

Who is Truth?
April 10, 2020
The Rev. Scott Walters

In the Good Friday service in the Book of Common Prayer, after the reading of the Passion Gospel, a rubric states flatly: "The Sermon follows." *Rubric* comes from the Latin word for red, the color that these directions used to be printed in to make sure they weren't overlooked, or spoken aloud, I suppose. A liturgical planner will develop a keen eye for the little word *may*, since it makes the instruction optional. There is no *may* in the rubric about a Good Friday sermon.

This is the prayer book instruction I've most ignored in my years as a priest. And there are plenty of people who, like me, take the rubrics to be almost as important as the rest of the text in our prayer book, but who set this one aside annually.

Maybe you can imagine why. What is there to say? Offering a sermon, after what we just heard, can seem a little like jumping nervously into the yawning breach of silence that follows Pilate's infamous question: "What is truth?" A silence that extends to today. Jesus still hasn't given Pilate a satisfactory answer, has he?

To preach on Good Friday, then, becomes one more betrayal if the sermon amounts to an explanation of what Jesus refuses to explain.

I offer this awkward disclaimer as a kind of homiletical warning label. One that reminds us that if a Good Friday meditation impinges upon the silence of Jesus, rather than draw us into it, it will have failed.

But the desire for explanation is universal and very human. The first word many of us learned to speak was, "no!" But "why" was probably not too far behind. And once we learn it we wear it out. And, by extension, we wear out whoever is nearest by and might be able to explain the world to us if we ask them why every last detail of it is the way it is.

In other words, I'm giving Pilate the benefit of a doubt. I'm assuming he's not just exasperated or snide. Because there is something in all of us that really wants to know why things are. And the question that lives within that one, like a seed in its husk, is "What is truth at all and how do we know it?"

I say all this not to launch into a philosophical inquiry. Just the opposite. I want us to remember that the desire to know the truth about ourselves and our world comes early and lives deep in us. I daresay it's a holy longing. One that surely has the power to draw us to God, if we tend to it well.

But there is also a very human tendency to mistake explanations for the truth. Which might also go back to the child's peppering of her parent with a thousand *whys* a day. Back when we thought that if someone would just explain the floating of clouds and greenness of grass and how come golf balls bounce higher than stones we'll be able to figure this world entirely out by the time we're big. Truth will have filled up the perfect void of ignorance we arrive with in this life, one accurate explanation at a time.

But what we find over time is that there's a void in us that the explanations can't fill. We know it well in this so-called information age. The sea of data we swim in has not made meaning any easier to come by. If anything, we talk only more about the need to turn off the spigot of news and facts, at least for periods of time. But this has always been so to a degree.

Maybe you're actually quite clever at the explanation game and you figure out enough about the way the world works to become a prefect of the Roman emperor, even if the district you govern is a backwater little province called Judea, full of Hebrews and their strange ways and even stranger God.

Now they've brought you a faith healer who they claim claims to be a king. But he's got no throne, no army. He's got nothing except... except what you might call *presence*. It's a hard thing to explain, right? You ask him whether he's a king and he turns it back on you. He says those are your words, not his. As if he's come from a far country where kings and armies and borders haven't been invented yet. He says he's come only to testify to the truth and that those who belong to the truth listen.

All of which doesn't make him seem like an ignorant fool somehow. In fact, it makes you want to ask him the question that gnaws at all of us. We may master more and more information about the world, but we remain as much a mystery to ourselves as ever. So you ask him. "What is truth at all?"

And he says nothing. To the question beneath and within all questions he offers no response. No explanation. Only silence. Well, silence *and* the presence that led you to ask the question you know can't just be answered and added to all the others like one more penny in a purse.

Which means maybe it's not quite right to say that Jesus did not answer Pilate. He answered — if you must call it an answer — the unanswerable question not with an *empty* silence. But with the fulness of his presence. Which is actually the way he's been trying to answer the question of our lives all along.

You see, from the first moments of John, we've been hearing about another way, a deeper way to the truth. We're told that the Word of God did not come to tell us how things are. But rather, the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth. As if this most essential truth about ourselves we will only learn by living with this Word. This Jesus. By staying present to this presence.

And over in chapter eight, as Rowan Williams translates it, Jesus says, "If you make your home in my word, you will learn the truth, and the truth shall make you free." Knowing the truth is not about acquiring one more accurate fact about the universe. Knowing the truth is about abiding...living...staying near to Jesus. Near to the words he said. Near to the things he did. Near to the God he told us he was so near to as to be one with.

Maybe just as importantly, staying near when what he does is refuse to say anything. Maybe because it is only in the silence, with his presence, that we sense the truth we really seek is not a concept. It is a person. It is Jesus himself. The whole of this one, human life lived entirely open to the purposes and to the mercy of God. Stay near to him, and the truth you need will be near to you as well.

Pilate does not stay near. He washes his hands and lets the story of Jesus go the violent way of the stories of the earth. But the invitation remains. Even to us. The invitation to turn from the kingdoms of this world and their explanations about the way things have to be, and to enter the silence of Jesus and stay near to him.

The invitation is to bring all of your life fully into contact with his. All of what your life is today. The unexpected grace of some moments as well as the drone string of anxiety that seems to hum beneath everything all the time right now and whatever else it might be holding. This story will not explain it. But it can hold it. It can hold it near to the truth that is Jesus, who is near to the mercy that made us, the mercy that fills him, and flows through him and is available to anyone who will simply abide... who will simply make their home...with him.

A mercy so fierce it may even run down the ones who cannot abide it. Even the ones who run away.