

“What is Truth?”

John 18:28-19:16

Key Verse: 18:37 “You are a king, then!” said Pilate. Jesus answered, ‘You say that I am a king. In fact, the reason I was born and came into the world is to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me.’”

Today’s passage takes place at a Roman court. Pontus Pilate, the Roman governor, is the judge, the Jewish leaders are prosecutors and accusers, and Jesus is the defendant on trial for his very life. At least in the courtroom, shouldn’t the most important thing be the truth and carrying out justice? However, in this court, everyone seemed intent on destroying the truth, avoiding the truth, or manipulating the truth. Yet, in this dark time, Jesus says something challenging in 18:37, **“You say that I am a king. In fact, the reason I was born and came into the world is to testify to the truth.”** Jesus implies that the world is in the wrong or very confused about truth. But he has come to testify to the truth to the point of death.

Like Jesus’ time, we are confused about truth - perhaps now more than any other time. We hear in social media and twitter, “fake news,” “alternative facts.” Our culture tells us, “Be true to yourself”- meaning be true to your feelings and your experiences. We hear relative truth- what’s true for you isn’t true for me. Our truth seems expedient and can crumble in critical moments or stress. With all this confusion, it seems impossible to know the truth or live by the truth. And for sure, the world’s truth does not set us free because we feel more lost than ever before.

However, in today’s passage, Jesus was born and came into the world to testify to the truth. Jesus came to testify to the truth especially through his trial and crucifixion. The truth Jesus testifies to will challenge us, even cause us some pain. But if we listen and heed Jesus’ truth it will lead us to true freedom (8:31-32). May the Spirit of truth guide us into the truth today.

I. This took place to fulfill what Jesus had said (28-32)

Upon his arrest, Jesus was taken to the High Priests, Annas and Caiaphas. They interrogated him all night long. Their charge against him was blasphemy that Jesus, a mere man from Nazareth, claimed to be the Son of God. They could have stoned him there by themselves.

However, for some compelling reason the Jewish leaders took him to the palace of the Roman governor. They wasted no time carrying out their plot. By now it was early morning. In order to avoid ceremonial uncleanness, they did not enter the palace of the uncircumcised Gentile governor, because they wanted to be able to eat the Passover. Such hypocrisy: they cared about ceremonial cleanness and eating the Passover, but not the spiritual uncleanness of killing the righteous Son of God.

How did Pilate respond to their rude and unannounced visit early in the morning? Verse 29a says, “So Pilate came out to them...” He did not force them to come to him. Rather, he came out in his pajamas and bathrobe cranky and yawning. Already we see the power the religious leaders had over Pilate.

Now let’s hear their conversation in verses 29b-31. Pilate asked, “What charges are you bringing against this man?” “If he were not a criminal,” they replied, “we would not have handed

him over to you.” Pilate said, “Take him yourselves and judge him by your own law.” “But we have no right to execute anyone,” they objected. From their conversation, it was clear the religious leaders wanted one thing from Pilate: it was the execution of Jesus. They must have had several compelling reasons in choosing the kind of death Jesus should die. Surely they didn’t want to get their hands dirty. If the Romans executed Jesus, his supporters would blame the Romans. The crucifixion would be the most shameful, cruel reproach to Jesus, their enemy. According to their religion, however, there was a more compelling reason- they wanted to frame Jesus as being cursed by God. Dt 21:23 says that anyone who is hung on a pole is under God’s curse. If they could be successful in crucifying Jesus, Jesus who claimed to be the Son of God would be a liar. His disciples and supporters would desert him, and his teachings discredited. Jesus’ crucifixion would serve all of these things legally, safely and completely. They were doing this all in the name of God. The Jews boasted about themselves because they had the Law of Moses, the embodiment of the knowledge and the truth (Ro 2:20). However, we can clearly see that they were not true to the law. They misused the Law. Their real working truth was not their law. It was their love for status, authority and power.

