

What is Our Truth?

(John 18:33-37)

Sermon delivered by The Rev. Matt Rhodes at Christ Church, Millwood, Virginia
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May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable to you, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

Today's Gospel reading is at its heart the story of two men: one, a son of Rome; the other, the Son of God. The first seeks the truth; the second witnesses to it.

The son of Rome uses the power and authority received from his emperor to impose the rule of an oppressive kingdom on the children of Abraham. The Son of God uses the authority received from his heavenly Father to work for the salvation of these children from their earthly bonds. He seeks to bring about a new, greater kingdom, one built on a heavenly foundation.

In this brief passage from John, the journeys of these two sons – one that began at the heart of the Roman Empire, the other beginning in a small working class village in Galilee – intersect in the heart of Jerusalem. Jesus, who only recently was swept along by cheering, adoring crowds from Jericho to Jerusalem in advance of the Passover Feast, now finds himself at the mercy of a jeering, contemptuous crowd anxious to turn him over to the authorities. A man beloved and proclaimed by many as the Messiah just days before now finds himself very much alone.

Unfortunately, the boundaries presented in today's passage – these five brief verses – do not allow us to get a full impression of exactly what is happening. In order to do that, I want to take things back to verse 28 and the true introduction of this scene:

Then they took Jesus from Caiaphas to Pilate's headquarters. It was early in the morning. They themselves did not enter the headquarters, so as to avoid ritual defilement and to be able to eat the Passover. So Pilate went out to them and said, "What accusation do you bring against this man?" They answered, "If this man were not a criminal, we would not have handed him over to you." Pilate said to them, "Take him yourselves and judge him according to your law." The Jews replied, "We are not permitted to put anyone to death." (This was to fulfill what Jesus had said when he indicated the kind of death he was to die.)

So with the scene established and the main players introduced, let us consider a few things. We know that this encounter takes place early in the morning, just as the sun is rising. On one side, we have the crowd, standing at the gate of Pilate's headquarters but refusing to enter because of concerns of ritual purity. They have brought Jesus to Pilate after his questioning by the high priest Caiaphas and the Pharisees during the previous night.

Elsewhere we have Pilate, found somewhere deep within the walls of the praetorium, unaware of what is about to take place. Because it was early, someone had to alert Pilate to the arrival of the crowd; perhaps they even had to wake him up.

Might Pilate have been angry? Perhaps. Here it is, first thing in the morning, and he is being confronted – quite out of the blue – by a crowd gathered at the gate wanting him to question some random itinerant preacher in their custody. It seems in the context of the passage that someone perhaps mentioned in clear terms their wanting this preacher tried. Pilate may have deferred, a testiness revealed in his voice, saying this was an issue for the Jewish authorities. Once, twice, three times – each time in a tone angrier than before. Finally, he exclaims, “This is ***not*** my problem!”

But perhaps then there is a pause. The messenger who has gone to summon the governor stands before him, terrified at what Pilate’s wrath might mean for him if he dares to speak. Despite that fear, he leans in and haltingly whispers, “But prefect ... ***this*** man ... claims to be ... a *King*.”

Now regardless of how you see these hidden moments in the passage, one thing is clear: whether it is the crowd or Pilate, there is in each of them something lurking just below the surface. They all want ***the truth***. And the version of the truth each expected may have been different. I think one of the most powerful verses in this entire scene, in addition to those before today’s passage, was also cut out after these verses by those creating the lectionary. A single line uttered by Pilate in the very next verse – three simple words – is the most challenging of all.

What ***is*** truth?

This is a question for which many people are struggling – sometimes with a sense of desperation – to find the answer. That is certainly the question on Pilate’s mind as he sought to unravel the situation he encountered early on this morning. And on this morning, it was not easy for him to arrive at the answers to his questions: Who is this Jesus? Why is this rabble, this crowd of Pharisees and officials, so afraid of him?

And in the context of the scene, Pilate’s search was not convenient. He, Jesus and the crowd were not in the same place together; the divide between Jesus and the crowd required the governor to take a journey of many steps, of going out and reentering, of questioning the crowd and questioning Jesus – again and again.

In this moment, there was a physical divide between the Son of God and the people of Israel, and in his quest to find the truth the son of Rome was bridging that divide.

But I do not see Pilate walking this loop in isolation. The governor did not live alone and unattended, and so along the sides of the corridor there may have been guards, servants, and other members of the household standing in silence, not daring to interrupt or question him

about what is taking place. But even more, I can see people standing hidden in the shadows of the inner chamber, looking at Jesus and wondering about the “truth” of this man’s existence. Was he just another itinerant prophet and rabble rouser, or, they wonder, is there something more to ***this*** man?

At one point early in my life, I was one of those people standing in the shadows, wondering about the truth. I was deeply hurt by people sitting next to me in the pews. I was scarred by the experiences of many unhappy attempts to find acceptance in a group of my peers at my childhood church. Labels were important to them: parents who were bankers, lawyers, and doctors; a home in just the right zip code; the propensity to point and say “Look what I have!” My labels seemed to be all wrong: a father who was a schoolteacher; a zip code nearly 20 miles away from theirs; a helpless feeling of being reminded of all the things I did not have.

For me, at that time, the truth of church – of the church based on the call of Christ – was that it was one that had no room for me. In my mind, if this was the Kingdom of God, then I was late arriving and had just missed getting through the door. But the time arrived when we transferred to a new parish, and for the first time I saw the truth of what the church – the Kingdom – was supposed to be.

Yes, there were still labels, but they were labels that I found had already been applied to me. I was accepted for who I was, not for where I lived. I was loved because of what I brought to the banquet, not excluded because there was no room at the table. I was valued because I came with something else that no one else could offer.

It was the first time I could see that I was receiving God’s grace, not being excluded from it. As Frederick Buechner wrote, “The grace of God means something like: Here is your life. You might never have been, but you are because the party wouldn’t have been complete without you.”

In that moment, the truth was easy to understand. For the first time, I had seen a church family that listened to Jesus, who lived out the gospel of love, who were part of his kingdom and made sure I knew I was part of it as well.

I would suspect that for many of you, there was a moment in your own journey when you understood the truth about Jesus – about this King who was the cause of consternation for so many in his own time. Perhaps it was an encounter with someone who had a special light that seemed to emanate from within them. Maybe it was hearing a particular poem or verse from the Gospels or song lyric that struck you more deeply than anything had ever before. It could have even been something that seemed as insignificant at the time as making a choice to visit a particular church.

Jesus said, “My kingdom is of another place.” But we are always striving to bring some of ***that*** place into ***this*** world. This church and this place are an example of where the truth has taken root and from which a wonderful community has grown and thrived.

But for many others, just like the 13-year-old me that felt abandoned and rejected, there is no kingdom – no sign of it here, and no hope for the future. So the question facing us all is this: what will **we** do when confronted by those feeling abandoned and rejected? Will we be the crowd passing off Jesus because we do not want to deal with them? Will we be Pilate and say it is not our problem?

Or will we be the revelation of the **truth** of God's kingdom, showing everyone we meet that they have a place at the table – **this** table – and that Jesus Christ the King is living **in us** and **through us**?

Amen.