

Christ the King

Jeremiah 23:1-6, John 18:28–19:16a (ESV)

July 22, 2007

It was nearly two-thousand years ago that Pontius Pilate, governor of Judea, asked Jesus Christ, King of the Jews, Son of God, and Lord of the universe, on trial for his life, “What is truth?” His question continues to echo down through the centuries. “What is truth?” It seems to be a good question, a valid and appropriate question. Jesus had already said to the Jews who believed in him, “You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free” (John 8:32 (ESV)). Jesus had told Pilate, “For this purpose I was born and for this purpose I have come into the world—to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice.” Pursuit of the truth seems not only prudent and worthwhile but also positively good. Hence the question: “What is truth?”

Regrettably, it appears that Pilate did not ask the question in earnest. He did not wait for an answer. He was not intellectually curious about the truth. He was not seeking to know the truth, to believe in the truth, or to live the truth. He was not seeking to uphold the truth or to promote the truth. Instead, Pilate asked the question in such a way as to be dismissive and belittling. He brushed aside the words of Jesus as if they were the delusions of a madman. Pilate meant by his question to suggest either that truth is not knowable or, which is much worse, that there is no truth at all. His only interest was in finding the best way out of a difficult political situation. His question is remembered primarily as the classic expression of cynicism.

However, just because Pilate asked the question wrongly does not mean that he asked the wrong question. The fact that he did not wait for an answer does not mean that there is not an answer. The fact that he meant to dismiss the truth does not mean that he dismissed the truth. The truth is hardier than that. And now we have the advantage of overhearing Pilate speak the truth he did not know, did not realize, and did not recognize or want to uphold. “What is truth?” Come, let us seek it together.

The first great truth articulated here is that Jesus is King of the Jews and, by extension, Lord of the universe. This is introduced by Pilate himself in his first question to Jesus: “Are you the King of the Jews?” Even Jesus expressed surprise: “Do you say this of your own accord, or did others say it to you about me?” The significant thing for our purposes is that with this opening question Pilate has spoken a truth he did not know and borne witness to a reality in which he did not believe. His shortcoming and deficiencies are not of interest to us. The fact that he

did not know or believe this truth does not matter to us. The point here is that gospel was written in such a way for us to overhear Pilate speaking this truth. “Are you the King of the Jews?” Yes, yes he is, even though Jesus will not say so himself. “Are you the King of the Jews?” The question simultaneously both announces the truth and also invites us affirm it ourselves.

This affirmation does not occur in a vacuum. A thousand years earlier, David had been the King of the Israel. The prophecy we have read from Jeremiah, one among many, foretold David’s successor as king. The crowds in Jerusalem had hailed Jesus as King of Israel when he entered the city on Palm Sunday. In today’s reading, the kingship of Jesus is presented first as if it were an underling challenge to the imperial authority of Rome and finally as an otherworldly kingship which exceeded the authority of Rome. In quick succession, Pilate first asked Jesus, “Are you the King of the Jews?” Jesus said, “My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would have been fighting...But my kingdom is not from the world.” Pilate said to Jesus again, second, “So you are a king?” Jesus answered, “You say that I am a king.” Pilate said to the Jews, third, “Do you want me to release to you the King of the Jews?” They declined. The soldiers said, “Hail, King of the Jews!” and struck him with their hands. Pilate said to the Jews again, fourth, “Behold your King!” They protested. Pilate said to them yet again, with his fifth use of the term, “Shall I crucify your King?” The chief priests denied he was their king.

Pilate could not have believed that Jesus was King of the Jews, for surely if he had believed that, he would have had no hesitation about crucifying him. And yet, Pilate would not have been carelessly bandying about such an inflammatory term in the midst of a situation he was trying to quiet down. The only thing that makes sense here is that he is articulating for our sake a truth he did not know himself and a reality greater than he realized. Jesus is King of the Jews and yet not of the Jews alone. Jesus is king of a kingdom greater than the Roman Empire. Jesus is king of a kingdom greater than this world. Jesus is Lord of the universe. Pilate refused to acknowledge this truth. Pilate refused to act in accord with this truth. But he articulated it for us again and again.