In verse 32, however, Apostle John commented on the truth behind their hypocrisy from a very different perspective. Let’s read verse 32. **“This took place to fulfill what Jesus had said about the kind of death he was going to die.”** Jesus had said in 12:32-33, **“And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.” He said this to show the kind of death he was going to die.”** John remembered what Jesus had said and understood what was happening as the fulfillment of Jesus’ own prophetic words. Being “lifted up” referred to crucifixion. Only Romans could carry it out. Even though the process reeks of malice and injustice, Jesus was fulfilling his own words. Apostle John sees the truthfulness of Jesus’ words even in regard to the kind of death he should die. All that Jesus said were, are being, will be fulfilled. Apostle Paul proclaims Jesus’ truthfulness further in fulfilling all of God’s promises in 2Co 1:20, which says, **“For no matter how many promises God has made, they are ‘Yes’ in Christ. And so through him the ‘Amen’ is spoken by us to the glory of God.”** How can Jesus be truthful to his own words? How can Jesus fulfill all of God’s promises without fail? He can do so simply because he is the truth, nothing but the truth. Therefore, we can trust in Jesus and his words. No matter the circumstance, no matter who seems to be in control, may we learn to trust in Jesus and his words as the only foundation that lasts forever and never fails.

II. Jesus, the King of truth (33-40)

After figuring out what the Jewish leaders wanted from him, Pilate went back inside the palace. He summoned Jesus and asked, “Are you the king of the Jews?” It was a very simple “yes” or “no” question. But it was also a very clever and dangerous question. Anything that Jesus would say could and would be used against him in the Roman court.

How did Jesus answer the question? Look at verse 34. **“‘Is that your own idea,’ Jesus asked, ‘or did others talk to you about me?’”** Jesus did not answer Pilate’s question. Instead he asked him a question about his question. Why? Jesus wanted Pilate to carry out justice based on facts and the Roman law, which the Romans believed as the embodiment of justice. Jesus wanted to help Pilate to make up his own mind and stand on the truth, and his good

conscience as the Roman Judge. He wanted Pilate to come to his own personal realization of who Jesus is, not influenced by the opinion of the religious leaders. What a crucial question for each one of us. "Is that your own idea?" Who do you say I am?

How did Pilate answer Jesus? Look at verse 35. **"Am I a Jew?" Pilate replied. 'Your own people and chief priests handed you over to me. What is it you have done?'"** This reveals his real agony. Though he was supposed to carry out justice as the Roman governor, he seemed helpless before the relentless Jewish leaders. He felt he was being manipulated by them. He sounded as if he hated those Jews, not to mention his own position in Jerusalem!

Jesus understood Pilate's agony very well. Look at verse 36. **"Jesus said, 'My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jewish leaders. But now my kingdom is from another place.'"** The Jewish leaders accused Jesus of being the political king. Now Jesus began to talk about his kingdom. If I were his lawyer, I would stop him from self-incrimination. But listen to Jesus. He was not afraid to speak the truth so that Pilate could know the true nature of his kingdom and his Kingship. .

The nature of Jesus' kingdom is that it is not of this world. What does that mean? Rather than explaining it theologically, Jesus simply presented evidence of it. He said, "If my kingdom were (of the world), my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jewish leaders." This was the proof that his kingdom is not of the world. His disciples and followers did not fight; there was no uproar, no attempt to rescue him. Jesus did not order them to fight. Instead he had forbidden it, saying to Peter, "Put away your sword!" Jesus was willing to be delivered to the Jews and now he was freely talking with the Judge. Correction! Jesus was having a 1:1 Bible study with him. What an abnormal and strange king Jesus was compared to worldly secular kings! Jesus concluded, **"My kingdom is from another place."** In other words, Jesus was saying to Pilate, "My kingdom, my kingship is no threat to the Roman Empire because it is not a worldly, secular, political kingdom, but a spiritual one."

Look at verse 37a. **"'You are a king, then!' said Pilate."** He was a very thoughtful and logical Bible student: "If Jesus had such a kingdom as he said, he is a king, then!" Pilate knew that Jesus was not the political king as the Jewish leaders had framed. Jesus then responded in 37b, "You say (correctly, rightly) that I am a king." Pilate had come to the correct realization.

