

John 18:33-37
November 21, 2021 Christ the King
The Rev. Dr. Mark W. Jennings

33 Then Pilate entered the headquarters* again, summoned Jesus, and asked him, ‘Are you the King of the Jews?’ 34 Jesus answered, ‘Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?’ 35 Pilate replied, ‘I am not Jewish, am I? Your own nation and the chief priests have handed you over to me. What have you done?’ 36 Jesus answered, ‘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. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here.’ 37 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.’ 38 Pilate asked him, ‘What is truth?’

What is truth? That's the problem, isn't it? You may remember that a few years ago one of the President's advisors used the term “alternative facts,” like what were facts for some weren't facts for others. Of course, the media went crazy over that and I remember myself thinking how ridiculous that was. But I wonder now whether she had a point.

What we perceive as real or as true may not be what someone else perceives as real or true. That's the issue that in our “post-modern” world we sometimes hear defined as “what's true for me may not be what's true for you.” Does each of us have our own truths, depending on how we experience the world? Is there no objective truth that we all agree on? Is truth elusive, can it ever be pinned down?

I used to love questions like that. Of course that was back when I was 21, had a beard and longer hair, and smoked a pipe like all philosophy majors were supposed to in college. We would sit around and debate about whether Plato or Aristotle was right in the conception of truth and reality. Were there such things as beauty and good, or were they just conceptions that had some mutual agreement but no objective reality. And what is truth? But now I wonder? Is there such a thing as truth? Is it the same for you as it is for me? Or does truth depend on the observer? Is my truth the same as yours?

That's the problem for Pilate. He has some set ideas of what is true and what is not. Pilate is the prefect of Judea. It is his job, first and foremost, to keep the peace. If there are riots, if things get out of hand, the Emperor in Rome might hear about it and that would not be a good thing. Keep the peace and keep the taxes flowing—whatever else these silly religious people might want to do was up to them. So on the Feast of Passover, when some of the chief priests bring to him someone they have arrested for

blasphemy, what does he care? He is not interested in their religious rules, but when they say that he is calling himself the “King of the Jews,” that peaks his interest. There is only one King, one ruler, Emperor Tiberius in Rome. Anyone challenging his authority was not going to be long for this world, so the first question that Pilate asks him is, “Are you the King of the Jews?” If Jesus had said, “yes,” it would have been over right then and there. But he doesn't. He says, “My kingdom is not from this world.” What does that mean? At first Pilate is relieved. If he's not really a king, then he is no threat to Rome and no problem for Pilate. But he seems to hint that he is a king. So Pilate asks, “so you are a king?” He doesn't seem to be political, not what Pilate had assumed him to be. But the crowd outside is yelling. Why is this man such a big problem? Why are the religious leaders so upset? If he is not a real king, if he has no real armies, no visible followers from what Pilate can tell, what's the big deal? But there's that “keeping the peace” thing. If there is a riot or any upset over this, Rome is bound to hear about it. What kind of king can he be? He finally answers, “I came to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth hears my voice.” What does that mean? Truth? What is that? The truth that Pilate knows is power, imperial military political power. What else is there? Is there something else? “What is truth,” he asks, and gets no answer. But picture this scene. Pilate asks, “What is truth?” But how does he ask it? Does he say, “What *is* truth?” in a dismissive way, expecting no answer, because no one has an answer—philosophers have debated this for centuries and will debate it more for centuries to come and no one comes up with a final answer. If truth is just an agreed upon definition for things, then it keeps changing and maybe there is no final truth. Or maybe Pilates says scornfully, “*What* is truth?” How in the world would you know, he might be saying, you're just a nobody from Backwoods, Galilee. Where do you get off trying to define truth to a prefect of the Roman Empire?

But maybe, just maybe, he senses something different in this man. Maybe Pilate thinks this man might have something that he needs, that he has been looking for. So perhaps Pilate asks with a little bit of hope in his voice, “What is truth?” But alas, he gets no answer. Or does he? I heard a wise man say recently that our expectations shape our experience. And maybe one of the lessons we take from today's scripture is just that: our expectations shape our experience. Jesus did not fit what Pilate knew was the

definition of a king. To him, “king” meant a person with military, political power. A king was not a poor, itinerant preacher and healer from some small town that no one had ever heard of. A king commanded armies, a king commanded respect, a king was not deserted by his rag-tag followers, and then arrested and beat up by a bunch of priests. Pilate is caught in between what his preconceived notion of reality was and the actual experience. The question, “so you’re a king?” may be one of incredulity. He can’t believe how far this ragged person is from his definition of what a king should be. He is caught between his experience of what a king is, like the emperor in Rome, and what is in front of him now.

Isn’t that just as true for us? What do we do when our experience doesn’t match what we have always thought to be true? Cognitive dissonance as another wise man calls it. Do we then just walk away, clinging to the old and refusing to accept new ideas? What if someone has a different idea of God than we do? Are they wrong and we are right? How do we know? Are we all different? Or as it is said, “The lamps might be different, but the light is the same.” Do we shine that same light, or is it a different light, a different truth altogether? Isn’t that what we come to church for, to get our questions answered about God? To find the truth? Isn’t that why we have all these sermons and education classes, so we can get answers to our questions about God and truth and the world? Isn’t that why we read the Bible, so we can find truth?

If there is one thing that we are discovering in this upsetting age of ours I hope it is that truth comes not just from commonly held definitions, but in the encounter with another. I hope we come to church not just to learn about God, or to get answers to questions but to encounter God. I hope that we have somehow felt that when we are together, when we are at worship or in a class or sharing a meal with each other, or serving the poor, that we experienced that catching of the breath, or the quick beat of the heart, or that peace of spirit, or even the occasional tear, that is as close to truth as we can come because it is an encounter with the Spirit of God. Truth comes in the encounter.

That’s where Pilate comes up short. He’s caught in-between his preconceived notion of what a king is and the reality standing in front of him. So he asks, what is truth? And he doesn’t get an answer. Or maybe he does. Maybe his answer is standing there in front of him. Maybe truth is standing right there. Truth is not an explanation, but an encounter. It is not just learning about God, it is being with God. It is not just

understanding that Jesus is king, it is having him as your king. Truth is being in that holy relationship. With God and with one another. But Pilate doesn't get it. He walks away. He gives in to the chief priests and he washes his hands of the whole thing. We don't really know what happens to Pilate after this. We know that he remains in charge in Judea for a few more years before he is called back to Rome, but then he fades from history, only remembered really in the words of the creed, "crucified under Pontius Pilate." But in the Eastern church there is a tradition that both Pilate and his wife later converted to Christianity and in the Egyptian Coptic church he is even recognized as one of the saints of the church. Western Christianity never bought into that idea though and through the years there were always legends about what happened to him, but no one really knows. What we do know is that at this moment in his life, at this encounter with truth, this encounter with God, at this trial of Jesus which is really a trial of Pilate, he turns his back and walks away.

One hopes that he gets another chance sometime in his life, but who knows. In the western church, it is said that after his return to Rome he was posted to Gaul, in what is now France and was there until he died. His body was cremated and the ashes scattered on an Alpine lake, and since then the legend persists that "again and again his body rises to the surface of a mountain lake and goes through the motion of washing its hands as he tries to cleanse himself not of something he'd done, for which God could forgive him, but of something he might have done but didn't, for which he could never forgive himself."¹

If truth is not a definition but an encounter, then none of us have a monopoly on what is true, but we learn more and more about truth as we learn more and more about each other. And we learn more and more of truth as we follow the one who is the way and the truth.

1 Buechner, Frederick. *Peculiar Treasures: A Biblical Who's Who*. p. 139