

John 18:28-40

Last week, we ended with Peter's denial after the cockcrow at daybreak. Jesus is in the praetorium, with Pilate, following his arrest and betrayal by Judas which was predestined in order that "the scriptures might be fulfilled," suggesting that Judas was far more a symbol than he was a person of history.

There is no reference to Judas Iscariot in any written Christian source prior to his introduction in Mark's gospel decade. The first crucifixion and resurrection stories are found in Paul's epistles, which, along with his martyrdom, occurred prior to the writing of the first gospel. Paul makes absolutely no mention of Judas.

Judas' name is the name of the Jewish nation, Judah. By the first century, Judah was not a nation, but a province of a nation which by then was called Judea. Details of Judas' biography woven into the New Testament appear to have been lifted out of other traitor stories, out of the Hebrew scriptures, strengthening the case that Judas is a mythological, literary creation, not a person of history.

Judas is the symbol of those who prefer death to life and darkness to light. He is one who cannot make the transition from death and darkness into life and light. John's Gospel is written on two levels. One level tried to recall the original Jesus. Many decades had passed between the crucifixion and the writing of this gospel, so the task of recollection was

not easy. The second level tried to understand Jesus as he was filtered through the Johannine community, a group that interpreted Jesus through the lens of the traumas which engulfed them in their own time near the end of the first century. In the passion and crucifixion of Jesus, it is not the historical memory of Jesus that is front and centre, rather, the current life experience of the community is the prism through which the story is told.

By the time the Fourth Gospel was written, the Johannine community had faced three defining realities. The Christian faith was born as a movement within the synagogue. The followers of Jesus were known as the “followers of the way,” a distinct subgroup that never wanted to be separate from Judaism. These followers only wanted to expand Judaism to include Jesus, just as Judaism had been expanded many times in the past to include such figures as Isaiah, Hosea, Amos, Micah and other prophetic voices.

The tensions between the old tradition and this new possibility were at least tolerable until external circumstances, such as the outbreak of the Jewish-Roman war in Galilee, made the price of any tension more costly and threatening. When the war expanded into Judea, Jerusalem and its Temple were destroyed by the Roman army and Judaism entered a struggle for survival. With increased tension between the orthodox leadership and this challenging revisionist movement, the orthodox leaders of the synagogue expelled the followers of Jesus.

The Johannine community was now in a new situation. With their messianic expectation, how could they continue to relate themselves and this Jesus to the Hebrew scriptures, if they were no longer to be a part of Judaism? They now settled into the post-Judaism phase of life, marked with a deep hostility toward the synagogue leaders who had excommunicated them. Now they had to define themselves not as a subgroup of Judaism, but as separate from the Judaism from which they had been expelled.

This struggling Johannine community was separated from its Jewish roots and torn internally in its attempt to see Jesus as the determinative life for their vision of the future. Now, looking outward, they found themselves facing the Roman Empire. The human symbol of this world, the person who was the highest Roman official in Judea - Pilate - became the “face” of that world. When Jesus confronts Pilate in the passion story as told by John, many themes are being addressed, from the meaning of truth to the meaning of kingship. But everything in this gospel’s long confrontation between Jesus and Pilate – refers to real issues in the life of the Johannine community. This passion story is not history and must not be read as such. It is not a record of the final events in the life of Jesus. It is an attempt to make sense out of the life that the members of this community were living near the end of the first century.

To read John’s Gospel literally is to never understand it. We need to see

John's story of the crucifixion, the resurrection, the gift of the spirit and the consequences of these acts as John understood them – new life, new consciousness, and a new doorway into the mystery of God. John's purpose in composing this "new" gospel, is to bring us into a dimension of life that we have never before known. It is to bind together the former Jewish expectations with a new sense of God as mystical oneness.

The trial before Pilate, longer in John than in the Synoptics, consists of seven scenes. The first three begin outside the praetorium, where the religious authorities, who have brought Jesus from Caiaphas to Pilate, are waiting outside in order to avoid ritual defilement. Caiaphas and the Sanhedrin want Jesus dead. They need Pilate to do their dirty work for them. While they may remain outside, they are defiled by their complicity.

John will shape the figure of Pilate to suit his personal, literary and mythological needs. The long, beautifully drawn, intense dialogue between Pilate and his condemned prisoner, Jesus, is crucial to John's understanding of the crucifixion. This is not the recollection of a confrontation that actually happened in history. This literary composition is deliberately designed to move the Fourth Gospel's story of Jesus to its grand climax.

