

Friday, April 3, 2026

Good Friday

John 18.1—19.42

The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

“Truth”

On the evening before he was arrested and brought to trial before Pontius Pilate, Jesus shared a meal with his disciples. In John’s account of that Last Supper, Jesus gives a lengthy speech, his final words to his disciples. Their final instructions, as it were. A speech that is known as the Farewell Discourse. Within the first few moments of that discourse, Jesus makes the well-known statement, “I am the way, the truth, and the life.” A statement of how Jesus reveals God to this particular faith community. To the faith community that would grow to be the Christian Church.

For the most part, I get what Jesus means by being “the way, the truth, and the life.” He is the way by which we encounter and come to know God in our own lives. Through his life and ministry, through his death and resurrection, he is the means that we obtain new and eternal life. The very things we will celebrate in just a few days. His being the Way. His being the Life. What I find a bit challenging is the part about him being “the truth.” Not that I question it. It’s just that, to me, saying “I am the truth” is a bit nebulous. What does it mean that Jesus is the truth? How is Jesus the truth? As with so many things when it comes to Jesus, there are a variety of interpretations, a variety of answers. Dare I say, a variety of truths?

Some of what it means for Jesus to be “the truth” is found in the Passion Narrative. In a specific event of the Passion that occurs mere hours after Jesus tells his disciples, “I am the way, the truth, and the life.” That moment comes in Jesus’ trial before Pontius Pilate. When brought before Pilate, there is a back and forth about whether Jesus is “the King of the Jews.” This is the charge on which Jesus’ fate rests. The temple authorities have leveled this charge because, from their perspective, it is a blasphemous statement: Jesus equating himself with God, who is, strictly speaking, the real King of the Jews. For the Roman authorities, this assertion is traitorous. Anyone claiming to be a king would be challenging the authority of the Roman emperor. An act of sedition.

Jesus, as often the case in John’s Gospel, is a bit cryptic. Talking about his kingdom not being of this world. Then saying, “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.” To which Pilate famously responds, “What is truth?”

Now, if I had my way, Jesus and Pilate would have engaged in a spirited discussion of that very question. Alas, that is not the case. Pilate essentially dismisses the whole matter, wanting to be done with Jesus. “I find no case against him.” No further discussion with Jesus. And yet, what happens through the remainder of the trial in actuality provides the very answer to Pilate’s question, “What is truth?” Or rather, answers the question as to what it means for Jesus to be the truth. Actions on the part of Pilate himself which answer the question, further clarifying Jesus’ identity.

Before we get to those specific points in the trial, there is one moment prior to the trial, which Pilate did not witness, that is part of the answer to how Jesus is the truth—to his true identity. That is in the garden when the temple police and the Roman soldiers come to arrest Jesus. When they arrive, Jesus asks, “Whom are you looking for?” to which they respond “Jesus of Nazareth.” And how does Jesus respond? By saying, “I am he.” Although, in actuality, the literal translation of what he says is, “I am.” To the Jews present, this would have been a profound statement, and the reason those present fell to the ground. In his response, Jesus is making a direct connection between himself and the Divine name, with how God identifies himself: “I Am.” Recall that when Moses encounters God in the burning bush and asks God for his name, God responds, “I Am Who I Am.” Or, in Hebrew, transliterated as YHWH. So here, in this statement at the beginning of the Passion Narrative, Jesus is explicitly identifying himself with and as God. Jesus expressing the truth of his identity.

What then happens during the trial before Pilate, what happens following Pilate’s question of “What is truth?” are specific aspects of Jesus’ divine identity.

The first is tied up in the very charge leveled against Jesus: that he is King of the Jews. The image of kingship. On the face of it, an absurd allegation, even to Roman ears. To the point that Pilate publicly stated “I find no case against him.” He certainly did not see Jesus as a threat. And certainly not as a king. To demonstrate this, after Pilate has Jesus flogged, rather than have Jesus stand there naked, in humiliation, as would have been a normal course of action, “the soldiers wove a crown of thorns and put it on his head, and they dressed him in a purple robe. They kept coming up to him, saying, ‘Hail, King of the Jews!’” Obviously meant to mock and ridicule Jesus for his alleged kingship. And to mock the temple authorities for making such a charge in the first place. Yet, even in the mocking, a representation of the truth of who Jesus is.

