

Sermon for 24th November 2024, Year B, Christ the King

Preached at St Serf Shettleston

Revelation 1:4b-8; John 18:33-37

Sermon

“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.”

Our gospel reading stops here at verse 37 and we don't get to hear Pilate's famous response. I wonder if anyone can remember what it is? Jesus is talking about 'belonging to the truth' and Pilate responds... “What is truth?” Not “What is the truth?” but “What is truth?” which seems a very modern question in our era of fake news and brazen political lies scattered across our news channels and social media.

As someone born solidly in the middle of 'Generation X', I grew up in the 70s and 80s at a time when authorities were starting to be mistrusted, and the only thing we could rely on was our own experience.

My mum, born in the mid-40s, always said things like “this is the way I was taught when I was growing up and I'm not going to change now,” as if received wisdom from her parents and grandparents was absolute truth and could never be challenged. For my generation though, in a more postmodern age, there was no Absolute Truth. Instead, everything depended on context, and we needed to figure things out everything for ourselves. What was true for you was not necessarily true for me, especially when it came to social mores or religious dogma, and we realised that even the Bible could be interpreted in a dozen different ways, depending on the perspective of the reader and not just the original intentions of the writer - which weren't always clear either.

For example, in centuries and decades past, the Bible has been used to justify slavery and argue against any racial mixing as well as limit women's freedoms and participation in society. But modern theologians now find very different truths in the Bible to ones that were formerly unquestioned. Women were once told to be silent in the churches - now they are bishops, at least in Anglicanism.

But many Churches still argue whether the Bible teaches that LGBTQ+ people should be excluded as sinful or included as a blessing. Truth on that topic is still hotly debated. Immigration is another area where the 'Truth' of God's will is unclear in a complicated world. The Bible is full of admonitions that God's people must care for foreigners as if they were natives, but it never discusses whether there can ever be 'too much' immigration. Even if we ask ourselves, "What would Jesus do," in our modern world, there's no guarantee we will all find the same 'truth' there waiting for us. I once asked children in a primary school RE class what they thought Jesus would do about immigrants crossing the Channel in small boats. The answers ranged from 'he would look after them with kindness' to 'he would protect us from the invasion.'

I've also noticed that if you ask a storyteller if their stories are true, they will respond with a wry smile and say something like, "All my stories are true... and some actually happened."

Part of the storyteller and sermon-writer's art seems to be to weave truth into stories so that it can slip into your mind sideways while you're distracted. It's like trying to get your cat to swallow a pill by mixing it with tasty food, though admittedly you will often find the pill licked dry and left in the empty bowl.

So, when Pilate says, "What is truth?", I think he's left the pill in the empty bowl. He's the regional representative of a vast and powerful empire and he could not care less about local religious squabbles. Everyone believes different things in an empire. His job is law and order and taxes. He just wants Jesus out of his hair. For him, truth is a tool. But he's also fearful. He's afraid of losing control. There's

a baying mob outside and he can't release Jesus even though he knows he's innocent. Like many politicians, he can't be true to his own convictions; he can't do what he knows is right. His role prevents him being authentic. "Are you the king of the Jews?" he asks, perhaps hoping that Jesus will condemn himself.

Jesus, however, can only ever be true to himself, and he reaches out to offer that truth to Pilate. "Do you ask this on your own?" he says, "Or did others tell you about me?" One can imagine the noise surrounding the two men fading into silence as Jesus reaches out to Pilate and invites him to drop the role and become himself. Which one has the real majesty? When I picture this scene in my mind, the strong man of Roman power begins to shrink and fade as the Son of Man grows brighter and more solid before him.

Jesus is far more interested in offering Pilate a chance to recognise an eternal truth than he is in defending himself. For Jesus, truth is not *just* something you believe intellectually, but something that changes and transforms you, something you belong to, something that you *are*. In chapter 8 of John's gospel, Jesus says, "you will know the truth and the truth will set you free". Then in chapter 14 he declares, "*I* am the way, the truth and the life". Truth is not a fact, or an idea, but a person. Jesus is the path, the destination and the beacon that lights the way. To meet him is to meet the Truth. Even with Pilate, Jesus offers to be the good shepherd. "Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice," he says.

Jesus may seem powerless in the grip of Roman authority, but this is the unveiling of his glory. This is someone claiming to be wisdom itself, goodness itself, authenticity itself, showing us the very best that humanity can be, showing us, in fact, God.

The storyteller, the sermon-writer, and the poet, erudite as he or she may be, can only offer a partial truth, but God's truth is always fully available and never hidden, because the Truth that Jesus is offering to Pilate is not a wise word, but

himself. There are no gnostic secrets hidden in Christianity, no Dan Brown mysteries waiting to be uncovered. Only the Lord of life, inviting us to drop our masks and follow him home.

Pilate wields the power of Rome, but Jesus declares his kingdom to be something else entirely. It consists of those who hear his voice, who want a relationship with him and with God, who have recognised that loving community is infinitely more worthwhile than power and wealth.

This is why this last Sunday before Advent is called the feast day of 'Christ the King'. It comes right at the end of the Church year, before we start afresh with the Nativity. Today we are celebrating the conclusion of the Jesus story, his everlasting kingship over creation, his ongoing invitation to join God's authentic kingdom of love.

But Christ the King is not just the end of the story but also the very beginning. Christ was also the King *before* he came into the world. "In the beginning was the Word," starts John's gospel, "and the Word was with God, and the Word was God... And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth."

'Full of grace and truth.' This is the eternal Truth that God has shown us, through scripture, through the ancient traditions of the Church, and through our own experience, that God the Creator loves everything that God has made, and was made human in Jesus to magnify that love from an intellectual holy idea into a profound lived experience of inner transformation.

It's not a clever idea that saves us; it's the experience of being loved by the one who made us. This is the point of everything we do in our faith. Everything is designed to help us experience God's love and God's presence among us. This is the Truth that sets us free.