The second great truth articulated here is that Jesus was not guilty of the charges against him. Three times Pilate said, “I find no guilt in him.” “I find no guilt in him.” “I find no guilt in him.” This is not merely an expression of personal opinion. This is an official ruling by the governor of Judea conducting a very serious trial on behalf of the Roman Empire, a trial of person charged with sedition, insurrection against the Empire. Pilate declared three times that Jesus was not guilty. Again, Pilate refused to act in accord with this truth. He had Jesus flogged and mocked despite his not being guilty. He went ahead and sent Jesus to his death. His

aforementioned cynicism about truth in general shines through here in his disregard for justice and for human life in particular. But at least Pilate articulated this truth for us again and again. And in so doing, he unwittingly affirmed the truth of the gospel which understands that Jesus Christ was without sin, without crime, without wrongdoing, and without guilt, so that when Jesus offered himself on our account on the cross, his was a good and perfect sacrifice, the sacrifice of an innocent one, the willing sacrifice of one without sin on behalf of all our sin. And his sinlessness is not the pious imagination of later Christian theologians. It is the official declaration of the Roman Empire. Thanks be to God!

The third great truth enacted here is that Pilate delivered Jesus over to them to be crucified. There was a lot of delivering going on here. The word appears five times in today's reading. The Jews delivered Jesus over to the governor at his headquarters. Pilate confronted Jesus with the hard reality that his own people had delivered him over to him. Jesus pointed out that the fact that his followers did not fight to prevent him from being delivered over to the governor was proof that his kingdom was not of this world. Jesus assured Pilate that the one who had delivered him over to him had the greater sin. And finally, Pilate himself delivered Jesus over to the chief priests to be crucified. Judas Iscariot and Annas and Caiaphas and Pontius Pilate all think they are in control of this situation, delivering Jesus over to one another, passing him on down the line.

They never realize that they are bit players in a much larger story. They never realize that Jesus Christ himself is the one in control of the situation and that it is going exactly according to plan. As he said, "You would have no authority over me at all unless it had been given you from above." They take nothing from him that he does not give. He gives his life, for our sake, and they unknowingly carry out his will. That is why he did not object when Judas betrayed him. That is why he did not defend himself before the priests. That is why he eventually fell silent before Pilate. Everything was going according to plan. They were delivering him up to death. And when they did so, a man with no guilt was condemned. A righteous man was executed. The Lord of life was put to death. The complete, perfect, and final sacrifice was offered not on the altar in the temple but on the cross outside the city. And in that moment, the power of sin, death, and evil was undone. The will of God was fulfilled.

"What is truth?" That is a huge question. Its most succinct answer comes a little earlier in this gospel, where Jesus says to his disciples, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6 (ESV)). In connection with this succinct answer that truth is in the person of Jesus Christ, we have additional propositional truths of the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and we have the truth of what he said about himself,

about his Father, and about the Holy Spirit. It all comes together. And in today's reading, we have three particular truths articulated for us by those who do not even recognize them as truth. The first great truth articulated here is that Jesus is King of the Jews and, by extension, Lord of the universe. The second great truth articulated here is that Jesus was not guilty of the charges against him. The third great truth enacted here is that Pilate delivered Jesus over to them to be crucified. And oddly enough, all of this truth telling occurred within the context of Pilate's easy dismissal of truth.

All of this happened a very long time ago. All of this seems very remote. One could raise a legitimate question about what it has to do with us or even what it can possibly have to do with us. And yet, it is also the case that the cynicism of Pilate is not unlike that of the world in which we live yet today. "What is truth?" "What is truth?" indeed! It is a commonplace today that truth is personal, individual, private, and incommunicable. If we were to say something today, such as "Jesus is Lord," we are likely now to get the smug and dismissive response, "That is your truth." I have heard those exact words too many times. "That is your truth." It is simultaneously nonsensical, infuriating, and very dangerous. Here is a confidence that moves beyond Pilate's question to an even more cynical answer.