Nonetheless, out of fear of the temple authorities inciting a riot, Pilate gives in and finds Jesus guilty as charged. Guilty of sedition. Punishable by crucifixion. The unwitting demonstration of Jesus as king continues on in the execution itself. When Jesus is nailed to the cross, a sign is placed above his head: “Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews.” The official statement of the charge of sedition against Jesus. But at the same time, unwittingly proclaiming the theological truth of who Jesus is. The fact that the statement was written in Hebrew, Latin, and Greek, added weight to the statement. Hebrew being the official language of the Jews. Latin being the official language of the Roman Empire. And Greek being the *lingua franca* of the day and the universal language of business and commerce. The three languages unintentionally adding a sense of the universality of Jesus’ kingship.

Then there is the side argument between Pilate and the temple authorities, who want the wording changed—not to proclaim that Jesus IS King of the Jews, but that he CLAIMS to be King of the Jews. By refusing to change it, Pilate adds a sense of finality, of truth, to the statement of Jesus as king. The cross, with its universal proclamation, becoming Jesus’ throne. The crucifixion becoming Jesus’ coronation. Taken together, particularly in light of how events will ultimately play out, providing an irrefutable statement that ultimate power comes from God and that power is vested in the One hanging on the cross. The One hailed as King of the Jews.

Interjected into the demonstration of kingship is another moment indicating another aspect of the divine truth of who Jesus is. In pronouncing guilt, Pilate “brought Jesus outside and sat on the judge’s bench at the place called The Stone Pavement, or in Hebrew Gabbatha.” The verb

used can be translated as “sat” or “seated him.” That either Pilate sat on the judge’s bench or he sat Jesus on the judge’s bench. While we cannot know which actually happened, seating Jesus on the judge’s bench would have completely been in keeping with Pilate mocking Jesus and taunting the temple authorities. If this is indeed the case, seating Jesus on the judge’s bench while pronouncing judgment against Jesus would have been an ironic twist to the final act of the trial. By placing Jesus on the judge’s bench, Pilate unwittingly places Jesus in his rightful place as judge. In mockingly judging Jesus, who in truth, as God incarnate, will be judge of the world.

The final aspect of the divine truth of who Jesus is comes in the fact that this all occurs, at least in John’s account, on the Day of Preparation—the day before Passover when preparations were made for the Passover meal. More specifically, that Pilate pronounced Jesus guilty at noon on the Day of Preparation. Traditionally, this is the time that the Passover lambs were slaughtered in preparation for the Passover meal. This is in keeping with the image of Jesus as the Passover lamb. Foretold by John the Baptist at the beginning of Jesus’ public ministry when he proclaimed, “Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!” (Jn 1.29).

Another direct connection to the idea of Jesus being the Passover lamb is in the rather strange statement that, on the cross, when Jesus says, “I am thirsty,” the soldiers “put a sponge full of the wine on a branch of hyssop and held it to his mouth.” In actuality, hyssop, because of being spindly, would not have been suited for the task. Other options would have been readily available. Yet, as reported in Exodus, hyssop was the plant used by the Hebrews to mark their doors with the blood of the Passover lamb to protect them from the angel of death. Perhaps here, at the crucifixion, hyssop is meant to evoke the image of the original Passover event, and to mark Jesus as God’s own. Indicating that he will ultimately be delivered from the plague of death. Equating Jesus own blood with the blood of the Passover lamb.

At Jesus’ crucifixion, there is a more explicit reference to the Passover event. That when the soldiers went to break the legs of those being crucified and “saw that he was already dead, they did not break his legs. Instead, one of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, and at once blood and water came out . . . These things occurred so that the scripture might be fulfilled, ‘None of his bones shall be broken.’” A direct reference to and fulfillment of God’s instructions at the original Passover not to break the legs of the Passover sacrifice. Again, likening Jesus with the Passover lamb.

The sentence of death being delivered at noon on the Day of Preparation, the use of hyssop to “mark” Jesus as one to be delivered from death, and the injunction not to break the legs of the Passover sacrifice combining in fulfillment of John the Baptist’s recognition that Jesus is the ultimate Passover sacrifice. The one who will be the means by which his people are led to freedom and new life.

Jesus said, “I am the way, the truth, and the life.” Even as Pontius Pilate, at Jesus’ trial questions “What is truth?” the actions of Pilate and the Roman soldiers unwittingly served to answer that rhetorical question. Even in his trial and crucifixion, in what is a tragic miscarriage of justice, Jesus is clearly demonstrated as God incarnate; as the King not just of the Jews, but of all humanity; the judge of the world; and the Passover sacrifice. But all of that pales in comparison to the truth that will be revealed on the third day.