

**Sermon for 20<sup>th</sup> November 2022, Evensong, Year C, Christ the King.**

**Preached at St Michael the Archangel, Smarden**

**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 lectionary stops here at verse 37 and cuts off Pilate’s final response. Can anyone remember what it is?

He asks, “What is truth?” - which seems a very modern question in a time of fake news and alternative facts and even brazen political lies filling our news channels and social media.

In this post-modern age, we’ve come to believe truth depends on context. What is true for you is not necessarily true for me, especially when it comes to social mores or religious rules. The bible was once used to justify slavery and argue against immigration and racial mixing. Now it’s the other way around, thank God. But even for my generation, Generation X, we still thought there was Truth out there to be uncovered, it just wasn’t the strict moralistic truth our parents inherited.

I’ve noticed that if you ask a storyteller if their stories are true, they will respond by looking at you askance with a wry smile and saying something like “All my stories are true. Some are true yesterday, and some are true today, and some are true tomorrow, and it’s up to you to find out which is which”. Or they might say, “All my stories are true... and some actually happened”.

Part of the storyteller’s art is to slightly obfuscate the truth so that it can slip into your mind sideways while you’re distracted. Jesus does this all the time with his parables. And Sermon-writers try to do it too. We pray about the scripture readings and wait for God to place a message on our heart, and then we take that truth and hide it among some fine words, and it’s like trying to get your cat to swallow a pill by mixing it with tasty food. Often you will find the pill licked dry and left in the empty bowl.

So, when Pilate says dismissively “What is truth?”, he’s leaving 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.

But he’s also fearful. He’s afraid of losing control. There’s a baying mob outside and he can’t do what he wants to do. He can’t release Jesus even though he knows he’s innocent. Like most politicians, he can’t be true to his own convictions. He can’t do what he knows is right. His role prevents him from 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 cacophony 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 beaten and bloodied man of God grows brighter and more solid before him.

Jesus is far more interested in offering Pilate a chance to recognise the 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, perhaps even something 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”. He is the path, the destination and the beacon that lights the way. Even to Pilate, Jesus offers to be the good shepherd. “Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice”.

Jesus may seem powerless, but this is actually the unveiling of his glory. This is not a storyteller with wisdom woven into a mysterious tale. 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, the poet, erudite as he or she may be, can only offer a partial truth, a truth that *was*, or *is*, or perhaps *is to come*.

But God’s truth is always available, never hidden, because the truth that Jesus is offering to Pilate is not a wise word, not even a political solution, 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 is made up 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. We are celebrating the conclusion of the Jesus story, his everlasting kingship over creation, his ongoing invitation to us to join God's authentic community 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".

### **Blessing**

Christ our King make you faithful and strong to do his will, that you may reign with him in glory;

and the blessing of God Almighty: Father, Son and Holy Spirit, be with us and remain with us - and everyone we love and care for - always, Amen.