

“What Is Truth”

A very familiar story in the Bible and one I've preached several times is the scene of Jesus on trial before Pontius Pilot. As the scene progresses, Pilot is quite concerned, because he has found no accusations that would hold under Roman law, and Pilot was beginning to feel that he was being *tricked. If Jesus had done something against the religion of Judaism, why didn't the Jews have their own religious trial? Why did they want Pilot, who represented the Roman State, to take this responsibility? In fact, Pilot questioned the Jews and said, "Take him yourself, and judge him by your own law." And do you know what they said? They said, "It is not lawful under our law, for us to put any man to death."

We have come a long way from that understanding.

The Jews think that what Jesus has done is worthy of death. They can't kill him, but the Roman government can.

Now, the problem is, they had no charge. They said, we want him dead, and we want the court that can kill him to handle it.

Pilot came in and called Jesus before him, and said: "Are you the King of the Jews?" And Jesus answered him by saying: "Do you say this of your own accord or are others saying this about me?" Pilot answered: "Am I a Jew? Your own nation, and your chief priests, have handed you over to me. What have you done?"

And here come some very interesting words. In John's Gospel Jesus says: "My kingship is not of this world. If my kingship were of this world my servants would fight, they would fight to keep me from being handed over by the Jews. But my kingship is not from the world."

And Pilot said to him: "So you are a King?" This is a very poignant moment, because Pilot doesn't understand what Jesus is talking about. He looked at him and said: "So you are a King?"

Jesus said: "You say I am a King." And then he said: "For this I was born, and for this I have come into the world, to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth hears my voice."

And Pilot replies with a question that is the text of my sermon today: "What is truth?"

Now, let me render it another way. Pilot is looking at this thing, and I can tell by the text that he is quite intrigued with Jesus and he doesn't understand why the Jews are after him; and he has also decided, obviously, that Jesus is on to something. I don't know whether it was Jesus' presence that conveys that, or whether it is what he has heard about him; but Pilot's inquisitiveness is real and he asks: "What is truth?"

That is my text. It is one of the great moments for me in all of the scripture. And its greatness is lodged in the fact that when we read Pilot asking that question, we are ready to devour the next sentences because we want to see what Jesus says. But there is no response to that question. Had Jesus feigned an answer to Pilot, Pilot may not have turned him over for crucifixion. At this moment, if you had been on trial, you would have come up with ten answers! But there is no response from Jesus. Pilot's question is never answered. And it is consistent with Jesus' understanding, that silence on the answer is the foundation of all religious consciousness.

All I really want to say to you this morning is that there are two approaches in religious life, in the Judeo-Christian tradition. There are two approaches that stand side by side. One gives an answer to Pilot that is ready packaged, useable, definitive doctrine and dogma. This tradition would answer Pilot by saying: Pilot, at such and so meeting of Bishops and such and so meeting of Rabbis, don't you know it was decided thus and so, and here it is. That is one tradition of the Church.

I contend this morning that Jesus was basically of another mind. He kept throwing people back upon themselves. Look at the way he dealt with the responses to Pilot's other questions. Why did he do that? Jesus believed that the root to Truth was through experience, not through tradition. That is the reason that central to his whole preachment He kept repeating, "It has been said to you by the Law, but I say to you." And then the call from him was, "Try it and see what you find out." Even in the instruction to those close to him. The disciples threw the fish net out and didn't get anything, and they complained to Jesus. He said, try over here. And then they got something. They had a primary experience. They had two ways: tradition and the experience of truth.

The route of the experience of a person to Truth does not have to overlook whatever tradition can teach us. But I want to say to you, tradition is not interested in experience. The Church will say, well, what of Jesus? Of Mary? Of the virgin birth? Of life after death? Their answer is that in the year 325 at Nicea a group of Bishops gathered and this is what they said; and that is it! Well, what about the experience of people today that doesn't seem to jive with that; people who are faithful, and trying to be religious and seriously searching the will of God, but they have a different experience? Tradition will not listen to these people. It never has and it never will. By definition, it cannot. If it listens, it loses its power. It makes concession to experience.

One religion is forever a closed book. God wrote it all. It is all there and that is all you need. The other religion contends that you must search everywhere, trying to discover new understandings of God's action in time.

One tradition says, here are the doctrines, here are the dogmas. You join this Church: Do you believe in such and so? If you do, and you can say you do, then we can take you in. If you do not believe, don't drink this communion. You can't have it. Only those who will say I believe in the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth; and Jesus Christ, the only Son, our Lord, born of the virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, crucified, dead and buried; and on the third day ..." Unless you believe it all, every period, and the cross of every T, this is not your Church. That is the voice of tradition.

