printed and bound in a special way. She had printed it out the night before. The only time she could do it was when he was in bed, because otherwise, he'd know.

So the facts, you know, don't always lead us to the truth. Do they? Sometimes, it's not about the facts at all when it comes to our desire to have truth of some sort. Because in our society, we love to manipulate and distort the truth anytime we can for our own gain or advantage. Now we could talk about politicians, but we won't go there. We'll talk about advertisers instead; they're some of the best. Not a week goes by that I don't hear a commercial on the radio telling me that Haynes Furniture or The Dump is having the biggest sale they've ever had. And prices have never ever been lower than this weekend. And I keep wondering, how low can they go? It makes one wonder.

You look at magazines and TV, and you get the impression that the meaning of life must be tied somehow to something called viagra or beer. It's everywhere. The commercials are everywhere. And it's obvious that you can't have a good time without it, if you listen to Madison Avenue.

We're told that the only way to really be happy or comfortable with yourself, the only way to like yourself, is have plastic surgery. Change yourself. Make yourself more beautiful. You couldn't possibly like yourself the way you are, so do something so that you can be comfortable with yourself.

We tend to exaggerate and manipulate all sorts of information, facts, until they are no longer facts. In fact in our country, lying has become pretty much accepted behavior. We are told that almost one-half of all job applications contain outright lies these days. A recent book by David Callahan says that in a recent poll ninety percent of all college students said that they would lie if it would increase their chances of getting a better job.

Ninety percent said that. In an article in USA Today a couple of weeks ago said that more and more people think it's okay to lie on their tax returns. You have a week and a half, by the way, if you haven't done it already.

So, what is truth? What is truth? We could almost hear Pilate saying that with disdain, with his voice dripping in sarcasm, and he lived a couple of thousand years ago. The truth in our age is something merely to be manipulated for our personal advantage. If in our post modern culture, there are more and more people who are unsure of any absolute truth. If everything is relative or situational or open to interpretation, well, anything goes. And who's to say what truth really is.

Pilate would fit in just fine with us. He's just trying to get some facts so he can make a judgment. But I don't get the sense that he's really interested in truth. He hears from the Jewish leaders what they believe the facts are, but he's not willing to go on what they say because their definition of truth has to do with tradition. Their definition of truth goes back to the Hebrew word, the Old Testament understanding of truth that had to do with faithfulness and that which had been tested. Something that was reliable and lasting and unchanging. And for the Jewish leadership, tradition covered all of that.

Tradition - the way we have always done things. This Jesus is breaking our traditions. He must be killed. Pilate is not willing to go that way, so he goes with the Greek-Roman understanding of truth, something that can be demonstrated beyond a reasonable doubt. He's asking simple questions that would help them make a logical decision. "Jesus, are you a Jew? Yes or no? Where are you from? What had you done? Are you a king? King of the Jews, by chance? Are you even competent? Are you stupid, because you do realize who I am and the kind of power I have over you, don't you?" Pilate is asking basic questions. He just wants some facts so he can make a decision.

But we can get bogged down in either way, either the Jewish understanding of truth or Pilate's understanding of truth. Some of us do get bogged down in tradition, and the way things have always been done, at seeing the truth. Nothing else matters. We must stick to tradition, and we can get bogged down there. Or we can get bogged down with just the facts. We want to have answers to some little questions, just a few facts. Did God create the world in six twenty-four hour days? I need to know. It's really important. In the sacraments, does it really turn into the body and blood of Christ, the way some Christians believe, or is merely symbolic, the way other Christians believe, or is it somewhere in between, the way Presbyterians are. What about baptism? Is it right to baptize infants and small children? Or is believers' baptism, the only way? Which is it? Give me an answer. We just want some facts. Some go so far as to question the bodily resurrection of Christ, and even ask whether that was important or not.

Then we get into the questions of our day, just in the last couple of months. Is Mel Gibson's movie anti-Semitic? Who really is responsible for Jesus' death? Is it the Jews or is it the Romans? Or is it somewhere closer to home where the blame lies.

Jesus is questioned by Pilate. What is the truth? What is truth? Pilate asks all the little questions. Jesus plays along to some extent, but doesn't give many answers. It's obvious that Jesus is much smarter. But when Pilate asks that question, "What is truth?" That's

when it gets interesting. It may have been a rhetorical question. It probably was sarcastic, but it surely is directed towards Jesus. And the answer that is given, Jesus remains silent. He stands there. I don't think that it was that Jesus didn't hear the question, and I'm pretty sure that Jesus wasn't just refusing to answer. I believe his silence was intentional.

What is truth? Jesus just stands there, and as He stands in the shadow of that question, it becomes rather obvious to those of us who know Him, what the answer is. So if we can hear His words from the teachings, we know from His life, we hear Him say, "I am." Over and over again. "I am the true vine. I am the true bread from heaven. I am the true life. I am the way, the truth, and the life". Over and over again, Jesus says "I am." Does He need to say it again? Would Pilate even understand it? As Jesus stands there in silence, and we get to answer the question for Him.

Just before Pilate asks that, Jesus says "Everyone who is of the truth hears my voice." You see the Jewish leaders didn't have it entirely wrong. Truth is something that is lasting and reliable and faithful and unchanging. But it's not based just in tradition. It is based in a person. Jesus said, "If you know me, you will know the truth." And Christians are set apart by the gospel.

It is the gospel we proclaim, not because we say it is interesting or we say it is fun or it will make life a little bit better for us. We claim the gospel as truth. We say that this is the truth, and we based everything else in our lives on that, don't we? Isn't that what we say? We don't take the little facts over here and the little facts over there and try to come up with a philosophy of life. We say that we have the truth in Jesus Christ, and that faith will seek understanding in different ways. But we start with Him. The big questions The big questions are answered when that is our truth. What is the meaning of life?

What is God up to anyway? What is my purpose here? Those are questions that can be answered if the truth is not just made up out a bunch of small facts.

What is truth? Jesus neither answers that question with an interpretation of tradition, as the Jewish leaders would do. And Jesus could easily have done that. He was very capable. Nor does he answer the question by expounding logically on facts of this sort and that sort, and we know that He was good at that too because he had all of the facts. He doesn't try to and he stands there in silence. And we know Pilate must be looking at him in that silence and wondering. What is truth? And Jesus just stands there.

What do you make of it?

This sermon was presented by the pastor from a brief outline and not from a written manuscript. It was transcribed from audiotape and edited by individuals other than the pastor who claims authorship. Said pastor did not necessarily read this transcript before publication.