

Truth

A Meditation for the Third Week After the Epiphany

“What is truth?” Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor, asked Jesus.

It’s a question that hangs in the air, even in our time. It may be the defining question of our time.

St. John does not record any answer; Pilate seems to simply turn to the crowd and announce that he is acquitting Jesus. Pilate had been interrogating Jesus about accusations that Jesus was claiming power as king – a claim that would threaten the power of the local puppet king and the politico-religious leaders. In response to these questions, Jesus has answered Pilate, “I was born into this world to tell about the truth. And everyone who belongs to the truth knows my voice.”



So Pilate asked Jesus, “What is truth?”

Pilate didn’t press for an answer, so his question is often treated as rhetorical – cynical, even. It is the last question in the extended kangaroo court that is the capital trial of Jesus, a trial in which nobody seems very interested in truth, but everybody is keenly interested in power, in hanging onto power, and in obliterating anybody who poses a threat to power. The local potentates have cooked up a jumble of rumor, innuendo, and outright lies, stirring up crowds who threaten to riot in the crowded capitol city. Pilate’s job was to serve Emperor Tiberius and to keep the peace in this outlying province. That is the truth that Pilate knows – imperial power. Deference to imperial power will lead in a few years to the rule of Caligula, and then Nero, whose brazenly evil madness stand as stark warnings of the perils of autocratic power seized in wealthy, well-armed states. Truth – the kind of truth of which Jesus speaks – is beside the point to these leaders.

Truth is central, on the other hand, to the character and purpose of Jesus. Think of all the passages; these are just a few from the Gospel of John:

And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and **truth**. *John 1:14*

The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and **truth** came through Jesus Christ. *John 1:17*

God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and **truth**. *John 4:24*

Then Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in him, “If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the **truth**, and the **truth** will make you free.” *John 8:32*

Jesus said to him, “I am the way, and the **truth**, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me”. *John 14:6*

Here's the thing. We have two problems when it comes to truth. The first is the telling of lies. The second is believing that you have the truth, when you don't. They can be related or not, but both are deadly.

Perhaps it is obvious, but if not, I'll remind us all: lying is a sin. It's a violation of the Ten Commandments. The lie of the serpent led to the expulsion from the Garden of Eden. Lies led to the execution of Jesus. Jesus refers to the devil as "the father of lies." We're not talking here about how you respond to a loved one who says "how do I look?" or to the retroactive previous engagement; we're talking about malicious untruths, denials of reality, false witness. Lies can be individual and they can be social, political, and systemic. They may begin with denial or rationalization, but they end in ruin and destruction. And one of the ways they do that is by infecting the unsuspecting with false narrative, false accusation, and false history. Every one of us has encountered such a lie at some point in our lives. And each of us can be shaken to our foundation when the "truths" that we were taught, often by people we loved and trusted, turned out to be false.

Suddenly, we don't know which way is up or whom to trust. And when this happens on a societal scale, things can get very fraught, very irrational, and very frightening, very fast.

What then?

Well, today, January 25, is the Feast of the Conversion of Saint Paul. You can read account of his story [here](#). It may resonate in surprising ways. Saul (his original name) was convinced that the new sect known as the followers of the Way – i.e., the followers of the rebel Jesus – were a danger to the honored traditions of faith, if not to the Empire of which he was a citizen, and he went after them. He launched lawsuits, roundups, interrogations, trials, even executions. Saul was not dissembling; he'd been to the best schools, he was a respected religious and legal leader, and he genuinely believed that his cause was righteous. But you know the story – one day, on the road to Damascus, Jesus blew his world apart with the truth. Saul got a new name – Paul – and new information, first from the Lord himself, then from a rather unwilling Ananias, then more tutoring and mentoring from the apostles. Eventually, Paul's education, zeal and determination, turned in the right direction, led to the planting of the Christian Church across a pagan, hostile, otherwise-occupied Roman Empire. Without Paul's willingness to accept new information and change his mind about what was true, we Christians might well not be here now.

Maybe the way through our current struggle with truth, lies, and the American Way comes not in finding ways to out-argue or out-maneuver or out-clobber one another. Maybe it comes through an unshakeable commitment to find and live into deep, full, holy truth, whatever that might reveal about us and about the world. Maybe the way through requires each and every one of us, however righteous we believe we are, to believe that there is important information that we do not yet have.

Here in the Diocese of Virginia, some of that information concerns our own history. It's funny: we all like history when it makes us (or our ancestors) look good (perhaps with a bit of embroidery to dress it up); not so much, when it's about the less noble parts. But we need to know those things. Otherwise we end up like a person who only tells the good things when giving the doctor a medical history. The embarrassing things that aren't mentioned fester, hidden, until they pose a lethal threat to the body. But if they are named, aired out, disinfected, or otherwise treated as best

we can, health and vibrancy can be restored. It's true in medicine; it's true in psychotherapy; and it's true in history, in sociopolitical narrative, and even in the Church.

That's because an incomplete truth, or embroidered truth, is ultimately really an untruth. That is why a witness must swear to tell the truth, the WHOLE truth, and nothing BUT the truth. The fuller picture reveals blind spots, and incorrect assumptions, and ingrained habits in the system, that we can't otherwise see. It may sting at first, but knowing the truth then sets you free. Just as with medicine or therapy or family dynamics, that is true of reckoning with our heritage in Virginia and across the country, and it is true of every other tension and conflict that roils our society.

Perhaps the way forward is an openness to MORE truth, more information, rather than a defensive protection of "MY truth." On a basic everyday level, we do that by speaking what we know, or think we know, into the shared pool of knowledge and meaning, in love, and by listening as others do the same. We can speak the truth in love because truth joined to love is the strongest force in the world. It is stronger than empires. It is stronger than demagogues and mobs. It is stronger than death. It is, as Jesus said and as Saul discovered, the Way. It is, in fact the foundation of the Way of Love.

That new, larger truth may knock us off our horse, but it leads to life. And so I give the last word to the man of the hour, St. Paul:

We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people's trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming. But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love. Ephesians 4:14-16

Be well; be brave; be free, beloved.

+Bishop Jennifer Brooke-Davidson

Image: The Conversion of Saint Paul, ca. 1391–92, Spinello Aretino. Collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art