It is designed to say to early Christians, for whom this gospel was written, that, in their conflict with the power of Rome in their generation,

they must be open to the possibility that the Romans seemed to come closer to understanding Jesus than did the Jews. Winning the approval of the Roman Empire might well have been one of John's goals. His text suggests that Rome itself perceived Jesus' power even though neither the Empire nor its representative, Pilate, was able to act upon it. There is also a clear need to victimize the orthodox Jews. This long Pilate-Jesus dialogue is one more step in his masterful portrayal of the revealer of God working against the power of religion as well as the power of the government.

After facing the accusers, Pilate goes back inside the palace, summons Jesus and asks him, "Are you the King of the Jews?" Rather than answer Pilate, Jesus becomes the interrogator and judge in this trial. Pilate is not as in control as he pretends to be and Jesus knows it. This ironic blurring of judicial and political roles is a favourite technique of John's.

In response to Jesus' question, "Is that your own idea, or did others talk to you about me?" Pilate declares, "I'm not a Jew, am I?" Of course he's not; quite the opposite. He's a Roman representing the arm of the Empire that is oppressing Jesus' own people, the Jews.

As far as the Jewish leaders and Pilate are concerned, there are two kingdoms: for the Jews, the legitimate kingdom of Judea; for Pilate, the legitimate kingdom of Rome. That's it. But, Jesus indicates there is yet another kingdom – the very kingdom that he has been preaching since

the beginning of his ministry, a kingdom that is not from 'here' but "from another place." This kingdom of God, of Heaven, is different from the earthly kingdoms; it is 'other,' it is invisible, with relatively up-side-down values and perspectives.

Insofar as he is a king, it is not of a kingdom Pilate would recognize as such. Jesus is operating in another realm. He is struggling not to survive, but to open life to new realities that are beyond the power struggles of the political world over which Pilate presides. Pilate is portrayed as listening closely and trying to discern the meaning implied. He is still a seeker, looking beyond the limits of his words.

In response to Pilate's king question, Jesus responds, "My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jewish leaders. But, know my kingdom is from another place." So, in his own way, Jesus responds to Pilate's king question. But, Jesus does not crow about being a king; rather he immediately speaks not about himself but his community, calling it a kingdom. Here he contrasts himself with Pilate.

Pilate uses power and authority for selfish ends with no concern for the building of community, and certainly not a community guided by love and truth. Pilate hoards power, and lords it over people even to the point of destroying them, on a cross or otherwise. Jesus empowers others and uses his authority to wash the feet of those he leads. He spends his life

on them, every last ounce of it; he gives his life to bring life.

Pilate's rule brings terror, even in the midst of calm; Jesus' rule brings peace, even in the midst of terror. Pilate's followers imitate him by using violence to conquer. Jesus' followers put away the sword in order to invite and unify people, as Jesus does when he says, "And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself." "So you ARE king?" Jesus again pushes deeper to the heart of the matter: this is the trial of the ages. Truth itself is on trial and Jesus is the star witness.

Pilate wants to know. He needs to know because "king" is a political term, and Pilate is a political person. He keeps going back and forth between the Praetorium and the crowds outside. He moves from questioning Jesus inside the palace to appeasing Jesus' accusers outside in the courtyard.

So, Pilate needed to know, "Are you the king of the Jews? If so, you're guilty of treason because the emperor in Rome is the king of everyone everywhere, including Jews." When Jesus says that he has come to bear witness to the truth, Pilate asks, "What is truth?" Contrary to the traditional view that his question is cynical, it is possible that he asks it with a lump in his throat. Instead of truth, Pilate has only expedience. His decision to throw Jesus to the wolves is expedient. Pilate views humankind as alone in the universe with nothing but its own courage and ingenuity to see it through. That is enough to choke up anybody.

Just as Pilate asks, “What is truth?” Jesus doesn’t answer Pilate’s question. He just stands there. Stands, and stands there. And, the silence of Jesus before Pilate is haunting. Pilate asks his famous question, “What is truth?” and Jesus answers him with a silence that is overwhelming in its eloquence. In case there should be any question as to what that silence meant, on another occasion Jesus put it into words for his disciple Thomas. “I,” he said, “I am the truth.”

Jesus did not say that religion was the truth, or that his own teachings were the truth, or that what people taught about him was the truth, or that the Bible was the truth, or that church, or any system of ethics or theological doctrine is the truth. But individual truths were not what Pilate was after – or what we are after. Truths about one thing or another are a dime a dozen, including religious truths. THE truth – the greater truth – is what Pilate is after; the truth about who we are and who God is, if there is a God, the truth about life, the truth about death, the truth about truth itself. That is the truth that Pilate and all of us are after.

