

# THE TRUTH

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*Christ Before Pilate. Mosaic in the Basilica of Saint Appollinaris in Ravenna, Italy, 6<sup>th</sup> century.*

Chapter 18 of John's Gospel presents the riveting appearance of Jesus before Pontius Pilate. I believe this is one of the highlights of the Passion Narrative in the Fourth Gospel. Its brilliant construction brings the theological and dramatic climax of the Hour of Jesus.

The trial takes place inside and outside the palace of Pilate, indicating an intersection of religion and politics. One must be careful as to not interpret Pilate as sympathetic to Jesus' case. Any talk of messiah among the Jewish people was viewed as a threat to Roman governance, so this situation had to be dealt with expediently. Jesus, even after the scourging and crowning, is resolute in his mission. In his dialogue with Pilate Jesus is clear about his role: "For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice." Pilate then posits that famous question: "What is the truth?" He then has Jesus brought outside again without waiting for an answer to his question.

The evangelist proclaims the mission of Jesus in the trial by referring back to chapter 10 where Jesus speaks about his relationship with God and the relationship of the sheep (followers and believers) who **belong** to him, **belong to the truth**. In this trial "the Jews" signifies those who do not believe in Jesus as revealer of God. Pilate also falls into that category of unbelievers

by simply walking away from The Truth without an answer to his question.

"*I am the way, the truth and the life.*" (JN 14:6) As Christians we do walk *the way* by following Jesus into everlasting life. We do live *the truth* because we believe Christ Jesus is the One who has revealed God's forgiveness. And as Christians we are born to *eternal life* through the Paschal Mystery.

Poet extraordinaire and U.S. treasure Carl Sandburg penned this poem about the search for truth within each of us. You may want to read and reread his words as they encapsulate the entirety of life:

### My name is Truth

My head knocks against the stars.  
My feet are on the hilltops.  
My fingertips are in the valleys  
and shores of universal life.  
Down in the sounding foam of primal things  
I reach my hands and play with  
pebbles of destiny.  
I have been to hell and back many times.  
I know all about heaven,  
for I have talked with God.  
I dabble in the blood and guts of the terrible.  
I know the passionate seizure of beauty  
and the marvelous rebellion of man  
at all signs reading "Keep Off."  
My name is Truth and I am the most elusive  
captive in the universe. Who Am I?

~ Carl Sandburg

Miriam Webster defines a fact as *something that has actual existence or an actual occurrence*. Finding the truth in our country right now has become even more challenging as we have now been presented with the concept of *alternative facts*. What? We clerics are not allowed to politicize from the pulpit but in this forum I feel compelled to address this issue. It has great ramifications on how we not only live as good citizens of the U.S. but, even more so, for how we live our faith, live the truth of God's love for us in Christ.

It is well known that representatives of conservative Christian groups have been in contact with counterparts in Russia, especially

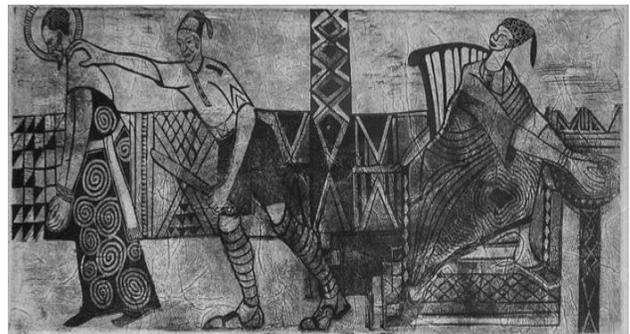
the Russian Orthodox Church. The NRA has also worked with Russian gun advocates. Accusations from the White House have been negated by the FBI Director. Congressional committees, newly appointed and long-time leaders, news commentators, even Hollywood stars offer blizzards and whirlpools of convoluted and multivalent facts. Social media is awash with everything from talk of impeachment to anger, outright hatred and every 'ism' one can imagine. In the middle of all the accurate and distorted information, hidden agendas, blatant attacks and constant negativity is YOU and I. People who are baptized into the Mystery of God, filled with the Spirit of holiness and the gentility of Jesus. How do you and I remain faithful to the truth with all the disparate information and facts swirling around us all day long?

Go back to the trial scene of Jesus before Pilate. Reread JN 18 if necessary. See how bravely committed Jesus is in his words. He knows too well the fate before him yet he does not turn away from the will of his Father. Nor does Jesus fear Pontius Pilate, the centurions or the crowd who scream for his execution. The evangelist holds up before us the perfect example of fidelity to God. We are to emulate this man and focus on his ability to face incredible adversity without denying God or his own role in salvation history. In a moment when most of us would melt from pain and distress, the Lord accepts his fate because of his belief in the truth, that he is the truth and what others may fabricate about him will not make him flinch or reject God's will. This is the Jesus we claim as Paschal Lord, the one who alone brings us God's forgiveness and salvation.

