

What Is Truth?
By Reverend Litton Logan
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Scriptures:

John 18:33-37 (NRSV)

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

Sermon:

As with the other gospels, we do not know who wrote the Gospel of John or when or where. Scholarly speculations are that it was written somewhere between 90 and 110 C.E. - 60-80 years after the events the author reports. I favor the opinion that it was written in Alexandria, Egypt, which had a very large, cosmopolitan community of Jews familiar with the Jewish Philosopher Philo's Logos theology.

The author may have had knowledge of Mark's and Luke's Gospels, but uses sources unique to his own community of faith in an equally unique presentation. What is obvious throughout the Gospel of John and is often overlooked by many is that the central character of the gospel is God and what God has done in Jesus to introduce into the Jewish world a new manifestation and perspective on the present reality of the kingdom of God. A perspective that transcended the realities of time and space and eventually will come to be understood to include all people for all times.

When most modern Christians think about or talk about their faith they tend to do so through the tinted lenses of the Gospel of John.

Prior to our text today Annas, the father-in-law of the high priest Caiaphas, himself a former high priest, has Jesus hauled in for an interrogation not a trial. The ostensible reason for having Jesus brought in was his having made threats against the Temple, during his rout of the money changers doing business in the Temple. Such a threat would not only smack of blasphemy but of Zealotism and the threat of civil disobedience.

The accusations that Jesus and his disciples were secretly plotting to destroy the Temple failed because Jesus states that what he taught, he spoke openly not in secret, just ask anyone. However, this small group of Jewish leaders in their effort to thwart Jesus' potential influences over the masses, especially during the volatile period of Passover, end up forwarding Jesus to the high priest. We are not told this, but Caiaphas apparently seizes on the reported claims of Jesus being "The" or a messiah to shuttle him off to Pilate. The term messiah would have had royal and militant dimensions as well as seditious connotations because only Rome could appoint kings or rulers over its subjects.

Sedition against Rome was not a capital offense among the Jews, far from it. However, in an effort to rid themselves of the threat that Jesus posed in stirring up others and bringing the wrath of Rome down on all, they transferred him to Pilate, ostensibly as a rebel.

Contrary to our text today, the author obviously lacked knowledge of Jewish customs and laws in Judea in Jesus' day, given when and where he wrote. The Jews did in fact have the authority to execute fellow Jews for certain Jewish religious-political crimes, but this required a unanimous decision of the Sanhedrin not a consensus of just one or a few members except under very, very rare and extraordinary circumstances. However, an execution, even if warranted, could not have been carried out on holy days.

As evidence of the Jews' authority to execute with Roman compliance, I would submit Josephus' Antiquities (14:168-70) where he tells about Herod before he became king being brought up on capital charges before the Sanhedrin, which he dodged, as well as the stoning of the Deacon Stephen in Acts 7 before the high priest. This being said, the Jews had no authority to arrest or hold anyone on suspected crimes against Rome. The priestly collaborators may have felt it in their best interests to turn Jesus over however.

Something else playing in the background that is not obvious to many is that Jesus is a Galilean, not a Judean. For the Romans, all self-identified people of Israelite heritage were called Jews. This is important for several reasons, one being that when the author uses the term "the Jews" he is referring only to Judean Israelites and possibly their rabbinic descendants in his local synagogue. Secondly, Jesus being a Galilean plays a role in Pilate's insulting the Judean Israelites with his mock crowning of a Galilean peasant as their king as he is crucified. Another interesting thing in our text today is that the world Jesus speaks about being sent into with divine truths is actually the world of all Israelites be they Galilean, Judean, Perea, or even Samaritan. Jesus makes this clear in his response to the Annas. *Jesus answered him, "I have spoken openly to the world; I have always taught in synagogues and in the temple, where all Jews come together; I have said nothing secretly."*

As Jesus stands before Pilate, he is interrogated, he is not on trial. As a Jew, he would not have been entitled to a trial. He is given a hearing and interrogated only because the Jewish leadership insisted that he was a seditious force and needed to be dealt with immediately. Pilate is not going to just take the Jews word for it. By this time, Pilate had been called on the carpet by Rome a couple of times for his dealings with the Jews, causing him to be reluctant to get sucked into a Jewish religious-political affair that could blow up in his face. Thus, we get the picture of him trying to pass the buck and absolve himself of culpability in this Jesus affair.

