

“Belonging To The Truth” – Christ The King – Nov 22/09

The tension was palpable. The air in the governor’s headquarters was thick not only with smoke from the lanterns but with a foreboding sense that something really important was happening. There didn’t seem at first to be anything unusual or unusually important about this particular criminal brought before the governor, and yet there was something different in the air. Perhaps it was the time of day that created a sense that something was not quite right because it was in the early pre-dawn darkness, a favourite time for conducting nefarious deeds. Or maybe it was the double-talk, the glib vagueness of the answers Pilate got from the religious leaders in response to his question as to what charges, that caused Pilate’s innate politician’s suspicions to rise along with his eyebrows, that caused him to detect trouble ahead and made his staff really nervous.

That was the setting, that was the scene of the famous interrogation of Jesus by Pilate, and it is as slippery an example of politicians doing a dance as any we see on TV today.

Who was this Pilate? He was the governor, the Chief Administrator appointed by Rome to represent the Empire in a remote occupied country. He had a great deal of official authority, backed by all the military might of his native superpower at his command. Even with all that official power, however, he was desperately trying to keep the lid on that troublesome occupied land, dealing with terrorist attacks against the Roman soldiers and trying to establish a local governing council that would operate using the principles of law and order that were a matter of pride to the Empire. The local government was a troubled mixture of appointments by Rome and religious leaders who derived their power from local custom and practice. The process was riddled with corruption and the evangelist’s remark about the “high priest that year” reflects Rome’s interference even in such a position since it was a position usually held for life. We might think of “Caiaphas” as an early version of “Karzai.”

But even with all his apparent power, Pilate appears as a somewhat pathetic figure, shuttling back and forth between Jesus and the religious leaders, sometimes shouting out his authority, other times being thoroughly confused and frustrated by the obscure rabbi-like responses from Jesus. The tension builds between Pilate and the religious authorities and Jesus is increasingly caught in the midst of a ping-pong power struggle between state and church, even though he stands aloof and above it all. This power struggle reveals deviousness that any senior politician or bureaucrat – or for that matter any senior church official – would long to master. “What charges do you bring against this man?” Pilate enquires of the religious leaders. Are they clear in response? Do they level specific accusations against Jesus? Of course not! Instead, they give a shaded and shadowy duck-and-weave, “Well, if he had not done evil things we wouldn’t have handed him over to you!”

In today’s politics there is even a word to describe such an answer – “deniability.” It’s the art of providing a sufficiently unclear answer to leave enough wiggle room for a politician, church leader, business honcho or anyone else in a position of power to deny accountability. Sometimes the deniability is so blatant as to be laughable, even when the subject is usually no laughing matter. I’m sure you’re familiar with these kinds of answers, because we hear them all the time in the news. “I never saw the memos about handing prisoners over to be tortured.” “We didn’t know that clergy person was abusing youngsters when we suddenly transferred him to another country!” “It’s not our fault that the people signing the new mortgage couldn’t understand that the rates would rocket upward in three years!” Oh yeah, the ways are legion to deny any culpability through shading the truth.

Of course, these are the more blatant examples, the ones that are most public, but I think if we’re honest with ourselves we would admit that we too participate in providing answers that do not quite ring with truth. It starts naturally enough with trying to be kind, and sometimes untruthful answers are the safest kind to respond with. “Do these jeans make me look fat?” is a question that rarely if ever should elicit a truly honest reply. Unless you want to either terminate the relationship or

risk being physically damaged you should never, ever respond truthfully with “no, you’d look fat with or without those jeans!” Other times a “softer” answer is appropriate for compassionate reasons, recognizing that there is a time and a place for brutal honesty, and times of grieving or high stress are rarely the right times.

The art, however, of deliberately obscuring the truth with a slippery answer is downright devious and is almost always designed to preserve the power of the one practicing the art. It is a way of life completely the opposite of the kind of behaviour to which we are called by God in Jesus. “My kingdom does not receive its power from this world”, Jesus tells Pilate, who cannot begin to understand that answer because his whole life has been spent grasping for earthly-based power. And this is where we are caught up in the tension of this dramatic encounter. We watch and hear Pilate ask Jesus, “so, you are King of the Jews” and we hear Jesus’ answer, and we see Pilate’s confusion, and we are twitching like children waving our hands and saying, “I know, I know, pick me!” Because where Pilate doesn’t understand Jesus’ answer, we do. Yes, we do have the advantage of knowing how it all turned out, but we’re caught up in the tension just the same. When Jesus tells Pilate, “I came to testify to the truth, and every one who belongs to the truth listens to my voice” we twitch with excitement because we know the truth of that statement.

What was that truth to which Jesus came to testify? He came to testify to the truth of the existence of God, to the limitless love and compassion God has for people, to the grace and mercy offered by God. Jesus came to testify with his life of the reconciliation offered to people by God. The truth of Jesus’ proclamations, “I am the resurrection and the life”, “the Father and I are one”, “I will ask our Father in heaven to send the Comforter, the Holy Spirit” was powerfully affirmed in his rising again from the tomb, and his ascending into heaven to sit at the right hand of God, reigning victorious over all powers on earth and in heaven. King of the Jews? Well, yes ... and no. Not merely over the Jews alone but over Gentiles also, indeed over all the earth. A king? Well, yes ... and no. Not merely an earthly king. The kingship of Jesus, confirmed in his victory even over death, is so incredibly superior to the meager power of Pilate and Caiaphas that we can almost feel sorry for their misplaced arrogance, and that they were in truth powerless in their roles of sending Jesus to the death that could not hold him.

There is a great deal of evidence that being truthful has a powerfully positive effect on our health – spiritual health and mental health of course, but also our physical health. Apart from the question about the jeans being truthful reduces stress, and stress is a killer. Being untruthful takes a great deal of energy – often one little lie requires an ever-growing web of lies to sustain the first one. Mark Twain said it succinctly ... “no man has a good enough memory to be a successful liar.” The stress of worrying about being caught in our own web of lies almost always results in anxiety and high blood pressure. The self-delusion of beginning to believe our own lies corrodes and erodes our mental capacity and health as surely as any powerfully evil drug. The separation from Christ in not testifying to the truth puts our very being in peril.

On the positive and healthier side belonging to the truth enables us to listen to Christ’s voice. Good health begins with being truthful with ourselves about ourselves. No longer is Christ’s voice crowded out by the clamoring of the world and our own agendas. Belonging to the truth silences the noisy denials of accountability, and lets the quiet voices of confession and apology begin to cross our lips leading to true healing and reconciliation with God and our fellow humans. Belonging to the truth lets us begin to hear Christ’s gentle, soothing voice saying, “Fear not. Peace be with you.”

And there is another truth that emerges from the conflict between Pilate and Jesus, and that is the truth, again displayed by the power of Jesus in his resurrection, that when all is said and done, when the battles of this world are over, when each person finally surrenders all earthly power, all those

who have placed their belief and trust in Jesus will share with him his victory over all powers below, on and above the earth. Those people who in belonging to the truth have listened to Jesus' voice will ultimately share in his power and victory, and in the life he has in truth promised, a life finally free from pain, from sorrow, from tears, from suffering; a life full of gladness and sharing and sheer raw rejoicing.

In truth I tell you, all those who belong to the truth will listen to his voice and will share in such a life. Thanks be to God.