

WHAT IS TRUTH?
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What is truth? The encounter between Jesus and Pilate as it is told in the Gospel of John goes right to the heart of religion. It is not Jesus who is on trial. It is Pilate. It is the conventional world and all its empires that are on trial. The world stands condemned, and the truth that sets the human spirit free from all world's harshness and pain is revealed triumphant.

Today is Palm Sunday in Christian tradition. It marks the day that Jesus entered Jerusalem to begin the week that would end in his arrest, execution, and what is said to be his resurrection. He had been teaching and healing among the village peasants in the region of Galilee. But now he had come to the center of religious and political power to give witness to the truth that flowed through his life.

It was the time of the Passover, one of the great religious festivals for Jews. The city was crowded to bursting as people came up to offer the customary sacrifices at the great Temple. The Passover celebrated their exodus from slavery in Egypt more than a thousand years before. Moses had led the people to a new freedom. There in the wilderness of Sinai they had forged a radical, new understanding of spiritual reality and become a new society. Now, Jesus had come to Jerusalem to give witness to a truth that would set people free from all that held them captive and to proclaim a new order.

Both the story of Passover and the story of Palm Sunday, Good Friday, and Easter are great stories of the human spirit. But how are they true? First of all, they are stories. They are based in historical experience, but they are not history as we understand history. What really happened at the crossing of the Red Sea? What happened there at the foot of Mount Sinai? What was actually said between Jesus and Pilate? What would you and I have seen if we had been there at the tomb on Easter morning?

In terms of historical fact, all that we know is that Jesus did live, that he was a religious teacher and healer who had remarkable spiritual power, that he was executed by order of the Roman ruler Pontius Pilate, and that after his death certain people had a powerful experience of his living presence, which they described as resurrection. Something powerful and life changing had to have happened to people in the presence of Jesus and in their remembered experience of him. People retold the story of his ministry. They retold sayings and anecdotes. They retold them not as biography, but as a way of evoking again the life changing experience they themselves had undergone and to share it with others.

As years passed the stories, sayings, and anecdotes were collected and written down and woven into what became the Gospel accounts. Some of the sayings may reflect actual words of Jesus. And some of the stories may reflect actual events. But what is actual fact and what is the work of religious imagination is hard to sort out.

But the Gospel texts themselves, the actual written documents, these are historical facts. The texts themselves are facts. They were written. They exist. This is indisputable. They represent how different Christian communities chose to remember Jesus and how they used that memory for inspiration and spiritual transformation long after Jesus had gone.

The four Gospels Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John were written some 35 to 55 years after Jesus' death. These were not the only Gospels. There were many others which fell by the wayside for a variety of reasons. Some didn't tell the story very well. Some were too fantastic. Some others were victims of church politics. But these four have persisted in wide religious consciousness over the past two millennia because they reveal truth in an especially powerful way.

These four Gospel accounts are so skillfully constructed; they are so spiritually and so literarily sophisticated and universal in their reach; that they still work to change lives today. Like all spiritual texts, the four Gospels were not written as historical documentaries. They were composed as spiritual texts whose purpose is to evoke spiritual transformation within the person who meditates upon them, and to open one's mind and heart to the larger truth of our being.

The four Gospels differ in their details and theological perspective, which is part of their collective genius. It's like looking at the same reality through different lenses, or listening to music in different keys. But what matters is the power they have to open people's minds and hearts to wisdom and spiritual truth that can change lives and bring new vitality, which these texts have done for many people over the centuries.

This is the way spiritual texts work in all religions. The Gospels are unique in that they develop the image of a human person whose very life and death embodies deep spiritual truths about our own being. The language is now two thousand years old, which causes a number of problems in interpretation. Their interpretation has sadly often fallen into the clutches of church institutions and political movements for their own self-serving agendas. That is a reason for the Reformation in the 1500's. It is also a reason for the development of our Unitarian and Universalist traditions. We wanted the freedom to interpret and experience the texts for ourselves. Of course, today, we are also open to inspiration from a wide variety of spiritual sources, not only the Gospels, but other world religions, poetry, art, and the universe itself.

Now back to Jesus and Pilate. The debate over truth occurs only in the Gospel of John. Jesus as the embodiment of truth is the unique theological perspective John. It is a theme throughout the Gospel. Jesus comes into the world full of "grace and truth." Further on, he says that he is "the way, the truth, and the life." He offers that we "shall know the truth, and the truth will set us free." Standing before Pilate, Jesus answers, "For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth."

