

**An Ancient Question for Modern Times**  
**John 18:33-37**  
**Christ the King Sunday**

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Well, we have reached the end of the year.

I know that there are still several weeks to go in world time. There are still decorations to decorate, presents to buy, Christmas to celebrate, but in church time this is the end.

See, the church runs on a different time table than the rest of the world. Just another way we are reminded that we are called to be a holy, a different people. Our calendar begins with Advent and ends today, with Christ the King Sunday. Today is a day in which the story we have been hearing since last Advent culminates as we are reminded that we are called to give our allegiance, to follow Christ who is our sovereign.

So why this text? But what kind of royalty is this? Shouldn't we be hearing the reading from the triumphal entry into Jerusalem when the people hailed him as their Messiah? What about that time after he had fed the multitudes when the people were ready to make him king by force?

That is what we expect from our royalty, isn't it? Admiration, power, glory?

And yet our reading for today is the polar opposite. Jesus, our king, is on trial before Pilate. He has already been shuffled around from court to court, with no one wanting to take responsibility for this farce. But the ball is rolling and someone, someone has to do something! And that someone is Pilate.

He is facing a sticky political situation. Outside his palace are people yelling at him. They are yelling their demands that he continue the tradition to free one prisoner during the holidays. Only the camps were divided, wanting freedom for different individuals. At last the Barabbas camp grew more vociferous and blood thirsty, demanding that Jesus be killed.

Jesus was accused of being a traitor to the empire, one who was seeking to set up his own kingdom. So Pilate asked him, "*Are you a king? Are you trying to set up a kingdom of your own?*" Jesus responded that his kingdom was a spiritual kingdom, one that would be inhabited by those who hear and follow the truth.

And Pilate asked the question, the one on which everything turns. "What is truth?"

What is truth?

In the spring of 1980, my final semester at Wake Forest I walking into Gregory Pritchard's Intro to Philosophy class. I didn't have to take the class. I had met the requirements but he was one of those professors that I wanted to have. So I took this intro class.

The first day he walked in and wrote on the board, “Why?” “You have 5 minutes to answer he said. And ‘why not’ is not an answer.”

For the next hour he continued writing questions on the board asking us to respond. In the end he said, “*Philosophy is asking the questions and digging beneath the surface.*”

At the end of the semester I had dug and dug, worked harder than any senior should work and thought I had answered the questions.

I realized that there were those that it was ok not to agree on, like aesthetics. What makes something beautiful? I remember Alison and Savannah standing in the national gallery in London arguing over Impressionist and Realist, which one is better. I remember asking Alison’s ballet teacher what made Baryshnikov good. Just recently I asked Christianne about a piece of music. Why is it good?

Is it enough that I just enjoy it? Does it need to be technically good? Who gets to decide?

There are some areas of philosophy that we know are open to interpretation. But others?

Ontology for instance. Reality? Is that open for discussion? Oh, we can ask what is a real Canadian, but can we ask is a person real, do they exist? (But we do after someone dies, don’t we? Do they still exist? Are they real?). Some questions that we put away come bubbling up from time to time, don’t they, inviting, demanding that we answer them all over again.

So Pilate isn’t asking such a far fetch question. He may be stalling for time, but he is asking the same question that the Sophists, that Socrates had been asking for centuries. What is truth? And amazingly, it is one we are having to answer again today, aren’t we?

What is truth?

The German philosopher Karl Jaspers put it this way:

*Truth—the word has an incomparable magic. It seems to promise what really matters to us. The violation of truth poisons everything gained by the violation.*

*Truth can cause pain, and can drive one to despair. But it is capable—merely in virtue of being truth, regardless of content—of giving deep satisfaction: there is truth after all.*

*Truth gives courage: if I have grasped it at any point, the urge grows to pursue it relentlessly.*

*Truth gives support: here is something indestructible, something linked to being.*

*But what this truth might be that so powerfully attracts us—not particular truths, but truth itself—that is the question.<sup>1</sup>*

Truth—that is the question.

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<sup>1</sup> Karl Jaspers. *Philosophy of Existence*. Translated by Richard F. Grabau. (University of Pennsylvania Press: Philadelphia, 1971,) 33.

The *Dictionary of Philosophy* says truth is “a characteristic of some propositional meanings, namely those which are true. Truth as predicated of “ideas” is today normally restricted to those which are propositional in nature, concepts being spoken of as true or false.”<sup>2</sup> Help any?

