

Title: Making Truth Personal

Subtitle: Having ears to hear the challenging demands of truth.

Video URL: <https://youtu.be/rR9Q5Maem7I?si=yivzrRVllG4PYKSt>

Today is the feast day of Christ the King. It marks the last Sunday of the Church calendar year. Our Old Testament lesson today reminds us, ***“His dominion is an everlasting dominion that shall not pass away, and his kingship is one that shall never be destroyed.”***¹ But his kingship is not associated with worldly power or coercion. In the dialogue between Jesus and Pilate in today’s Gospel, Jesus tells Pilate that He is a King but that his kingship is not of this world. The Jews wanted a king like Caesar, but even though Jesus was a king, ***“he made himself nothing and took the form of a servant.”***² Now, as he was ready to give his life as a ransom for many, he told Pilate, ***“You are right in saying I am a king. In fact, for this reason, I was born, and for this, I came into the world to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of the truth listens to me.”***³

In the same spirit, our opening Collect prayer today asks that God would ***“Grant that the peoples of the earth, divided and enslaved by sin, may be freed and brought together under his most gracious rule.”***⁴ We long for his rule because ***“righteousness and justice are the foundation of this throne,”***⁵ for his reign is built on love and truth.

Truth is a complex issue to discern due to how easily it can be twisted and distorted by harsh and ungracious applications. Yet, no matter how difficult and confusing it may be, we long for it in every meaningful relationship. We long for it in our marriages, family relations, and friendships. We want relationships that have substance. We want relationships that go beyond the surface of

¹ Daniel 7:14

² Philippians 2:6

³ John 18:37

⁴ BCP, p. 236 Collect for proper 29, The Feast of Christ the King.

⁵ Psalm 89:14

rhetorical words or mere appearance. If no one ever talks about misunderstandings, hurt feelings, or dares to air frustrations, then we don't have what it takes to grow in healthy, wholesome ways. Authentic relationships develop in an atmosphere where truth is sought even if it means that hurts are unburied, hostilities are revealed, and challenging questions are asked.

When I was young and first married, I didn't have the emotional intelligence to talk about negative feelings. I was raised in a family of six boys. As young boys, we didn't feel comfortable wearing our feelings on our sleeves and being assertive meant that we hid our vulnerabilities from others. But when I got married, I encountered a whole new world where emotions needed expression. Fortunately, I married a woman who could read my face and ask hard questions. Ellen didn't hesitate to ask, "What is going on with you? I can see that you are troubled about something. Tell me what it is?" Feelings I had stuffed and ignored for years were now gently brought into the open. It was like a new part of me was finally unthawing as I courageously confronted what was happening inside. And as the truth within me was gently exposed, our marriage grew.

As I look back and reflect on those heart-to-heart conversations, I can see that something similar was going on between our Lord and Pilate in today's Gospel. Like most of us, Pilate was looking for the truth, yet he was unwilling to commit himself to it when it was staring him in the face. His struggle is not uncommon, for the implications of truth make us all uncomfortable.

Therefore, the drama presented before us in Pilate's encounter with Jesus is one of the most intense and provocative encounters in all of Scripture. Pilate is caught between a proverbial "rock and a hard place" as he wrestles with the apparent innocence of the man before him and the political pressure to condemn him.

Pilate was intelligent enough to see that this prisoner was utterly harmless so far as Rome was concerned. But he can't help expressing his scornful wonder, "***Are you the King of the Jews?***"⁶

From Pilate's point of view, this was an unbelievable proposition. Should this abused and rejected carpenter, with no apparent followers around him, who was betrayed by one of his intimate friends, deserted by the rest, and hounded to death by the fierce cries of Pharisees and Sadducees, chief priests and elders actually be "the King of the Jews?" Any affirmative answer would certainly seem contrary to all apparent evidence.

Jesus, aware of Pilate's contemptuous question, asks, "Is that your *idea ... or did others talk to you about me?*"⁷ Pilate wanted to distance himself from the truth, but Jesus made the matter before Pilate personal by appealing to his conscience. So he asks, "What do you think? Where do you stand regarding this matter?"

As the implications of Jesus' question get a little too close for comfort, Pilate contemptuously responds, "***Am I a Jew?***"⁸ He was not a person who was interested in religious matters. So, he redirects the conversation back to more practical issues. "***Your own nation and the chief priests have handed you over to me. What have you done?***"⁹

In his answer to Pilate's question, Jesus explains, "***My kingdom is not of this world.***"¹⁰ If the kingdom that Jesus proclaimed belonged in any sense to this world, he would not have been handed over without a fight. The fact that there had been nothing more than Peter's impulsive attack upon the High Priest's slave, which Jesus rectified by healing the man's ear, further demonstrated the falsity of the charge brought against Jesus.

⁶ John 18:33

⁷ John 18:34

⁸ John 18:35

⁹ John 18:35b

¹⁰ John 18:36

Therefore, as the certainty of Jesus' innocence becomes increasingly clear to Pilate, the struggle in his own soul intensifies. One can feel the vacillation and uncertainty in Pilate as he moves back and forth, in and out, from the quiet, probing conversation with Jesus in the Praetorium to the angry political pressure of the Jews outside who are demanding the death of the man he faces.

So, Pilate inquires further, "***Then you are a King?***"¹¹ Jesus answered, "***You are right in saying I am a king. In fact, for this reason, I was born, and for this, I came into the world to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of the truth listens to me.***"

The influence and authority of heaven work upon the human heart by truth applied with grace in a way that is "***...first of all pure, peaceable and gentle, easy to be entreated and is full of good fruit.***"¹² When the truth is either forced, inconvenient, or conflicts with our personal desires, it can quickly become the target of suspicions. The first temptation presented by the serpent in the garden started with the question, "***Has God said?***"¹³ In that same suspicious environment, Pilate asked, "***What is truth?***"¹⁴ Consequently, he was driven step by step to the final expediency of ordering the crucifixion of one whom he knew to be innocent.

But the problem we face is not concerning Pilate. Like Pilate, each one of us faces competing claims for our affections. But we can embrace the loving, liberating, and life-giving reality of him who is the truth. And by doing so, we are empowered to live a healthy, wholesome, and attractive life. A life that includes being a part of God's beloved community that boldly proclaims Good News so that others can be set free. Amen.

¹¹ John 18:37

¹² James 3:17

¹³ Genesis 3:1b

¹⁴ John 18:38