A bit of morning news and a half hour evening report can muddy one's sense of truth; if one creates a steady diet of news programs all day long how murky does one's moral self become? Whom do I believe? Can I withstand a bombardment of negative verbiage? Pope Francis has written beautifully about global warming in *Laudato 'Si*, but our proposed U.S. budget will slash 1/3 of the EPA's resources. Do I think the pope is misinformed because the government now says global warming doesn't

exist? Do I allow fidelity to my Catholicity lose ground while being involved in the political life of our country? How do I balance both?

Always go back to Jesus! Remember that we have a **personal** relationship with Christ! A **personal** relationship with our living God. And the God of the United States is not the God of our Judaeo-Christian tradition. There's a huge, gargantuan distinction to be made between "In God We Trust" and "I believe in one God who created heaven and earth..." The first statement is the construct of a few men while the second is a creedal statement rooted in the **lived experience** of God as revealed by Jesus Christ and passed down through the ages by the power of the Holy Spirit and Mother Church. I would suggest that our relationship with God, regardless of religious affiliation, takes precedence over citizenship. Therefore, God as revealed by Jesus Christ is the foundation of our morality, the Truth is our source for truth. Jesus alone.



*First Station - Society of African Missions, 20<sup>th</sup> Century.*

Pilate is presented as torn between what the Jews would think of him and how a bad decision as judge could cause a loss of prestige within Roman governance. So he makes no decision, merely walks away from the scene and leaves Jesus in the hands of others who do not believe in him or the Truth of God he revealed. Inside. Outside. Rome. Israel. Inside. Outside. Rome. Israel. Inside. Outside. Vacillation and indecision. I wash my hands of it all.

In chapter 14 Jesus answers Philip's inquiry about where Jesus is going. "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." The Lord goes on to instruct his disciples that they will soon be filled with the Advocate, the "spirit of truth." This Spirit will teach them everything. The Last

Supper is a bittersweet event, I believe. Jesus gathers those he loved the most, his trusted followers to pass on to them (and to all believers) his living legacy and the truth that he will be with us forever, signified beautifully by the Eucharist and our humble service to others. His life becomes our life in our own suffering and death. His passage to eternal life opened the way to God for all people for all time. Truth and life, in John 14, are inseparable. What distinguishes Christians from people of other faiths is our conviction that those who believe have access to God through Jesus Christ.

Living the truth of God's revelation in Christ is the challenge constantly before us who believe. When we are surrounded by negativity, public lies, international intrigue that is covered with shadowy figures and deals it is hard for all of us to not strike back or even consider doing so. *Love your enemies. The truth shall set you free. I am the way, the truth and the life. The Spirit of truth will teach you everything.* Remember that Jesus does not ask us to get comfortable before we walk in his steps. He tells us we must pick up our cross each day and follow him beyond Calvary into heaven. When everyone in the office is ripping apart a politician or the latest budget proposal or international embarrassment we are often alone in acting on our Christian faith. I'll be the first to admit that it's hard to shut my mouth instead of joining in the negative criticism.

How can we be good Catholics and citizens of the United States at the same time? How do we live the truth of God's revelation in Christ and wear a flag in a lapel? How have we done it before these past few months? I believe it is absolutely critical that we Catholic Christians publicly profess our faith by being strong in our convictions and yet humble in the way we witness Gospel values. Jesus was strong and direct. But his example of respecting each person (sinners and believers) is our guide to a balanced life. We can agree to disagree with people without forsaking the goodness of Jesus in our hearts. We can speak and advocate for the poor and be confident that this is the very work and mission of Jesus himself. We can gather people into Beauty Itself by allowing our

God-given talents to overpower attitudes that are destructive and inconsistent with the Gospel. And many of the beautiful values cherished by our country do fit within our Christian heritage.

Francis of Assisi never relinquished the love for the poor, crucified Christ. He spoke bravely within the papal court, admonished political leaders he felt were unfair, shared the Christian message with Sultan Malek al-Kamil of Egypt in 1219. In his Rule of 1223 he asks us friars to "humbly and charitably correct" errant friars. He had this wonderful way, just like Jesus, of accepting every woman, man and child as they were and where they were in life. Emperor, pope, clerics, wealthy, impoverished, non-Christian – everyone! He is a powerful model for our present day behavior. We can accept leaders whom we believe to be way off base as children of God; and yet we also have the right to communicate with them and call them to justice and responsible behavior.

*My name is Truth and I am the most elusive captive in the universe.* Some poetry analysts claim that Sandburg's words of 1916 express the impossibility of ever finding the complete truth about anything in society. In our faith system, however, we do have the revealed truth of our God in the Incarnation of Christ. This truth guides us through life, helps us make sense of suffering, enables us to stand up for justice and speak against hatred, gives us the conviction to respect life from conception to death, to preach and live the Good News that God saved the world from sin through the love and Paschal Mystery of his only Son, Jesus. It may virtually be impossible to see the truth in our society right now, but we **know** that the Lord is our Truth. The U.S. has been problematic since its inception. However, Jesus Christ shaped our existence by his own passage from this life through death and back to God. His reign is forever and when we allow Jesus to rule our hearts, then we can live within any form of government while remaining faithful to our baptismal commitment to be the Body of Christ.

Thank you for all you offer St. Peter's and the friars here. May God fill you with the joy of Easter, peace and everything good!

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