

True Facts - Sermon by Rob McClellan, November 26, 2006

John 18:33-38

(33) Then Pilate entered the headquarters again and called Jesus and said to him, "Are you the King of the Jews?"

(34) Jesus answered, "Do you say this yourself, or did another tell you about me?"

(35) Pilate answered, "I'm a Jew? *Your* nation and chief priests handed you over to me; what did you do?"

(36) Jesus answered, "My kingdom is not of this world; if my kingdom were of this world my helpers would be fighting in order that I not be handed over to the Jews; but **at present** my kingdom is not from here."

(37) Then Pilate said to him, "So, you *are* a king?"

Jesus answered, "You say that I am a king. I have been born for this, and for this I came into the world, in order to witness to the truth; all those who are of the truth hear my voice."

(38) Pilate says to him, "What is truth?"

After he had said this, he went out to the Jews again and told them, "I find no case against him." THE WORD OF THE LORD.

As a kid, I loved to be right. Who am I fooling? I still love to be right—but as a kid I especially loved it. In fact, it has always been difficult for me to own up to it when I am wrong. I can still remember the first time I admitted being wrong... It was last Tuesday, and I've appealed. Growing up, when I had no occasion to be right, though, a close second was my older brother being wrong. I liked that a great deal.

I recall one occasion on which I took particular satisfaction at my brother's folly. This is at least how I remember it: He was eagerly sharing what he had learned in school as we sat around the dinner table. There are three different kinds of knowledge, he proudly proclaimed: opinions, "true facts," and "false facts." Since then there's been a lot of needling about varying degrees of facthood in our family. It's now appropriate to punctuate something important by adding, "and that's a true fact!"

"What is truth?" Pilate's words peer right off the page. What is truth? It's my favorite question in the Bible. Recently, scholars almost ruined it for me. To my dismay, I discovered this question was not likely some philosophical pontification, the great Pontius Pilate perhaps preempting the postmodernists by 2 millennia.

Rather than striking a wise pose and musing, "What is truth," Pilate may have simply said, "Eh, what's truth?" as if to say, "Who needs it? That's overrated. I've got gold... and armies."

Pilate has not wondered existentially, "What is truth?" It sounds more like he's bored, if not bothered. It is not a matter of import to him because whether or not it is true, that particular truth means nothing to him. Even if Jesus were King of the Jews, what would that matter to an officer of the Roman Empire? Pilate himself expresses the oddity of the situation at the outset of the passage. "I'm a Jew?" he says, as if to remind Jesus who this concerns and who it doesn't; "*Your* nation and chief priests handed you over to me." What would it matter to Pilate?

It mattered a great deal to the people to whom John was writing. John's Gospel was authored out of a bitter struggle. In the decades after Jesus' death it was common for Jews who believed Jesus was God's son to worship in synagogue right alongside those who did not.¹ In John's community something happened along the way that sparked their expulsion from the synagogue. The general polemical tone of John grows out of this specific strife, and "The

¹ Bartlett, 124.

Jews" is more appropriately understood as those particular Jewish leaders who did the expelling.

This is why Jesus' true identity was such an important question for John to be asking. Belief in Jesus was the definitive characteristic, the one that got John's community cast out of the synagogue, and the one that must hold them together on the outside. John wanted to make it clear that those who did the casting out had gotten it wrong to reassure his community they were all right. While other gospels might seem more concerned with discipleship and doing, John's entire gospel is centered on the importance of believing who Jesus is.

Make no mistake, says John, Jesus is *the* one, God's son, the Messiah. The beginning testifies to this, "without him, not one thing came into being" reads that beautiful prologue. The likely original ending of the gospel testifies to this (end of ch. 20); "Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name." Everything in between testifies to this. The miracles and signs and prayers, they

all point to the one truth that is central to John and his community. It was a statement about one Lord that mattered intensely for two communities.

Should it matter to our community? I know I don't need to ask that question here. You are at church this morning, and while you may have come in part for the beautiful music and warm friends, your presence here on Christ the King Sunday says something about who you say is Lord. You are here despite the fact there you could find far more appealing talking heads on television waxing political, and there are turkey sandwiches and football waiting. (I half expected a mass exodus there). What is it we are here to proclaim? What does it mean for us to believe that Christ is king? Let those questions guide your mind as we revisit how John talks about Jesus throughout his gospel.

From the beginning we learn that Jesus is someone who came to his own people, and his own people did not accept him (1:11). Jesus' message is lost on those who should know it best. His first real miracle comes at Cana where he turns the water to wine, making what is good *uncharacteristically* saved for last, for those not too drunk to taste it (2:1-12).