It is a truth that can never be put into words because no words can contain it. It is a truth that can never be caught in any doctrine or creed because it will never stay still long enough, as it is always moving and shifting like air. It is a truth that is always beckoning us in different ways and coming at us from different directions. That is precisely why whenever Jesus tries to put that ultimate and inexpressible truth into

words – instead of into silence as he did with Pilate - the form of words he uses is a form that itself moves and shifts and beckons us in different ways.

“What is the truth?” – and the question is left hanging in the air. Was Pilate being sarcastic or was he searching for answers nobody else had given him? The answer was not a philosophical proof or a creedal proposition. Truth was the person standing in silence before Pilate. John’s Gospel began with claims that shocked the philosophers, “In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God.” The philosophers nodded their heads and pulled their chairs closer to listen. They knew this Word. It was *logos* in Greek – as in logic. This was the cosmic, eternal prime-mover, beyond time and space. This was logic they could understand and affirm, but they weren’t prepared for the next part: “And the Word became flesh and lived among us ... full of grace and truth.”

That was jarring – a dissonant sound. Eternal Word clashed with earthly flesh. We hear dissonance in the beginning and now near the end of Jesus’ life. The truth is a person, the Word made Flesh. This Word came to live with us – to “pitch his tent” among people of earth.

We look in places we never expected, surprised as the philosophers were at the beginning of John’s gospel. We see Jesus engaging in deep theological conversation with a Samaritan. We see Jesus putting a towel

around his waist and then kneeling on the floor to wash his disciples' dirty feet.

The kingdom of God that Jesus announced and embodied is what life would be like on earth here and now if God were king and rulers of this world were not. Imagine if God ruled the nations. Every aspect of personal and communal life would experience a radical reversal: peace-making instead of war mongering, liberation not exploitation, sacrifice rather than subjugation, mercy not vengeance, care for the vulnerable instead of privileges for the powerful, generosity instead of greed, humility rather than hubris, embrace rather than exclusion.

Jesus is a king who never rose so high that he couldn't see those who were down low. Even today, we see Jesus in tent cities where people live together after losing their homes to foreclosures or disasters. We see Jesus in public housing where people are still waiting for the power to come on after the storm, or for cockroaches and rats to be exterminated. We see Jesus in shelters where women have sought refuge from abusers. We see Jesus in refugee camps. We see Jesus in jails with political prisoners. We see Jesus in mud huts with orphans.

If we want to see Jesus, we need to look in those places where earthly kings seldom go – places where truth stands in silence – and challenges us to bring into our communities – Jesus' kingdom – a kingdom where all are included, where there is compassion, love, and justice for all. Is

that not what we pray for in the Lord's Prayer ? People who live and pray this way have a very different agenda than Caesar's, for they have entered a kingdom, pledged their allegiance to a ruler, and submitted to the reign of Christ. Truth is important to John, perhaps because of his interaction with those influenced by Greek thought or perhaps out of his own search for truth.

Jesus' truth, his testimony and his person, is an expression of the divine love he embodies and comes to reveal. This truth brings comfort, freedom, and joy. But it is still uncomfortable to many. Grounded in God's being extending itself in love for the world, God's truth is from above and offers a peace "not as the world gives." For those embedded in the view from below, whose identity is grounded in power and fear, the truth of God's transforming love seems either irrelevant or threatening.

Pilate tries; he really does. He actually sees the injustice of this situation, but his goal is keeping the peace, not necessarily executing justice. He returns to those who want Jesus dead. He makes them a provocative offer. Threatened deeply, the Jews have to play the traditional human survival card. So they cry out: "Not this man, but Barabas."

Jesus is a king yearning for the communion of hearts. This is the truth he has come to proclaim: not power for the sake of power, but the power of love and compassion that heals, liberates and gives life, that calls people to live in love with him.

How often in our world today truth is chained, silenced, hidden, pushed away. And how often those who speak the truth to abusive power are silenced. How often we ourselves have refused to follow our conscience and the call of truth and justice because we were afraid of losing our job, our friends, or power of some sort. Such fear darkens our world and makes us lose the truth of who we are.

Truth is like a tiny light, the light of our conscience, which, in a mysterious way, is the ruler or the “king” that governs our being. It is like the eyes of a child, the song of a bird, the gentle flower. But we are often too busy to notice, too frightened to listen and to see. We even crush this inner conscience, the ruler or “king” of our being. We become slaves to our fears and prejudices, slaves to what others want us to be. Let us not keep the king of love and of truth enchained. May that tiny light of truth always shine in you!

Amen.

PRAYER OF THE DAY

God of truth, too often we bend truth to fit our needs. Show us how to recognize and follow your truth, shown to us by the love and life of your son, Jesus. **Amen.**