I say, thank God, there is the Jesus tradition where people were turned on to a Kingdom within them that they had to continuously struggle about and work with. And if a Kingdom is within you, it then stands to reason that out of your own psyche, and out of the burden of your own struggle, and out of your own soul, life may dawn about the nature of truth of Last Things. I would say, this experience makes the Church meaningful. As far as I am concerned, in the doctrinal, dogmatic churches, where it is all written down, I don't see any reason to go to Church. I think the fellowship is about the other tradition that is the reason we sang this morning. We didn't sing what a fellowship those who believe we are the elect of

God, what a grouping of us. No. We didn't sing that. We sang what a fellowship of the pilgrims, leaning on the Everlasting Arms. That is good theology.

Now. If you believe that experience is the way that you will know more of God, then you take seriously your own daily activity. Every possibility to know more, is embedded in your own day, no matter what you are doing.

You have to be careful because anytime, anyone thinks they have clearly arrived at something and seen something for sure about ultimate issues, they run the risk of becoming deranged. They might take a club and beat everybody else over the head. That is the reason you have a fellowship. You come to a fellowship of other struggling people and you test your idea. Certainly anybody who thinks they see anything ought to say it clearly, and somebody who doesn't see it that way within the fellowship can say, but Reverend, I didn't understand it that way. I experienced it this way. And then we have the meaning of a covenanted fellowship, of searching and growing religious people. That is the fundamental meaning of the Church. But what has been put into place has nothing to do with the open and searching spirit that Jesus revealed in his own time to his own people. The quality of his spirit, the quality of the questing spirit; the quality of looking beyond the data, is lost, if your religion is simply saying, yes, to something somebody wrote and said was the truth. We must look through the turmoil of our own life, and the struggle of our own time, and look longingly for insight about what God has in mind.

You can tell the difference, you are not stupid. If it is a question of us sending money to some political group so they can kill up a bunch of people in behalf of some abstraction called democracy, you don't have to go back to the Bible to know that that is wrong. We are committing ourselves to more and more mass murder in the world. You see, some things come clear. And if it is not clear to you, other issues in your religious searching, even your private life, where you are struggling with issues, light will dawn and you won't know where it came from; and yesterday's dead end will be an open road for you today. Light has dawned. In the midst of your struggle, if a search is real, can you trust that light? Or do you say, oh no, nobody told me that. Can you trust it? Can you come and say, I have had a

new revelation of how I ought to be doing more or living more deeply. The test is related not only to sharing it, but walking in it.

Whenever light has dawned in your own life about what would be the highest contribution for you to make, I say, the religious obligation is to walk in that light. That makes religion vital. When it is a religion of tradition, all you have to do is go through the ritual; pay your dues; be saved. Tradition with all of its time-bound creeds and doctrines that care nothing for the contradictions to them that people experience in their lives; versus a questing spirit, anointed by Creation itself, searching everywhere, to be sensitive to the hints of God's Presence.

You choose what kind of a Church you want. One tradition says: If you want the answer Pilot, I'll give it to you. And then there is the Jesus tradition: It steps back and it can't tell you.

Browning says it for me. "Then did I turn my long defeated face, full to the sun. Turned to the world with all of its turmoil, and through the clouded warfare of the world, I saw, not a dogma, not a creed; I saw the Light." And the text says to me: "Walk in the Light, the little you see; and it will lead you to a fellowship that is larger."

It doesn't mean you will be lifted out, raptured and saved. It means struggle. God is still in business in this world. And I wonder if people can be so shallow as to believe that God has decided to have one representative. One representative? Jesus said, no. Jesus says God has a lot of representatives; and Jesus says you are one. That is the difference. Jesus says, the Kingdom is within you. And you have to struggle with that, and with others who seek to know God's Will. And there is no person who can condemn you. There is no person who can make the final moral judgment upon you. A person may make a passing judgment, but not a final statement about your existence.

What is truth? Our life quest. It is our life struggle and search, knowing that there are moments of break-through and clear vision; and knowing it is our responsibility to live in those moments, and to grow into the understanding that they bring.

Do you ever think how exciting it would be if we would be true to the truth that we already know? This would be a wild place. If every body in this room, now and next week, decided, I am going to be true to the truth that I know. I would say that next week you would have some more truth. Truth is ever-alive, dynamic, not absolutistic and not a frozen code to be learned. Truth is a life to be experienced. Truth is a God to be known.