Christ, in his next reply, gave a full and direct answer to Pilate's former question: "Are you the king of the Jews?" Let's read 37b-c, from "Jesus answered" to "to the truth." **"Jesus answered, 'You say that I am a king. In fact the reason I was born and came into the world is to testify to the truth.'"** Here the word "testify" is from "μαρτυρήσω/[martyrēsō](#)" in Greek, from which "martyrdom" came. He came to testify not only with his words, but with his death, through his death, and to the point of death. Jesus was willing to lay down his life to bear witness to and carry out the truth. He would never save face or his life at the risk of the truth. It is impossible for Jesus to do so because he is the truth, the embodiment of the truth. What then is the truth Jesus came to testify to through his death? The first truth: He is the King of the Jews; more so, he is the King and Creator of the whole world. The second truth: Jesus, the king and Creator is love and reveals the deep love of God (3:16). Jesus willingly left his almighty throne in heaven, in order to reveal the love of God for us, those who hated him and wanted to kill him. Praise Jesus who came to testify (be martyred to reveal) the truth! He came to be king not with political might and destruction but by being lifted up on the cursed cross, that whoever looks at him and believes in him will be saved (3:14,15).

So how should we respond? Look at verse 37d. **“Everyone on the side of the truth listens to me.”** Pilate was standing at a crossroads. Jesus seemed to be on trial before Pilate. But in truth, Pilate was on trial before Jesus. He had to make a deliberate choice whether to give in to the pressure and lies of the Jewish leaders to save face and his political future, or to boldly stand up for the truth! Surely truth demands of us a right response.

How did Pilate respond? Look at verse 38. **“‘What is truth?’ retorted Pilate. With this he went out again to the Jews gathered there and said, ‘I find no basis for a charge against him.’”** He responded sharply, angrily, even cynically to the truth about Jesus’ kingdom and his purpose as the King. He was very sure that the truth would not prevail at the end of the day.

So if Pilate knew the truth, that Jesus was innocent, he should have released him right away as a righteous Judge according to the Roman law. But he chose not to offend the Jewish leaders who were sneering at him like hungry wolves. So he compromised with them. Look at verse 39, **“But it is your custom for me to release to you one prisoner at the time of the Passover. Do you want me to release ‘the King of the Jews’?”** Pilate had hoped that the people’s conscience would be pricked, when faced with the truth and the choice between the true insurrectionist and rabble-rouser Barabbas, versus Jesus the spiritual King who had fed them and loved them. But according to verse 40, **“They shouted back, ‘No, not him! Give us Barabbas! Now Barabbas had taken part in an uprising.’”** Pilate then had to see Barabbas, the true insurrectionist against the Roman Empire walk away free. So in the end, Pilate knew the truth, but refused to stand on the side of truth, and tragically, he ended up compromising again and again.

In real and daily life, truth doesn’t seem to matter. Justice and human rights don’t seem to matter either! In this world, what seems to matter is who has more power, authority, money, information or technology. On a personal level, what matters to you? Is it your pride and saving face? Success? Freedom, safety, independence, happiness and pleasure, marriage and a happy family? Is it what you feel genuinely? Is it what is beneficial to you at the moment? Is it your relationship with friends and their love and approval? Non-judgmental acceptance? How many likes on social media? What about truth? Right now, Jesus challenges us: everyone on the side of truth listens to me. Will you listen to Jesus, the King of Kings? Will you accept his truth, the truth that Jesus is our king who loves us so much that he has come to save us? And will you stand on this truth, in the midst of the peer pressures around us, the condemnation of Satan, the difficulties and hardships to come? Let us listen to Jesus each day and stand on the truth, Jesus, each day by his grace.

