

St Mary's, Dorchester, Friday 18th April 2025 i.e. Good Friday.

Isaiah 52:13-end of 53

Hebrews 10:16-25

John 18:1-end of 19

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

“What is truth?” [John 18:38] Sometimes you hear people argue that Pilate was a philosopher. In truth, neither Pilate nor the forces of barely-contained violence that he represents are interested in questions of truth and falsity. All they care about is power: what power can they obtain? what power can they hold on to?

John is unsqueamish about the reasons why Pilate gets involved with Jesus at all. John has this mob of soldiers and police and religious people drag Jesus around; and when they arrive at Pilate's place they put their demand in bald terms: “We are not permitted to put anyone to death,” they say to him [18:31]. In other words, those who have seized Jesus are saying: We realise that there is a power here that is systematically indifferent to human need and goodness. And we want this power – the Roman machine – to do what it does best to this individual.

And so, with only a little encouragement, the Roman machine does precisely that. Many interpreters see John's Gospel as anti-Jewish. For all that, John recognises that even Caiaphas the High Priest is aiming for something good when he conspires to murder Jesus. Caiaphas argues that it's better for one person to die than for the whole nation to be destroyed [John 11:50]; and he appears to be sincere in his belief that he might protect his nation in this way. We might disagree with some of his assumptions; but we can't deny that he is acting on principle. Pilate on the other hand clearly doesn't care about much at all. Putting to one side for a moment all of the casual cruelty that Pilate authorises [e.g. 19:1-5] I read his comment about the tradition of releasing someone at the Passover [18:39] as the best measure of his utter indifference. This is not about truth and falsity; it is not about just government; Jesus' death is just another arbitrary act of power – the power to release, and the power to torture to death [19:10].

There will always be people who seek this kind of power. We call them tyrants. Whenever they don't like the truth, they have people to give them “alternative facts”. They boast publicly about the casual use of violence. Some people will be impressed by this sort of talk; some people will court it, try to take advantage of it, to their own ends. No society is immune.

To state the blindingly obvious: Jesus is different. Even in the face of persecution, he continues to attempt good conversation; he is still interested in the truth. A policeman strikes him when he talks out of place; and he says, “If I have spoken wrongly, testify to the wrong. But if I have spoken rightly, why do you strike me?” [John 18:23]. This isn't just witty repartee (although the wit is disarming): Jesus sees his persecutors as human beings, because they are human beings. He sees them as people worth listening to, and – even now – as partners in a common human journey towards the truth. He sees them as people worth praying for. Such is the difference between Pilate and Jesus: one of them jokes about the truth as he idly kills. The other abandons all power, all pretense of power, and is true to the end.

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Jesus says, “By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” [John 13:35] We are called to imitate our Lord and Teacher. We are called to adore the pattern he gives us, in his life and his death. Indeed, everyone who is baptised is encouraged to see themselves as already dead to the lies that make tyranny possible.

Tyranny says that some humans are worthy of love, and others are not. Tyranny says that some human lives are expendable. At times, tyranny doesn't even attempt to justify its disregard for human life. Love is our public response to those lies. If we are true to the one who is the Truth we will follow him. We will love where others expect to find no love; we will listen where others expect to find no truth. We will pray for our persecutors, that God will turn their hearts. We will speak, knowing that – at the end of the day – there is one audience that matters, and he discerns truth in the inmost parts.

Therefore, my friends, since we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain (that is, through his flesh), and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us approach with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful. And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching. [Hebrews 10:19-25]

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.