What is truth? It really depends on what you are asking, for you see, there are many different types of truths. As Jaspers says, there are particular truths, truth that lies in the validity of the statement. I can say with all the conviction in the world, “*It is snowing here right now!*” and no matter how much you want to believe me, no matter how much you want to trust me, no matter how much you want it to be the truth (or not)—all you have to do is look outside and see. There is a truth that can be verified by the validity of the statement itself.

The problem with that now is that we no longer even trust the validity of the statement. I blame Stephen Colbert. On the first night of his faux-news show on The Comedy Network in 2005 he introduced the world to the word “truthiness,” a kind of “truth” that is derived from a visceral feeling rather than from any known facts. Colbert elaborated on it in an interview by saying Truthiness is “*What I say is right, and [nothing] anyone else says could possibly be true.*” *It’s not only that I feel it to be true, but that I feel it to be true. There’s not only an emotional quality, but there’s a selfish quality.*”<sup>3</sup>

The world laughed, and we all started using the word to the point that Merriam Webster named it the “Word of the Year!” But it introduced a real break with “reality” (Again that idea.)

So should we have been surprised when Kellyanne Conway, standing in front of the White House (arguing about numbers none the less,) introduced us to “*alternative facts.*”<sup>4</sup>

At that point, truth gave way to truthiness, the way I feel. We live in a world where the truth depends on my feelings, and you shouldn’t do anything to disrupt that truth, to disturb my feelings.

That is the crux of a recent bill passed in Texas. It forbade any teacher from teaching anything that might cause a student to “*feel discomfort, guilt, anguish, or any other form of psychological distress.*”<sup>5</sup> When asked how they should teach about the Holocaust a district leader responded by saying, if you have a book on the Holocaust, make sure, “*that you have one that has an opposing, that has other perspectives.*”<sup>6</sup>

Truth depends on my feelings. I wish that had been true in my math classes!

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<sup>2</sup> *Dictionary of Philosophy*. Dagobert Runes, editor (Littlefield, Adams and Co: Totowa, NJ,1980) 321.

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.merriam-webster.com/words-at-play/truthiness-meaning-word-origin>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.cnn.com/2017/01/22/politics/kellyanne-conway-alternative-facts/index.html>

<sup>5</sup> <https://capitol.texas.gov/tlodocs/871/billtext/pdf/SB000031.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/southlake-texas-holocaust-books-schools-rcna2965>

Friends, we are venturing into a world where all shared reality is lost, where truth is a casualty to our feelings. And while we would like to think it is a southern thing, we have seen it begin to slip across our border!

And we have seen what comes next, haven't we? All shared reality is lost. We cannot have a conversation about Covid, vaccinations, masks; about global warming or elections. Ultimately we can't have a conversation about anything that matters, about the ultimate, about God. We become our truth, our god.

And that truth doesn't help anyone. It only hurts us all. It destines us all to a prison of our making, a prison of loneliness where we can't share anything with anyone.

Maybe that is what Jesus meant when he told the crowd earlier in John's gospel, "*The truth will set you free.*" It may make us uncomfortable but it will set us free.

There are places in our world where we have seen that happen. Prior to Covid we had an AA group meeting here at our church. Every week as they gather they began with the truth that they are alcoholics. And that truth opens the door for freedom from addiction. It opens them to a future where they can be the true selves that God intended. They don't avoid the rough edges, the way that their actions have resulted in hurts, in broken relationships, in near death at times. But every week they live out the scripture, "the truth will set you free."

We have seen that in our dealing with our indigenous neighbors. Oh, we haven't wanted to, we haven't wanted to deal with the fact, the truth that for centuries we have mistreated them, oppressed them, killed them. But the discovery of the unmarked graves at the former residential schools has forced the truth upon us, it has opened a window to reconciliation. If we will take it.

That was the window opened for Pilate. What is truth? What is truth, Jesus?

And he waits, and waits, and waits, and waits.

And Jesus doesn't answer—because he can't. He can't tell Pilate what truth is. Jesus can't answer that question for us. He can't answer that question any more than he could answer the question he posed to his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" Because only we can answer it—as individuals.

Soren Kierkegaard said it plainly—"*Truth is subjective.*" He didn't mean that we each have our own truth, but rather that we live our own truth. Jesus couldn't answer Pilate because Pilate was living his truth—his political power. And we are living ours. What is truth? We answer with how we live.

That was the answer Jesus gave Pilate. If you want to see truth, see how I live. I live trusting God, unconcerned about gaining power, unconcerned about getting stuff, concerned only with living out the love that is God. Even if you seek to kill me, I will live out that truth, believing, trusting that it is the way that leads to life, that leads to true freedom.

Every day we make a statement about truth by the way we live. What is truth? The answer is yours. How will you answer. What is the truth, the one that will set you free?