

November 21 , 2021

What Is Truth?

Texts: **Revelation 1: 4b- 8; John 18: 28-38a; “Reflected Light”**, Israelmore Ayivor

“What is truth?” Pilate asked as Jesus stood before him.

What is truth? It sounds like an easy question. It's what's really real. It's the way things really are. But it's not really quite as simple as that, is it? For example, if Noah asks me where the sun rises, I will confidently tell him that the sun rises in the east, and that's certainly true. If you want to see the sun coming over the horizon in the morning, the east is the place to look for it. But in a deeper sense, that's not the whole truth, is it? In fact, the sun isn't rising at all! The earth is turning under it, so the sun just looks like it's rising. When I tell Noah that the sun rises in the east, that is certainly true if we are talking about appearances, about the way things look, but it's not true if we are talking about the underlying astronomical facts. So the same statement might be true or not true, depending on what we are asking.

Here's another statement: Pumpkin pie is delicious. Okay, it's nearly Thanksgiving, a lot of us will be eating pumpkin pie after our turkey and potatoes. You might think that a piece of pumpkin pie is heavenly, the perfect finish to a perfect meal. For you, the statement, “Pumpkin pie is delicious” is absolutely true. But I hate pumpkin pie! I don't like the texture, I don't like the taste, I don't even like the smell of pumpkin pie. For me, pumpkin pie is absolutely NOT delicious. The statement is false. In the case of the simple statement, “Pumpkin pie is delicious”, what is true for you is not true for me. And there is no objective way of settling our disagreement. There is no *Dictionary of Delicious Things* that we could consult that would tell us who is right and who is wrong. The statement simply is true for you and your taste buds, and false for me and mine.

Truth can be complicated, and might not be quite what we think it is from first appearances or merely our own experience! Sometimes truth is two-fold, with a deeper truth hidden beneath the surface of things, or true for one person and not true for another. And this matters to our gospel reading today. Pilate's question is a good one, even though he doesn't hang around to hear Jesus' answer.

So let's get back to Pilate then, who started us out along this road with his question, “What is truth?” It's not actually the first question Pilate had asked of Jesus that day, and since we've seen that in the question of truth, context matters a lot, we'd better look at that other question first. This other question is the one that is far more important to Pilate, so important, in fact, that he asks it twice in two minutes. What Pilate most wanted to know was not what truth was, but only what he needed to know to do his job. “Jesus, are you a king?” This is the question that was foremost on his mind.

At first glance, it certainly doesn't look like Jesus is a king. Picture the scene: there is Pilate, the Roman governor, decked out in his gleaming regalia, representing Rome and the Emperor, representing power, and glory, and riches... along with violence, oppression, and the power of life and death. And then there is Jesus: stripped bare, beaten, bloody, spat upon, humiliated, a prisoner, turned over by his own people, penniless, powerless, a living pulp. No one in their right mind would ask this man if he is a king! Yet Pilate asks him, not once, but twice, this very question.

Remarkably, there's something about Jesus that seems threatening to Pilate, as if he realizes that this man, beaten though he is, still has the power to call forth obedience, still has the ability to usurp the title of Lord, which in Pilate's mind belongs to Caesar alone. Pilate is worried that, despite appearances, Jesus might really be a king of some sort, or at least a pretender to the throne, a rival to the power of Rome, that the truth of the matter might lie behind the bloody mess that stands in front of him, deeper and harder to see. All Pilate really cares about is protecting his kingdom, Rome's kingdom, and its power. Serve Rome and all will be well. Bow to Rome, and you will be saved. Confront Rome, and you will be crushed. We'll crucify you.

In Pilate's world, where the only truth is power and the ability to use violence to enforce your will, another king is a threat, because another king will demand obedience, will command respect, will exercise sovereignty. Those are Caesar's prerogatives. So that's why he asks Jesus twice, "Are you a king? Are you the king of the Jews?" The answer depends on what Pilate means by the question. If he means, is Jesus about to take up arms and rebel against Rome, using Rome's own violence to overthrow Rome's rule, the answer is "No." Jesus is not that kind of king. But if he means, does Jesus intend to demand the ultimate allegiance of his people to himself and to his cause, over and above any worldly allegiances to Rome, it's Emperor, or to any one else, the answer is "Yes." Jesus is the ultimate king, the King of kings.

Jesus' answer to Pilate is yes, and no. He tells Pilate that he has a kingdom alright, but not the kind that Pilate is thinking of. Jesus's kingdom is not of this world. It's not a kingdom founded on violence, as Rome's was, and his followers will not fight. But it is a kingdom where people will follow his lead, even if Rome says otherwise.

"So you are a king, then?" Pilate asks. This is all he cares about. And Jesus says, "You can call me that. For this I was born, for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth." There's that word again! "Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice."

What Jesus is saying is this: "I was born for this moment, to stand before the power of the kingdoms of this world, and to speak the deeper truth that the only thing that matters is allegiance to God, the true Ruler of the world, and to God's kingdom which is to come. Everyone who belongs to that kingdom will listen to my voice and obey it, and not the kingdom of this world. That's the truth of the matter."

That's when Pilate veers off and says, "Well, what is truth anyway?" And then he leaves, not bothering to wait for an answer. But Pilate knew a king when he saw one, even if it was someone else's king. He knew someone who was demanding allegiance and seeking obedience when he met Jesus. We know this because Pilate wrote it on the plaque that went above Jesus' head on the cross, "The King of the Jews." But still, Pilate didn't wait for Jesus to answer his question about truth.

What Jesus might have said is that truth is not just some abstract concept, but can come in the shape of a person and a life lived differently and more deeply than Pilate could have imagined then. Jesus might have said to Pilate, if Pilate had bothered to stay around and listen, that truth was staring him in the face, though he couldn't see it. He might have said, "I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life!" and "You shall know the truth, and the truth shall set you free!"

Pilate might have realized that the proper question in Jesus' case was not, "What is truth?" but "Who is truth?", that is, who is the one who's really real, who is the one who knows the deeper reality behind appearances, who is the one who can really give you life and really set you free. It's not Caesar, and it's not Pilate! It's Jesus himself. But Pilate didn't stay around to hear it. He wrote that Jesus was a king all right, and put the plaque up on the cross, but Jesus was clearly not a king to

him, just to somebody else. Yes, Jesus was a king to the Jews, or at least to those that followed him, but Jesus was no king to Pilate. What was true for them was not true for him!

On Christ the King Sunday, Pilate's two questions still stand for us. By his resurrection, we know that Jesus is a king, and that one day he will rule the world. We know that this is the deeper truth of the matter, in spite of appearances to the contrary.

But is he a king to us? Is he the one to whom we have pledged our allegiance, the one who leads our lives, the one who gives us directions, and whose directions we follow? Will we serve Jesus when he calls in our lives, at work, at home, in the church? What will our answer be? Jesus is a king, but the question is, is he your king?

I hope the answer is yes, that in this world where Jesus' reign is still hidden behind appearances to the contrary, you can see beyond to what lies beneath, and recognize him as king for you. Because Jesus is where truth lies, or rather, Jesus is who truth is.

Amen