

Friday, March 29, 2024

Good Friday

John 18.1—19.42

The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

Service Live Streamed at:

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/3272357879735780>

(Sermon begins at about 31:15)

“What is Truth?”

“What is truth?”

These words are Pontius Pilate’s response to Jesus during an exchange about whether Jesus is the King of the Jews. His response to Jesus’ comment: “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.” It’s hard to know Pilate’s intent asking Jesus, “What is truth?” Was this merely a rhetorical question? Was it a genuine attempt to ascertain the truth? And if so, whose truth? Or was it a mocking inquiry designed not to further, but rather to shutdown, conversation? We cannot be entirely sure as to the truth surrounding this question, “What is truth?”

Although there is something interesting about the placement of this exchange within John’s account of the Passion Narrative. Pilate’s interrogation of Jesus and his famous utterance of “What is truth?” comes virtually at the midpoint of the Passion Narrative. Mere coincidence, or intentional on John’s part? Again, we cannot know for sure. Although it was not uncommon for the authors of the Gospels to structure their writings so that central themes are positioned at the center of the written text. A literary device to further highlight the central point of the story.

Whether this was John’s intent or not, whether this was Pilate’s intent or not, Pilate’s question to Jesus, “What is truth?” is indeed the central theme of the entire Passion Narrative. The question that everyone portrayed in the narrative addresses in their own way.

In our own time, in a post-modern world in which “fake news” has come to imply the existence of alternative truths, we have come to realize that truth is, in many cases, subjective. My truth may not be the same as your truth. Although this is not particularly new to our age. Looking at the Passion Narrative reveals an array of apparent truths that are expressed or tested in the narrative arc.

What is truth? Judas had his own truth. The Passion Narrative opens with Judas’ betrayal and leading the temple soldiers to arrest Jesus. While we don’t get the whole account of Judas’ betrayal, we see the results played out. We are never told why Judas betrays Jesus. Merely that earlier in the Gospel, at the Last Supper, it is noted that “the devil had already put it into the heart of Judas Iscariot to betray him” (Jn 13.2). What was Judas’ truth for betraying his friend and teacher? Was it for the money? Or possibly, as some have posited, that Jesus’ understanding of what it means to be Messiah was not consistent with the understanding Judas subscribed to; and that perhaps Judas’ betrayal was his way of trying to force Jesus’ hand, to

get him to be more of a warrior king as the Messiah was traditionally understood to be. But this was not who Jesus was. Judas' truth was not Jesus' truth.

What is truth? The temple authorities had their own truth. The Pharisees and the chief priests, in convincing Judas to betray Jesus, and in sending their soldiers to arrest him did so because they viewed Jesus as a threat to their authority. All because Jesus dared to speak out against them and for pointing out what they were doing was not always in alignment with God's commandments. The temple authorities' truth was not Jesus' truth.

What is truth? Simon Peter had his own truth. Peter draws a sword in an effort to prevent Jesus from being arrested and from undergoing his Passion. Obviously out of loyalty to and love for his friend. Yet, Jesus knew that this was how things were to play out: "Am I not to drink the cup that the Father has given me?" And then, a little later, Peter does what appears to be a 180. When recognized as being one of Jesus' disciples, Peter denies knowing Jesus three times. Self-preservation taking precedence over loyalty. Peter's truth, changing with circumstances, was not Jesus' truth.

What is truth? Pontius Pilate had his own truth. He bows to the whims of the temple authorities in viewing Jesus as a threat. Despite finding no case against him, Pilate nonetheless condemns Jesus and releases a convicted criminal instead. Presumably out of fear of a potential uprising that could effectively end his career. Better to condone injustice to save his own skin. Pilate's truth was not Jesus' truth.

What is truth? That in a perversion of justice by the religious and civil authorities, Jesus was condemned to death, because of a perceived threat; charged with crimes that had no basis in fact. Because Jesus dared to preach a truth they did not want to hear. Because their truth was not Jesus' truth.

What is truth? Jesus does not provide a response to Pilate's question when it is originally posed. But he does provide an answer through what follows. In going to the cross. In what happens on the cross.

What is truth? That Jesus was crucified out of fear, out of hate.

What is truth? That Jesus selflessly went to the cross in an act of compassion, in an act of forgiveness, in the ultimate act of love.

On this night, we stand at the foot of the cross watching our Lord die. We stand at the foot of the cross and remember just who he is dying for.

That is truth.