

Isaiah 52: 13 – 53:12  
Hebrews 10: 16 – 25  
John 18: 1 – 19:42  
Good Friday

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### **“What is Truth?”**

The image is graphic, horrific, appalling. We see human bodies, displayed in public, with people standing below them. Some in the crowd face away as if they are ashamed to be present. Others gaze at us, somewhat dazed by the powerful events in their midst. Some laugh or cheer or jeer, caught in the grip of uncontrollable emotions of anger, revenge, hatred, even macabre joy. The bodies are almost not recognizable for they have been brutalized in sundry ways. And yet we know that they were once fully human; we know they have families, loved ones, friends who grieve them. We sense the pain of their deaths, we sense the rising grief of those who cared for them, we sense the fear, even among those who gather in the crowd, that things are out of control; we sense the world is a very dangerous place. But where are we? When did we first see this image?

It could have been a few years ago when we saw Americans killed in Iraq. It could have been in Kosovo when we saw Muslims killed by Christians and Christians killed by Muslims. It could have been in Pakistan or India as Hindus killed Muslims and vice versa. It could have been in Rwanda as Tutsi's killed Hutu's and vice-versa. It could have been at Auschwitz or Bergen-Belsen or Sobibor or Treblinka as Nazis killed Jews. It could have been in Mississippi or Alabama where white Americans killed black Americans. It could have been in 16<sup>th</sup> Century Europe when Catholics killed Protestants and vice-versa. It could have been in 4<sup>th</sup> Century Rome when Christians killed pagans. It could have been in 2<sup>nd</sup> Century Rome when pagans killed Christians. It could have been on Calvary when the world killed Christ. The image is graphic, horrific, appalling, and profoundly human. It is as old as the human race.

What all these acts of violence have in common is the effort of one group to impose its will, its beliefs, and its control on another person or group of people. Whether it is violence by outsiders or groups within a society or the organized state itself, the choice of violence is made to gain complete power or control or independence by one group at the expense of others. The stories that often accompany such violence depict perpetrators and victims, good and evil, right and wrong, and all sides claim God as their protector and advocate. These stories claim one side only holds the truth and the other side only holds lies. What is the truth? What is truth?

Pontius Pilate shares in the puzzle of deciding truth when, early in his questioning of Jesus, he mutters somewhat to himself, “What is truth?” For our readings today bring us face-to-face with the challenge of understanding the life and ministry of Christ Jesus in terms of royal kingship and perfect servant leadership. What was the truth of that ministry that began at a wedding and ended in a public execution? Jesus often asked, “Who do you say I am?” Today we are asked, “Who do we say he was?”

Most of the questions posed by Pilate and the revealed worries of the Pharisees revolve around the question of the kingship of Jesus. The battle between Pilate and Jesus is not one between a high Roman official and a lowly, beaten carpenter. Their dialogue is one between equals and Jesus gives no ground but makes his claim clearly. Jesus indicates he is no political or military threat to Pilate, but that he, Jesus has come into the world to speak the truth. Pilate rejects Jesus and, thus, rejects the truth. But Pilate allows the surface insult of Jesus as King of the Jews to play out as Jesus is outfitted with royal attire and then displayed to the crowd. Pilate and Jesus have one more interchange in which Jesus speaks the truth and Pilate misses it completely. Pilate claims earthly power of life and death over Jesus and Jesus dismisses that claim as idolatrous for all power comes from God and Jesus is co-eternal with God. Again, Pilate continues his mockery of the Jews and Jesus, again revealing his own blindness, places Jesus on the judge's bench, the place of temporal power, and introduces him as King to the assembly. In a moment of astonishing apostasy, the chief priests claim that they have no king but the emperor, thus denying their own cherished belief in the Messiah. In one final act of mockery and disbelief, Pilate has a public inscription made that declares Jesus to be the King of the Jews.

The wonderful irony of all this is that we know that Jesus is the Son of God, co-eternal with the Father, and King over all, Jews and Gentiles alike. Jesus is the one to whom all knees must bend, all heads must bow. Jesus has told the truth throughout his ministry his arrest, his trial, his flogging, his crucifixion. Jesus fulfilled each and every prophecy every made about the Messiah, right down to the distribution of his clothes and the state of his body after death. It is most instructive that in the death scene in John, Jesus' last words are not ones of agony or abandonment, but of an almost un-natural calm as he draws his final breaths. Jesus settles his final filial duties, completes one last prophecy by asking for something to drink, and then announces that "it is finished" and gives up his spirit.

This is no victim, torn apart by wild mobs. This is no accidental death; an innocent caught up in the wrong place and the wrong time. This is no minor politician trapped in a plan that has gone awry. This is the consummate shepherd, laying down his life for his sheep. This is the embodiment of the greatest love, going with resolute sadness to a death in benefit of others. This is our great high priest who has made the one perfect satisfaction, oblation and sacrifice. This is the one who poured out himself unto death for us. This is the noblest of souls, the great High King, who willingly did for us what we could not do for ourselves. He accepted death, not as flight from the complexities and challenges of living in this mortal world, or in ecstatic embrace of pain and suffering as proof of his holiness, but as an act of selfless devotion. Jesus went to his death on the cross to show us all how death is not final; that in dying to ourselves we will rise again and be made whole. Jesus lived the complete truth of God's love of all of creation.

It is we, the living, who struggle with accepting and living into that truth. Jesus, who began his ministry by making over 120 gallons of the finest wine in Galilee, asked for a drink in the last moments of life, and we responded with a small cup of sour wine. Jesus said he was our King and we flogged him for his truth telling. Jesus told us he would die

for us and we mocked him as he did so. Jesus called us to drive away no one and we do the exact opposite. Jesus called us to life and we continue to choose violence and death.

We seem prone to violence because it seems easier than struggling with the truth of Christ Jesus. We seem to create boundaries of hate and prejudice because we seem to fear the open-ness of love and acceptance. We seem to want to be God-like because we cannot seem to trust the God who created us. So, what is truth?

The truth is that there is a love greater than laying down your life for another; it's the love that created all life in the first place. And God so loved the world and so loves each and every one of us that God did both.