III. The deeper truth (19:1 - 16)

Now we can see Pilate’s second compromise in chapter 19:1-6. He took Jesus and had him flogged. The soldiers twisted together a crown of thorns and put it on his head. They clothed him in a purple robe and went up to him again and again, saying, ‘Hail, king of the Jews!’ And they slapped him in the face. Once more Pilate came out and said to the Jews gathered there, ‘Look, I am bringing him out to you to let you know that I find no basis for a charge against him.’ When Jesus came out wearing the crown of thorns and the purple robes, Pilate said to them, ‘Here is the man!’ As soon as the chief priests and their officials saw him, they shouted, ‘Crucify! Crucify!’ But Pilate answered, ‘You take him and crucify him. As for me, I find no basis for a

charge against him.” Pilate had hoped that when the Jews saw Jesus, who was humiliated, flogged, tortured and crushed, their anger would be assuaged and would have some pity on Jesus. However, they refused to give in. They got worse. They pressed Pilate harder. When Pilate did not stand up for the truth decisively, he got pushed deeper into their trap.

The main character of this story was not Pilate though. It is Jesus. Now it is time for us to see the deeper truth about Jesus hidden in the tragic miscarriage of justice. Pilate said one thing about Jesus very clearly: **“I find no basis to charge against him”** three times (18:38; 19:4,6). Pilate himself and the soldiers called Jesus “the king of the Jews” again and again. Ironically, these things about Jesus are true: Jesus is the sinless king. He is the Lamb of God (1:29) and he was about to be slaughtered during that Passover. Jesus knew what God was truly doing. Apostle Paul tells us what God was doing in 2Co 5:21. **“God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.”** By knowing what God was doing behind the miscarriage of justice, Jesus was silent. He gave his back to the soldiers who flogged him. He was willing to be slapped in the face by those mockers. Thank you Jesus, the Lamb of God who took away the sins of the world so that we might be righteous before God. This is the truth: Jesus is the perfect sinless Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. He testified to this truth through his torture, beating and mockery.

Pilate knew that the things were not going as he had hoped. His conscience also condemned himself within. Jewish leaders threw another punch at his face by insisting, “We have a law, and according to that law he must die, because he claimed to be the Son of God.” After this, Pilate got terribly scared. He could barely breathe. While Pilate was talking with Jesus again, Jesus declared the verdict as the Ultimate Judge saying, “Therefore the one who handed me over to you is guilty of a great sin.” Jesus truly knew the truth.

Pilate tried to set Jesus free again but the Jewish leaders threw a harder punch by shouting, “If you let this man go, you are no friend of Caesar. Anyone who claims to be a king opposes Caesar.” Pilate tried to toss Jesus, the hot potato back, to the Jewish leaders so that he would avoid any responsibility and blame. But they shouted, “Take him away! Take him away! Crucify him!” “Shall I crucify your king?” Pilate asked. “We have no other king but Caesar,” the chief priests answered. It was their last K.O punch. Finally Pilate threw in the towel by handing Jesus over to them to be crucified.

But in the end, Pilate who had asked, “What is truth?” rejected Jesus, the King of the truth and chose his own truth. In the end, Pilate lost more than his political position or integrity. He killed the King of kings and Lord of lords. And one day, he will face the ultimate judgment of Christ. How tragic that he experienced hell on earth and finally lost his life eternally.

Today, we have entered the courtroom of Pontus Pilate, witnessing the trial of Jesus, the embodiment of the truth. Jesus’ words took place just as he had said. In the midst of the worst and most tragic miscarriage of justice in human history, Jesus stood firmly on the truth as the Lamb of God. Jesus submitted himself into the hands of evil man because he knew that God was making him to be sin for each of us. He willingly and patiently bore the curse of God in our places. In this way, Jesus testified to the very truth about the depth of our sins and God’s love toward us. Thank you Jesus who was born and came into the world to testify to the truth through his death! Thank you Jesus for loving me to the point of death! May each of us let go of

whatever other truths or lies we have been holding to, and accept Jesus the Truth, who gave his life on the cross for us, and experience true freedom- freedom from our sins and our condemnation, and experience the freedom of being the beloved children of the King of the Jews, children of God.