As Unitarian Universalists we cherish the search for truth and meaning. We are people who seek the truth in the freedom of mind and conscience. What is the truth we seek? What is the truth by which the Pilates of this world stand condemned?

There are many levels and kinds of truth. There is the truth that science seeks. These are the facts and theories which can be publicly verified by carefully designed experiments. The planets appear to move in precise orbits by a force of gravity which can be described mathematically as the inverse of the exact square of the distance between them and the Sun. This is a truly remarkable thing. But even the most established and respected theories are only theories. They stand in final judgment by the universe itself and the next data, which may throw them into question. Scientific truth is only as true as the universe judges it to be.

Another kind of truth is the truth as established by courts of law. Each witness swears to tell “the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.” Of course, different witnesses to the same event will see it quite differently and will tell different stories, often in all honesty. In the end, truth is what the jury finally decides it is.

When I stand before a painting in the museum and ponder it, its truth may be the feeling it stirs within me, the insight that it evokes, or the sense of beauty it inspires within me. These emotions and insights may be quite different than what the artist was thinking or experiencing when she painted it. They are nonetheless true for me. Like you, I have pondered certain abstract paintings whose truth, if any, has totally eluded me. Even so, we want to believe they meant something to the painter or the museum, or at least that is what they would like us to believe.

Philosophers have argued for centuries about truth. There is the famous story of the professor who wrote statement “A” on the blackboard. But he meant to write statement “B.” Another professor says he should have written statement “C” instead. But as it happens, the truth is statement “D.”

So, you see, truth can be a tricky thing. We sense that it has to do with the agreement of something with reality. But what do we mean by “agreement” and what is the “reality.” We expect a scientific claim to agree with observable physical reality. A system of law and rules of evidence developed over centuries govern what facts a jury may consider in reaching their verdict as to the truth of the charge and defense, but the verdict itself reflects the collective and fallible judgment of 12 people. The truth of a painting depends on one’s personal experience of it.

But, what is spiritual truth? What is the reality to which it points? And what do we mean by agreement with that reality? What is the truth which Pilate dismissed with such utter contempt in saying, “What is truth?”

Pilate was a Roman ruler who governed Judea from the years 26 to 36. We know from history that Pilate was a mean-spirited and harsh ruler. He had little interest in innocence or guilt. His concerns were those of worldly power and political expediency.

His questioning Jesus about being king of the Jews was to mock him and to show contempt and contempt for the Jewish leaders as well.

But it was Pilate who stood condemned. Jesus confronted Pilate with the truth of a very different kind. The kingdom of which he spoke was not of Pilate's world. He spoke of a spiritual order very different from the ordinary world. The kingdom of which Jesus spoke was not about an empire ruled by the elite and privileged. It was instead like a banquet to which all the outcasts and those discriminated against and the lowly are welcome in radical equality. It is not a reality somewhere else, but one that is right here and all around us, among us, and within us. It is not a future in some distant heaven, but a present reality here and now spread out all around us. And it was already happening right around Pilate.

The truth that Jesus embodied is about the reality of life in all its fullness, graciousness, compassion, beauty, and joy. Such life is about living in harmony with the sacredness which is at the core of every person. Such life is about a way of being that leads from anxiety and fear to a life of peace and trust. Such life is about liberation from all that demeans humanity. It is the freedom that comes when we live with compassion for others, and when we live for the sake of justice and peace, and when we live with respect for the essential worth of each person. Today, with new insight we also are coming to see that such life is life lived in harmony with the natural environment within which we have our lives.

Jesus was on trial for his life, but only his physical life. At a deeper level it is the world that is on trial for its life, its spiritual life. It is the conventional world, and all its empires and injustices, oppressions, and wars that is on trial. It is you and I, with all our self-preoccupations, prejudices and fears, who are on trial. But, the world stands condemned in light of the greater truth. This is the truth that was lived by Jesus so powerfully. This is the same truth that has been lived by so many courageous and enlightened women and men in every age. It is this truth of life in all its beauty and fullness, it is this life in all its compassion and justice that inspires and transforms the world still today. The Pilates of this world pass away. But the truth of life awaits us. It is here and now. It is all around us and within us, if we would let ourselves die to all the false priorities and anxious concerns of the ordinary world. The truth of Easter is the truth that sets our spirit free.