

What is truth?

Psalm 93, John 18:33-19:5

21 November 2021

Today's gospel reading has reminded me of a picture, which, in my childhood used to hang on the living room wall in my parents' house. It was a print of a painting by a prominent Hungarian artist entitled *Ecce Homo*, the Latin words meaning 'Behold the Man' or in our Bible translation 'Here is the Man'. These were the words, according to John's Gospel, with which Pilate handed Jesus over to be crucified and that was the moment shown on the picture. It is remarkable, isn't it, what stays with you from your childhood. At the time I never paid too much attention to the picture or the words, they were simply a constant background to my growing up along with a number of other pictures. Yet this painting and especially those words, 'Behold the Man', remained with me all through my life. Maybe you have similar memories to recall, too. With hindsight, I now wonder if those words played a formative role in awakening my later interest in the human Jesus in addition to the divine Jesus, which was so much part of my Christian upbringing.

But before we get to those words, first I want us to focus on another significant few words from the Passion story, which Peter read to us from John's Gospel. Although today is the last Sunday before the busy, joyfully expectant season of Advent, we are given a reading, which would be more appropriate for Good Friday than for the days running up to Christmas. The passage contains an extended private dialogue between Pilate and Jesus, which doesn't appear in the other Gospels. Listening to it, it becomes clear that the two protagonists are talking at cross purposes. Pilate's concern is to find out if Jesus has any nationalistic aspirations to lead the Jewish nation in a revolt against Rome. Whereas Jesus is talking about a much wider picture, beside which Pilate's problem looks almost parochial. Jesus is engaged in a universal project that he calls 'witnessing to the truth'. But Pilate can only sneer at that, saying the famous words: "What is truth?"

Well, *truth* is one of those illusive words, which we use a lot in everyday conversation. I know someone, who starts every sentence with 'To tell you the truth...'. Yet, the exact meaning of the word is quite difficult to pin down. Just try any dictionary, or Wikipedia entry and you will see how many different ways there are

to define it. Initially, most of them agree that it is something to do with factual reality, but then they go on to give additional meanings, which can only be illustrated by the varying ways in which the word *truth* is being used: to tell the truth, to be deaf to the truth, to be truthful, nothing but the truth, etc. In our reading Pilate doesn't think much of the notion of *truth*. He certainly does not accept 'witnessing to the truth' as a serious defence from Jesus. It only tells him that Jesus is not really dangerous, he is not threatening Roman interests, which in turn tells us that Pilate is not very bright. He brushes aside Jesus' truth claims and in essence he is saying to him: don't talk to me about truth, this is only your truth and I have my truth, which is far more important.

I think we know something about this characteristic of truth, although maybe we are not always aware of it. When we assess a person, or a situation, or give an opinion about something, it is easy to forget that 'my truth' may not be 'their truth'. And that 'my truth' may not be 'The Truth'. This service of worship will be followed by our church meeting, where we hope to discuss important matters of our church community. It is an occasion when sometimes we have to decide on issues, where we hold different opinions. The question arises, how to do this in good spirit without falling out with our friends.

Well, I have found an interesting answer the other day as I was listening to a sermon by the principal rabbi of the Central Synagogue in New York. Rabbi Angela Buchdahl was talking about the so-called *Third opinion*. She referred to the saying: 'Two Jews – three opinions', jokingly indicating an almost national trait of Jewish people to love a good argument, where everyone stands up for their own truths. But then she explained that there was a more serious way of understanding the three opinions, as, in fact, this kind of arguing is a core Jewish practice, which is employed in formulating theological truths as well.

Apparently, rabbinic teaching was not based on handing down tenets of faith, eternal truths to be learnt. This way of teaching could only bring out two possible responses: acceptance or rejection. Instead of rigid, polarised stances, the rabbis encouraged a good argument, a kind of struggle for the truth, where listening to other people's truths was as much part of the discourse as putting forward your own. So, vigorous but respectful disagreements were all right, for out of them there was usually a *third opinion* emerging

that won the day, one on which all could agree. I am sure this is the same for us Christians as well if we are really 'seekers after truth', rather than merely want to win an argument. For we believe with Richard Rohr that the 'reconciling third opinion' is very often the Holy Spirit. This is why we pray for the help of God's Spirit to direct our discussions at our church meetings.

Pilate's words 'What is truth?' and the events that followed also raise another question about the meaning of truth. And it is to do with time. Where is Pilate now? Where is his little truth which secured his 'big fish in a little pond' status for a short while longer after he sentenced Jesus to death? History tells us that soon he was removed from his office in disgrace as Governor of Judea. Nobody knows anything about him now except what is known through the story of Jesus, whose truth is still being witnessed to by millions and millions of his followers all over the world. "Truth is the daughter of time" says a quotation from Leonardo da Vinci found in one of his notebooks. It is a great insight meaning, it is the passage of time that reveals the real truth. Today's truth for example is shown by the declaration published at the end of the COP26 Conference a few days ago. But the real truth of the matter will only be revealed by the actions of all of us in the following years.

The saying we often use to describe ourselves as 'seekers after truth' also refers to this time-related nature of truth. When we say it we humbly acknowledge that we are not in possession of the full truth yet, we have a way to go. We also express our willingness and openness to be led into further and deeper truth about ourselves and about God. "The Lord has yet more light and truth to break forth from His word" says an old Congregational Hymn based on the parting words of Pastor John Robinson to the Pilgrim Fathers in 1620. And just like for the Pilgrim Fathers, believing in and hoping for more truth and light, can be a risky business for us too. There may be choppy waters ahead. Seeking after this 'more truth' often means giving up some earlier held truths, and this can be unsettling, even painful. But the struggle itself is a way of engaging with God, who never lets us down.

It is a worthwhile path to follow. Jesus has done it. He has reached the ultimate truth, the great mystery of how to be a child of God as well as a child of Adam and Eve. It is the credit to the early church, in this case the church community of John, the Gospel writer to arrive at the greatest insight about truth. Their newly found

Christian experience taught them not to worry about definitions of truth. For them, and I believe for us too, ultimately truth is not an idea, it is a person. The person of Jesus Christ, who in his life and in his death embodied The Truth revealing to us what God is like and also showing us what we can be in relation to God. This was the Truth that Pilate couldn't comprehend: here was a man, who didn't deny his kingship, yet stood there in front of him powerless, flogged and humiliated with a crown of thorns on his head. This is the truth we often cannot comprehend either. Can God really be found in the victims of society? Can it be that true humanity demands our solidarity with them? Can it be that God would do anything for flawed humanity and that we all have the capacity to be the hands and feet, the hearts and minds through which God chooses to accomplish this? Jesus believed it. He put his life on it. So, as we come to His table, we come to give thanks for Him, who is our Truth, our Way and our Life.

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