In Pilate's interrogation of Jesus in John's Gospel, Jesus stands not as a social inferior but as an equal, just as he had before Annas and his group. In fact, in the Gospel of John, Jesus is always the master of his fate, including laying down his life for God's will. Pilate asked him, "Are you the King of the Jews".

Jesus' response to this honor challenge is to answer Pilate's question with a question, showing that he is not only a man of honor but is highly skilled at playing the honor challenge game, having the courage to defend his honor even against Rome.

Jesus asks Pilate the source of his question. Is it coming from him having a personal interest in Jesus and his ministry or is this the accusations that the Jews that have brought against him? Pilate's riposte is here again a question, "Am I a Jew?" Pilate is saying he doesn't give two cents about the Jews and their affairs beyond how they may affect him and Rome.

I believe in what Jesus says next, given that for John he shares in the mind and purposes of God, he reluctantly must use common concepts and terms like king and kingdom to convey to Pilate and John to his audiences the scope and the other worldliness of Jesus and the realm he

represents. Jesus is from above, the realm of God, and represents an alternate reality called the Kingdom of God that was destined to come on earth through him, the incarnate wisdom of God, from before the beginning. A kingdom reality that can and does live in and among all those who hear and embrace his teachings and ways synonymous with Gods ways.

Jesus then makes a declaration that his authority and status is not derived from the authorities of this world be they Roman or Jewish. If it were, his disciples naturally would have prevented him from being seized and interrogated by the Jews and subsequently brought before Pilate. Pilate says, "So you are a king?"

We might hear Jesus' response after a deep and bewildered sigh being something like this, "Well if that's the best term you've got for who and what I am, I guess we will have to go with that. All I can say is that my purpose existed before created reality and is to testify to the truth." Please note Jesus does not qualify what that truth is at this point for Pilate. John, his audience, and we know what that truth is. Pilate being this world oriented in response challenges Jesus for the last time with a philosophical question, "What is Truth?"

Pilate's question has been the subject of much debate and millions of gallons of ink over the centuries. As you know, I tend to scrounge around in the historical settings of the New Testament looking for answers and meanings in and for scripture. Therefore, Pilate's question brings to my mind several prevailing Hellenistic world views from that era and interestingly some from our day.

Given the obvious sophistication of John and his Jewish community of faith, he would have been very knowledgeable of certain Sophist's perspectives that had been around for well over a half a century. The early Sophists in their search for an absolute and comprehensive basis for determining what is the truth upon which to build and live a noble and virtuous life became frustrated and settled on truth as being relative and subjective.

Pythagoras, the greatest of the Sophists, stated that "Man (by which he meant each man [or person]) is the measure of all things, whether of their existence when they do exist, or of their non-existence when they do not."¹ Therefore, what a person believed to be true and could develop a consensus on, was considered to be the truth in that moment or possibly longer.

An example: If I feel a breeze blowing and it is cool, and you feel the same breeze and you say it is warm, the breeze cannot be both simultaneously cool and warm. However, if I can convince you that your sense of cool and warm are a bit off because you are dressed more warmly than me and I bring you around to my way of thinking then the breeze is cool for both of us regardless of its actual temperature relative to our unique metabolisms or how we are dressed. At the collective level, what a person or persons can persuade others to believe can become policy or law, at least until some dissenting opinion convinces otherwise.

I think this is the proper context in which to hear Pilate's question and Jesus' answer. In so doing, we don't have to wade through centuries of convoluted theological arguments in order to discredit Pilate or his question, or to defend or enhance Jesus' answers. In this context, we are dealing with questions and statements of values, meanings, and purposes not with the validity of physical laws of cause and effect.

So, let me say that if Pilate was serious in his question and not just being antagonistic, he is right up there with one of the greatest seekers of truth of all ages - Leo Gallagher, one of my favorite standup comics. Although I didn't care too much for some of his HBO specials, they were a bit too raunchy. You may remember Gallagher by his spoof on the Vega-O-Matic infomercials

¹ Marshall, John. A Short History of Greek Philosophy (Kindle Locations 823-832). Public Domain Books. Kindle Edition.

where he smashes vegetables and watermelons with a big wooden mallet called the Sledge-O-Matic and splattered his audiences with squashed vegetables and watermelons. Dumb, I know.

