

Good Friday 2019

John 18,1 – 19,42: Who is on Trial?

'What is truth?' asks Pilate....and walks out to face the crowd again. At least he does then say 'I find no fault in him,' but it's clear he won't wait for an answer: his profound question is just a cynical throwaway. I'll come back to this bit of the story later – enough to say that in his use of those three words, he raises illuminating questions. Who really is on trial? Is it a would-be freedom fighter with messianic delusions? Or the Messiah himself, Son of the Most High? Or is it in fact the high priests? Or Pilate himself? Or *the Disciples*? Or...someone else?

On Good Friday it's usual to concentrate on the actual crucifixion of Jesus, and rightly so. But all the gospels also give great prominence to his trial, and that can tell us a lot about those playing a part in it, and those looking on from afar.

Already, before Pilate's notorious question about truth (painfully topical in our world – what *is* truth?) the disciples had shown their fickle weakness. When the soldiers and temple police appear in the garden, the impetuous Peter draws his sword and strikes at the High Priest's servant, cutting off his ear. As if the Kingdom announced by Jesus could be – would ever *want* to be – defended by force and bloodshed. The other gospels say that 'they all forsook him and fled', so evidently Peter and one of the others (John?) turned back and followed at a distance. Knowing the doorkeeper, John got himself and Peter admitted to the courtyard, but the woman thought she recognized Peter as one of Jesus's disciples, to which he gave the infamous reply 'I am not'. And this was only the first of three denials, by the very Peter who had earlier claimed that even on pain of his own death, he would never desert or deny Jesus. Can we really pour blame on him, without a strong whiff of hypocrisy?

The double interrogation, at the house of Annas and then of Caiaphas the current high priest, is not dwelt on in John's gospel. Jesus is quickly taken on to Pilate's headquarters. The priests know that their charges of blasphemy won't get them anywhere, but they feel their authority threatened by Jesus, by his powerful 'signs', and by his teaching that shows up their own hypocrisy. Only the Romans can inflict the death penalty they want, and it's a charge of causing civil unrest that will cut any ice with Pilate. He then takes over the case, and in that long exchange with Jesus, this man with a background of severe and merciless rule also shows his weakness. There's evidently something about Jesus that he cannot explain in his world view, but he'd like not to be responsible for this strange prisoner's death. As we know, he finally succumbs to the pressure on his weakest spot: his career, the success of his rule in the eyes of the emperor. 'If you release this man you are no friend of Caesar.' And Pilate: 'Crucify your king?' The priests: 'We have no king but Caesar!' Outrageous hypocrisy! But it works – Pilate hands him over to be crucified.

Jesus had earlier told Pilate, 'My kingdom is not from this world – if it were, my followers would be fighting...' Pilate replied, 'So you are a king?' 'That word is yours', Jesus says, 'for this I came into the world: to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth

listens to my voice.' Then Pilate's 'what is truth?' and he walks out. He succumbs to his cynical self, as well as to his insecure, ambitious self.

Now what kind of thing is this truth to which Jesus came to testify, and to which above all is testified in his acceptance of that terrible death. What is it, to 'belong to the truth'? Clearly it means more than avoiding lies – though that's certainly included. There's a great deal about truth in the Bible, Old Testament as well as New, but especially in John's Gospel. The Lord is abundant in truth. He is the God of mercy and truth. God desires truth 'in the inward parts' – to be built into our very being. In that great opening passage of John's Gospel, the Word which was 'in the beginning', becoming flesh and dwelling among us – it was 'full of grace and truth'. And later: '*I am* the way, and the truth, and the life.' And Jesus says 'If you continue in my word, (or, "make my word your home") you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth and the truth shall set you free.'

How wonderful that freedom would be! What keeps us from such freedom in the Spirit? Surely, it's because we make our 'home' – our place of security, of confidence – in things *other* than Christ's truth. In things like power, status of whatever kind – race, wealth, education, career, fame, appearance, good opinion of others, how many followers ... as though such fickle and fragile things could make up who we truly are.

Making his Word our home means finding our security in Christ, so knowing the truth of who we truly are – beloved children of God, who loves the world so much that he gave his only Son, so that knowing *the truth of what is*, we can be set free.

This, of course, is an ongoing journey, however much we tarry aside and let those other things take over, however much the goal seems distant as ever after years and years of traveling. In our response to the events of Good Friday, we – *I, you* – find ourselves on trial. Yet it is *Good Friday*. We can always start again, and this is a good time to re-assess the truth of where we really are, *who* we really are, and *what/who* is the firm foundation and leading guide for our journey towards freedom in the Spirit. God is just longing to acquit us, if we can only accept this freedom

Harold Stringer

Let us pray

Loving and gracious Lord, God of mercy and truth,
help us to face the truth about ourselves
in the confusion of this troubled world –
to find our home in your Word-made-flesh
to know the Truth that sets us free.
Help us to discern our true and deepest needs.
And may we find in Jesus crucified
the true image of your limitless love for us.
Amen