

Questioning Truth

Isaiah 52.13 - 53.12

Hebrews 10.16-25

John 18.1 - 19.42

Jesus said: 'For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth....'

Pilate asked him, 'What is truth?'

The events of Good Friday put the question of truth to us in stark fashion. We are confronted with Jesus condemned, suffering, crucified, dead. What does this have to do with truth?

What happens on this day is what it looks like when the love of God made flesh in Jesus turns to face human violence. In Jesus, we encounter the truth about ourselves in the light of God's truth.

John's passion narrative is peppered with people struggling in their encounter with the truth that shines in the face of Jesus. We have the puzzlement of the temple guard who are stunned by Jesus' forthrightness when he announces that he is the one they are looking for. There is Simon Peter who goes from wanting to answer violence with violence to hiding in the warmth of anonymity and fitting into the group of the powerful. Who, when confronted, denies he knows Jesus. There is the anger of the religious authorities, their failure to be true to their own convictions, their attempt to

dissociate themselves from any responsibility for Jesus' death. We have Pilate's cowardice and reluctance to seek true justice in favour of what is politically expedient.

Echoing in these encounters with Jesus is Pilate's question: What is truth?

There is here a basic ambiguity about truth.

In our own day, we hear that we live in a post-truth society. People say there is no such thing as truth. And yet confusion ensues when it is pointed out, often by a child, that they too are making statements of truth: either it is true or not that there is no such thing as truth. We can be left with rather sore heads!

In fact, the refusal of truth relates to a deeper issue: the fear that truth is a mask for power. Mahatma Gandhi echoes this in a question he has about truth. He asks, 'How can he who thinks he possesses absolute truth, be fraternal?' The American monk Thomas Merton took this question seriously. Merton noted how knowledge can make us think we hold in ourselves a truth denied others, and so we make it our duty to impose it on them. Merton is particularly critical of religious people. He says here the temptation is 'to cultivate an inner sense of rightness and make this subjective feeling the final test of everything. As long as this feeling of rightness remains with them, they will do anything under the sun. But this inner feeling (as

Auschwitz and the Eichmann case have shown) can coexist with the ultimate in human corruption.'

This is what we see in the passion narrative. The religious and political authorities reject the truth Christ shows forth but only by imposing their version of truth upheld by violence and a lack of truthfulness.

Our post-truth culture rightly identifies here how so-called truth can be imposed on us by the powerful and threaten our freedom. But our culture risks undermining itself when it then goes on to say what is needed is a liberation from truth and a celebration of human freedom. We must make our own truths and shape the truth of the world accordingly. This creates an opposition between truth and freedom that can be very deep seated. Faced with compelling evidence and unassailable arguments, we may still choose to ignore truth for the sake of freedom. Indeed, the more compelling the evidence the more I might assert my freedom against it. The dangers of this, however, have become more apparent in our politics and in particular in the debate over climate change. The state of the natural world questions our use of freedom. The problem is that when all of us act in our own freedom this still favours the more powerful who are now unaccountable to any truth but their own.

The cross, however, holds up a mirror to all the ways we distort truth itself to serve power. This concerns not simply those in power. For

we all carry the seeds of an abuse of power in ourselves: An angry word spoken against another; the joke that demeans; an unwillingness to listen to another person properly. Merton is uncompromising. He says, “The rush and pressure of modern life are a form, perhaps the most common form, of its innate violence. To allow oneself to be carried away by a multitude of conflicting concerns, to surrender to too many demands, to commit oneself to too many projects, to want to help everyone in everything is to succumb to violence. More than that, it is cooperation in violence...”

But we must also be careful of the way the cross itself can be misused. It too has been used as a symbol of oppression. History will not let us forget how the cross has been used as a sign of imperialist conquest. There is also a more subtle way to misuse the cross. We can make it the final word on everything. This distorts the Christian message: unless you are suffering you are not getting it right; or, our suffering placates a wrathful God. But nothing could be further from the truth. This again plays into the notion of truth as a mask for control.

The cross, however, does not simply unveil the uncomfortable truth about human violence. It also calls out to a humanity which has an inexhaustible capacity for love and compassion. Our hearts cry out in pain at the sight of someone we love suffering. In Jesus on the cross, God is revealed as the one whose heart cries out for all human

beings. Also for anyone who has suffered, for the victims of violence and persecution, Jesus' passion speaks to and from within the depths of their experience. This is not to glory in Jesus's suffering. Rather it is to encounter the depth of God's love in the midst of suffering. Jesus suffered because he willingly lived a life of love, a life open to God and others; a love that seeks to engage with every aspect of human reality.

Here we come to how Jesus on the cross transforms the very notion of truth. Truth is not a mask for power but is revealed fully as love, a love that is willing to suffer as it refuses to return violence for violence. This challenges Pilate's question. It is not: what is truth? But who is truth? Truth is ultimately about the person of Jesus and, therefore, about every person who stands before us. This informs Thomas Merton's reply to Gandhi: 'Only he who loves can be sure that he is still in contact with the truth, which is in fact too absolute to be grasped by his mind. Hence, he who holds to the gospel truth is afraid that he may lose the truth by a failure of love....'

Truth is not something we simply possess, create, and impose on others. It is a concrete communion we discover only with others; a way of life where each belongs to the other, where each is accountable to other, where justice serves the truth of love, and suffering is met with concrete compassion. To live truthfully in the light of the cross is to live in the openness to a reality that belongs to

everyone. This does not undermine freedom, it enables a freedom that goes deeper than freedom of choice. A freedom that brings us out of ourselves to be with each other and for each other. This is a freedom that is cross-shaped because it refuses violence, preferring to suffer for and with others than impose suffering on them. This is the very truth of love that Jesus shows from the cross when with dying breath he commends his mother and the disciple John into each other's loving care. Here Jesus transforms an instrument of torture into an occasion for love until the end, a love without end.