However, Gallagher asked some of the more profound questions in his efforts to understand the "truth of things." For instance:

Why is it that we drive through a parkway, and park in a driveway?

Why are they called apartments when they're all stuck together?

If con is the opposite of pro, is Congress the opposite of progress?

If 7-11 is open 24 hours a day, 365 days a year, why are there locks on the doors?

You know that little indestructible black box that is used on planes? Why can't they make the whole plane out of the same material?

Why do they call them buildings when they're already built? They ought to call them built.

Why do cowboys wear a spur on each boot? If one side of the horse moves, the other side goes with it.

Therefore, to say some statement or idea is the truth, as I understand it, is to locate its source of authority, value, or meaning in a dimension beyond our everyday ways of knowing and defining things. Truth is what makes the real, real, and gives ultimate authority to the principles and ideals we live by. It seems we human beings can know the truth when we see it or hear it even though we may not always be able to define it. This is to paraphrase Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart's statement about defining pornography, I may not be able to define what it is or isn't, but "I know it when I see it." I dare say that without this ability to know and affirm the truth, our lives would not only be meaningless and hopeless but, I think not human.

Again, John understands that Jesus and his teachings contain truths not of this world, they are from another world, a world that existed in the wisdom or reason of God before time began. Jesus' truth-world cannot be reduced to religious propositions and defended with theological or philosophical arguments, it must be experienced. In this, the Sophists were on to something. However, Jesus' truth-world is also about the concrete foundation upon which all reality is based.

When an individual hears the message of Jesus it resonates with an innate ability to know truth and it brings not only joyous hope in this life but a promise of eternal joy. This is especially important for John and his audiences because John does not have a clear sense of the end or end times as do the other gospels. For John, the kingdom is here now, ever growing in the hearts and minds of people, as they become aware of and possessed by the Truths of Jesus. This internal and subjective participation in the kingdom reality is given objective form in this world in the shared life of sacred community. This individual-collective world of the community of Christ is not an anarchy, where anything religious goes, but a community of people, whose reality test their interior spiritual and community life against the teachings of Jesus.

Thus, given that John's Gospel has no discernable eschatology, when Jesus tells Nicodemus he must be born from above, he is telling Nicodemus he must be open to participating in a divine, alternate reality, called the kingdom of God in his present and in his associations with like spirit-minded people.

Hear how the writer of John understood the source and purposes of this alternate world of God and its truth for his day and time.

John 3:16-19 (TMNT)

"This is how much God loved the world: He gave his Son, his one and only Son. And this is why: so that no one need be destroyed [be cut off from a positive relationship to God and positive, continuing relationships with others]; by believing in him, anyone can have a whole and lasting life. God didn't go to all the trouble of sending his Son merely to point an accusing finger, telling the world how bad it was. He came to help, to put the world right again. Anyone who trusts in him is acquitted; anyone who refuses to trust him has long since been under the death sentence without knowing it. And, why? Because of that person's failure to believe in the one-of-a-kind, Son of God when introduced to him."

God is acknowledged and worshiped in the highly subjective world of spirit and truth and can only be fully known and experienced through people's participation in the divine dimension of love; that is, a loyal, living commitment and participation in God's will and ways in all aspects of our lives. Its emotional component would be joy. I believe we come equipped with all that we need to realize our fullest potential as divine beings given our innate capacities to love, be loved, and to know the truth of love as the divine foundation of all life. We realize our fullest potential in our capacity as beings created in the image of God, when we strive to love God with all our being by loving others as we love ourselves.

This is not to say that other life philosophies or religions do not possess good life truths, they do. However, John's claims for Jesus are not about relative truths of the good or the good life based upon cultural consensuses, but about Jesus and his teachings being the absolute Truth - the ultimate way of being human and the people of God for all time and beyond this world. Therefore, those who would be citizens in good standing in the kingdom of God now and yet to be they must strive to love and be open to love.