

“For this purpose I was born and for this purpose I have come into the world—to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice.” Pilate said to him, “What is truth?” After he had said this, he went back outside to the Jews and told them, “I find no guilt in him.”

Dear Friends in Christ, and fellow redeemed:

What is truth?

That question asked by Pilate is one that is asked again and again in our world today. What is true? We hear so many contradictory discussions in our world that it is hard to know truth from lie; fact from fiction. For years we have been struggling with the relativistic views of people who believe that there is no absolute truth; that your truth is not necessarily my truth, and my truth is just as valid as yours. Truth has suffered because of social media tirades where fact is replaced by opinion and feeling. We know, and even accept, that we are bombarded with ‘fake news’. Even where truth can be established by every measurable standard that people would bring to bear: scientific, logical, historical, or physical, many will still look and say, “well, that’s just your opinion. I know what’s true for me, and it isn’t what you say it is.”

What is truth? We are inundated with conspiracy theories on everything from COVID to 9/11 to aliens and just about anything else you want to name. We set aside legitimate truth simply because it contradicts or limits what we want to believe and what we want to do. Worst of all, we see that St. Paul was right on the money when he said by inspiration of the Holy Spirit that people ***“exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen.”*** (Romans 1:25, ESV)

What is truth? It definitely wasn’t in the actions of the chief priest and religious leaders who plotted against Jesus, seeking false witnesses against Him. There was no truth in the trial that they held, where they accused Jesus of blasphemy. There was no truth in their testimony against Jesus when they brought Him before Pontius Pilate. There was no truth in these hypocrites who will not dare go into Pilate’s Praetorium—his palace and headquarters—because they didn’t want to be ceremonial defiled with contact from these Gentiles before the Passover, yet they were more than willing to bring their false charges against Jesus and violate the 5th commandment by killing an innocent man. There was no truth when Pilate asked these leaders: ***“Shall I crucify your King?” The chief priests answered, “We have no king but Caesar.”*** (John 19:15, ESV) They lied, giving mere lip service that they hoped would satisfy Pilate, but they had no allegiance to Caesar. They only wanted to serve themselves.

What is truth? Pilate knew the truth. He knew that Jesus was innocent of the charges brought against him. He knew it was out of jealousy that they were accusing Him. He says to the crowd: ***“I find no guilt in him.”*** Yet the truth was not enough to keep Pilate from giving Jesus to be crucified.

Someone has said that “Sometimes people don’t want to hear the truth because they don’t want their illusions destroyed”. We might put it another way: the truth hurts. The truth hurts, because we don’t want to confront what that truth means for our lives. In so many ways, this day is about truth. As we look at the cross, we are confronted by the truth; an ugly truth—the truth of our sinfulness and shame. The hymn writer has rightly said: ***“Ye who think of sin but lightly Nor suppose the evil great Here may view its nature rightly, Here its guilt may estimate”***. (LSB 451, st. 3) Our self-delusion that we are basically good people is shattered by the Saviour’s death on that cross. He does not die for what He has done. He does not die as a helpless or hapless victim. He does die for the lies told by the Jewish council. He dies for Peter, who denies Him. He dies for Judas, who betrayed Him. He died for smug James and John, who wanted to rule with Him in what they thought was going to be the glory of an earthly kingdom. He died for Adam, who disobeyed by eating of the fruit of the tree of which God said he could not eat. He died for Cain who killed his brother. He died for every transgression of God’s holy law since the creation of the world, no matter how small and no matter how great. It is not His sin, but our sin, as Isaiah pointed out in our Old Testament lesson today: ***“But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed.”*** (Isaiah 53:5, ESV)

The truth hurts, for the truth is that each and every one of us is a sinner. We are the reason for the cross. We are the reason why the holy, sinless Son of God dies in pain and agony. We are the ones who caused this day. That truth hurts. It makes us uncomfortable. It makes us squirm. I know that we don't tend to think of ourselves as unforgiving to those who have hurt us. No, we lie to ourselves and say that we are justified in our actions until they make amends the way we feel they should. We aren't the ones who bear false witness. We are just 'telling it like it is'. We don't hurt or harm others. We simply make sure that we are protecting ourselves and what is ours. But the commandments say that we are sinners. The apostle John said something we remember often in our worship: ***"If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us."*** (1 John 1:8, ESV) Yes, the truth hurts as we realize it is for us and for our salvation that the darkness of this day exists.

But more than just the terrible reality of our sin is that the Truth hurts. Pilate asks, ***"What is truth?"*** The better question is, "who is the Truth?" On the night before His crucifixion, Jesus prays for His disciples, saying: ***"Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth."*** (John 17:17, ESV) We know that God's Word is truth. Sadly, the unbelieving world continues to look at that divinely inspired Word and sees it as nothing more than the rambling and musings of people trapped by superstition and fear. But in a world of so much falsehood, where truth is a rare commodity, God's Word is truth. It leads and guides us to the greatest truth of all—the Living Truth; the Living Word. Jesus said: ***"I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."*** (John 14:6, ESV) In the Eternal Son, who comes to take into Himself our human nature, truth comes to life. Jesus told Pilate that He came to bear witness to the truth. He came to declare—and to be—God's plan for our salvation. He bears witness to the truth by what He says and by who He is and what He does. He bears witness to our lostness, but also to the truth of God's grace. It is the truth that the Son of God descends from heaven to be with His people; to live for His people; to die and rise to redeem His people. It is a truth that must lead to this day.

And so we see that on the cross, the Truth—the Living Truth hurts. The Truth hurts from those nails that pierced His hands and feet. The Truth hurts from the marks of the whip on His back. The Truth hurts from those thorns pressed into His brow. The Truth hurts as He suffers and thirsts and is mocked by those He came to save. The Truth hurts as He is forsaken by His Father—something we cannot even begin to comprehend. The Truth hurts, but here is the greatest and most comforting truth: He hurts for us. He bears this for us. He hurts, but He does this because of His love for us. The One who is Truth hurts so that we can be forgiven. He hurts so we can be free. He hurts so that we can overcome the hurts of this world and share in the glory that is His. He calls us to listen to His voice; to listen to His truth and assures us: ***"If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."*** (John 8:31–32, ESV)

Yes, the truth hurts when it forces us to face our sinfulness and our imperfection. It hurts when we realize how unloving, unkind, unforgiving and self-serving we are. The truth hurts when it forces us to realize what we confess in the Nicene Creed, that it was *for us men and for our salvation [Christ] came down from heaven And was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the virgin Mary and was made man; And was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate. He suffered and was buried.* (Nicene Creed, 2nd Article)

But there is more truth, and this truth doesn't hurt. It heals. It is the truth that lies hidden in the darkness of this day, as the body of the Saviour was taken from the cross and laid in that borrowed tomb. Jesus bore witness to this truth. The Word of God, the Holy Scriptures, bears witness to this truth. It is the great truth that will be revealed again in just 3 days, as the Saviour rises from the dead as proof and testimony that His Word is true. It is the truth that assures us that we are forgiven, for everything that had to be done to save us has been done. It is the truth that says that we will also rise to live in the truth, with the One who is the Way, the Truth and the Life.

What is truth? In a world where it can be hard to know truth from lie or truth from error, we can be sure that God is truth. His Word is truth. Christ is the Living Word, and therefore the Living truth. By His life, death and resurrection He has testified to the truth that brings us hope, peace and comfort this day. This is the truth: that ***"God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life."*** (John 3:16, ESV)