The people who say such things are often both proud at how clever they are to have found a way to escape from the claim of truth upon them and also distressed at all the rest of us who refuse to jettison the truth. They seem oblivious to the uncomfortable reality that widespread acceptance of their thesis that there is no shared or shareable truth would tend to belie it. In fact, if only two of them were to agree upon it, that would belie it, which makes me wonder why they even bother to say it out loud. And I wonder how they would respond to other kinds of statements, such as mathematics, "Two plus two equals four," history, "George Washington is dead," or law, "Murder is illegal." Surely all of those are true, and they are true apart from me. Or what would happen if I were to ask one of them, "Are you breathing?" and, "Does it matter?" After all, answers to such questions would refer to his or her truth, not to mine! But I digress.

It is a commonplace today that truth is personal, individual, private, and incommunicable. But we should not fall for this lie. Instead, we need to be clear that this Pilate-like rejection of shared truth is the rejection of all truth and that this rejection of all truth is nothing less than an all out attack upon western thought in general and also and especially upon the Christian faith, the gospel of Jesus Christ, and the Scriptures in particular. That is why its proponents not only say out loud, but also are eager to say at every opportunity, "That is your truth." What that means is, "Jesus is not my Lord. The gospel has no claim upon me. Keep your faith to yourself." These are not neutral observations. These are not polite disagreements.

These are vicious attacks upon Christianity. We need to understand such attacks for what they are. And what both amuses and distresses me is how fresh, current, and avant-garde the proponents of merely personal truth think they are.

Far from being on the cutting edge of cultural advance, they are merely joining forces with that cynical and cowardly condemner of Jesus Christ, even Pontius Pilate, governor of Judea. Jesus said, “For this purpose I was born and for this purpose I have come into the world—to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice.” And Pilate said back to him, in a clear refusal to listen to his voice, “What is truth?” “What is truth?” Pilate was not seeking an answer to that question. The point of his rhetorical question two-thousand years ago was to dismiss all claims to truth, especially those made by Jesus Christ. And so the point of all who make common cause with him today is to dismiss all claims to truth, especially those made about Jesus Christ. This is the context within which we live and breathe today. This is the context within which we believe. This is the context within which we worship. This is the context within which we bear witness to our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. And this context is not unlike that of ancient Rome. We are not far away from Pontius Pilate. So today’s reading is not about a remote reality. Today’s reading is about the very world in which we live.

It is a commonplace today—despite the irony that if it is common, it is necessarily false, which is to say that it collapses under the weight of its own silliness—it is a commonplace today that truth is personal, individual, private, and incommunicable. We need to be clear that the implication of this is that there is absolutely no truth at all. Of course, it cannot be *true* that there is no *truth*, because that would be contradictory, a violation of the law of non-contradiction and hence an attack upon western thought, but that seems not to bother people. And it is to us, in this world, and against this commonplace, that Jesus Christ himself says, “For this purpose I was born and for this purpose I have come into the world—to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice.” “Everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice.” Thus the invitation is extended. The door is open. The kingdom awaits. Are you willing to listen? Are you willing to take the risk to pay attention? Are you willing even to consider the truth first that Jesus is in fact not only King of the Jews but also Lord of the universe and therefore your Lord and mine, second that there is no guilt in him, and third that he was delivered over to be crucified for your sake and for mine, so that our sin would be forgiven and that we would be given eternal life? Step back from the cynicism of our day, break away from the crowd mentality which isolates each one of us, and dare to hear again for the first time the gospel of Jesus Christ. It is the truth.

To God be the glory forever and ever! Amen.

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© Dr. James C. Goodloe IV, Pastor
Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church
1627 Monument Avenue
Richmond, Virginia 23220
www.grace-covenant.org