Soon after, Jesus enters the temple and finds it has become a first century shopping mall (2:13-16). "Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!" he decries. He sees cattle and coin changers and with a whip of cords he drives them out, overturning tables and pouring out their currency. It is the separation of church and commerce. Jesus is clear. This is God's house. The economy will not be worshipped here.

Then Jesus meets Nicodemus, the Pharisee stand-in for all Pharisees (3:1-21). Jesus tells him in order to see the kingdom of God he must be born again, he must be born from above. The phrase means both, indicating that Nicodemus must indeed have a spiritual rebirth (born from above), and a physical rebirth (born again) and be rid of his old "family," his old allegiances and connections, his old positions of privilege within social and religious structures and join a new community. Poor Nicodemus doesn't quite get it, asking "How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?," questions more apropos for health class than a religious debate. So Jesus spells it out, if not for him, than for the rest of us, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that

everyone who believes in him may not perish, but have eternal life.”

John 3:16 reminds us that even with all Nicodemus is being asked to give up, that we are asked to give up, we are promised an experience of the eternal both in the life now and in the life to come.

We get a glimpse of the expanse of God’s mission in Jesus Christ, as we witness Jesus heal the royal official’s son (4:46-50). “Your son will live,” says Jesus, and it is clear that even empire, that way of being which stands counter to everything Jesus’ kingdom is about, is not exempt from God’s healing.

Jesus’ healing offends the religious leaders. He is persecuted for healing on the Sabbath (5:16). God’s work is to be done even when it makes the synagogue, or the church, uncomfortable.

The miracles continue, Jesus testifying to the abundant provision of the kingdom of heaven by feeding the multitudes (5:1-18), offering himself as the bread of life (5:35) talking about living water (7:37), and proclaiming to be the light of the world, saying, “Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life” (8:12). Scarcity does not rule the day in this kingdom.

There is so much to be seen, yet blindness recurs. The blind people Jesus heals seem to have no trouble believing, with eyes opened to a new world of vision. They stand in contrast to the religious leaders who cannot see what Jesus has done before their very eyes. It's obvious who is truly blind. How far do we need to go to see blind religion in our midst, where prosperity and abundance come not in following God's word, and Jesus' commandment to, "love your neighbor," but in sowing a "financial seed?" Blindness!

Jesus does not stop at blindness, though, defeating disbelief and death with one swift sentence. Driven to tears at the death of Lazarus, Jesus cries out to the one entombed and rotting, "Lazarus, come out!"

"The dead man came out," John tells us, "his hands and feet bound with strips of bandage, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, 'Unbind him, and let him go' (11:44)."

Unbind him. Is this really so alien a story or are we, too, bound by disbelief? What decisions do we make that betray our paralyzing fear of death? Rather than being afraid of not doing the will of God, we do everything in our power to protect not life

throughout God's creation, but our life, and our quality of life.

Unbind us Jesus.

It is much to think about, much to believe. Just when it seems too much, though, John reminds us that if we love Jesus, keeping his commandment to love one another, we will be given an Advocate (14:15). This promised Spirit makes our "too much" much more bearable. We're not left to this on our own. "I am the vine, you are the branches," says Jesus, "apart from me you can do nothing" (15:5). That sounds familiar.

Jesus prays for his followers and the road ahead, and then he is brought before Pilate who asks, "Are you the King of the Jews?" But, it doesn't really matter to Pilate, who then says dismissively, "What is truth?"

When Jesus speaks of the kingdom, Pilate sounds curious, "So you *are* a king?" Jesus must have lit up. Finally what he has been waiting for, someone to profess who he is.

"*You* say that I am a king," says Jesus. You say that I am king. Is it a description or a commandment? I think here Jesus is calling for us to make an embodied profession. We do so by getting inside all those episodes from John's gospel and believing in a way many

of those characters cannot. Better yet, it means letting those stories get inside us. It means proclaiming Christ's coronation not simply with our lips or heart, but with the fiber of our being. If Christ is King then we too should remember that the good wine is around for those who persevere. If Christ is King then we too must be born again from above. If Christ is King then we too must do the work of God regardless of who it makes nervous. If Christ is King, then we too have to see where religion is blind. If Christ is King then we ought to be willing to go to the tomb for the one who will lead us out. If Christ is King then today, and every day, we crown him Lord of all. Christ is our King. That's a true fact. Amen.