

## **Easter V**

### **April 20, 2008**

“What is truth?” Recognize that question? I think it’s the most ironic question, the most ironic moment, in all the Bible. It’s Good Friday, Jesus is standing before Pilate and has said something to Pilate about himself and the truth. That’s when Pilate asks his version of the already ancient question, “What is truth?”

It’s a good question; it’s the great search. It’s a question I know really well—I spent seven years of my life studying philosophy as an undergraduate and graduate student—and I’ve taught it off and on ever since. On top of that is another three years in formal theological studies; and, since then, I’ve spent over a quarter of a century gnawing around the edges of this stuff.

I’ve gone round the block with all of them, sort of tagging along as the great search has passed from Socrates and Plato to Aquinas and Averroes to Descartes, Kant, Wittgenstein, Quine, Derrida and all the glorious steps in between.

And through all of that, Pilate’s question was the question that mattered. All of these folks wanted to know what truth is—and I went along for the ride. Virtually every part and person of the intellectual and religious traditions that have created and shaped our culture—they all wanted to know the answer to Pilate’s question. We were together on that. We all wanted to know the truth—the truth about our world, our human nature, our universe, our destiny, our purpose. We wanted to know the truth about God and the cosmic order, the moral law, the possibility of hope, and the goal of our existence. From Socrates and before to so many today, we all wanted to know. And it’s a magnificent quest, this great search for truth, and it’s worth the effort.

I’ll never disparage those questions; and anyone who is worth the dust that makes them up has heard these same question about truth and taken them on—if not in formal academic fashion, then, more significantly, in the silence of their own soul.

Everyone worth the dust that makes them up has fought the fight that comes when the darkness and the noise that those great and ancient questions churn up within us seem much stronger, and much more persistent, than any light we can find through them.

And, almost parenthetically, I truly despair that much of modern thought insists that these are really naive, or silly, or senseless questions. Postmodernism says that such questions are either meaningless or hopelessly confused. Common sense seems to have turned uncommonly senseless, and is telling way too many of us that truth about values and truth about ultimate concerns is really a question of psychology—of what is true for you and what is true for me—and these “for me” truths can be so different and so relative and so personal that even to suggest that anyone has anything meaningful to say beyond their own autobiography is named arrogant, oppressive, and, finally, absurd.

Perhaps worst of all is the trivialization of this ancient and wonderful search for truth by turning it into a game, or a contest. Now, as far as I’m concerned, the greatest of many corruptions of the real search for truth is the modern “instant poll”, where people who could not possibly know anything about what they are talking about are encouraged to give their opinion, and then the rest of us are led to believe that such opinions are of enough value to merit our listening to the results.

Television news stations have call-in polls on issues like, “Should all those children be returned to their compound in El dorado?” And there are internet polls where you are encouraged to click yes or no on whether Tibetans are planning suicide attacks against China or whether the media favors Obama over Clinton.

And thousands of people actually do this; and the results are reported as news. These, I am convinced, are among the greatest signs of the decline of our culture.

They assume that anyone's ideas about anything are as good as anyone else's, and that the only real standard for truth is what the individual or majority of responders, whomever they may be, happen to think at the moment. Saints preserve us—it's such nonsense.

But none the less, and in spite of this, the great search continues. Pilate still asks; and so do we. As well we should. "What is truth?"

Then, in words we so often hear at funerals, and words that we should probably hear just as often at Baptisms, Jesus says, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life." "I am the truth". Pilate's answer was standing right in front of him *and he missed it*. (Which is one reason nobody names their kid 'Pontius' anymore). But we can't be too smug. After all, we usually miss it, too.

Listen. Jesus said, 'I am the truth'. He did not say, 'I know the truth', or 'I bring the truth', or 'I will tell you the truth', or 'the truth is what I say', or anything like that. Instead, Jesus said, "I am the truth". Which suggests, rather strongly if you think about it, that in order to know the truth, the real truth, the ultimate truth that the great search is all about, the truth as it is revealed to us in our faith, to know this, we need to come to know Jesus—not just to know things about Jesus, but to know Jesus himself. (Yea, I talked some about that last week; and it looks like I'm going to do that again today.) To know the truth, we need to know Jesus.

Now, this claim, when said in the Texas Bible belt, sounds like it means something very different from what it really means.

To come to know Jesus is not (or is not mainly or not mostly) to have some sort of solitary and personal religious experience. It's not to get zapped by God or to flop around like a fish on the bank. (Although such moments can be both wonderful and valuable.) To come to know Jesus is to do what we have been hearing about in the readings from Acts these last few weeks—it is to continue in the Apostles' teaching and fellowship, the breaking of bread, and the prayers. It is about disciplined spirituality, worship, and study. Coming to know Jesus also has to do what Peter is talking about in the reading we just heard—to seek to live in such a way as our lives are given shape by the life of Jesus, and that is the shape of a cross. To come to know Jesus involves seeking him in the face of the stranger and, especially, in the weakest and the most despised. | | To come to know Jesus is to look for his mind, and his heart, in the basic, daily, earthly realities of our lives.

And to come to know Jesus means to know his body, and to love his body—to engage seriously the life of the Church, of that community that the Lord has created and redeemed for his service. | | Finally, to come to to know Jesus is about coming to know a person, and that takes time, and effort, and love, and discipline, and a willingness to be frustrated, patient, and tolerant.

Because, you see, in all of the world's search for truth—from Plato to Pilate to us, as important and, indeed, as sacred as this search is, in all of it there will always be a sense in which we go out the same door we came in through. There's not a brass ring on that particular carousel.

That's because final truth is not propositional—it's not a list of facts. Real truth, the truth that lies at the end of the great quest, this is relational. It is about surrendering, not our minds, but our hearts.

This final truth is not about words, not even the wonderful, inspired words of the Bible. It is not about rules, even good rules, even good moral rules. It is not about even the best of Creeds, doctrines and traditions. At their best, any and all these can point us toward, or reflect for us, a bit of the glory of the truth. They can help us to find, or to understand, or to reach beyond themselves, to the truth. But none of them is fully the truth. None is the answer to the great search.

Jesus is the truth—a human being who is perfectly God for us, he is the truth. This is what we have to face and celebrate and deal with. This is perhaps the great, distinctive religious insights of our tradition.

It is a very good thing to seek the truth. But the final answer is not what we expect—instead, the final truth is a person. To know the truth, we must come to know Jesus.

This is something we need to hear not only when people die. This is something we need to hear when we want to live.