

Sermon – Bethany College Sunday at Bethany Lutheran Church

22 November 2009 – Christ the King Sunday

Gospel: John 18:33-37

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

This Sunday marks the last Sunday in this year's Christian calendar. Next Sunday is the First Sunday of Advent. In the Lutheran Church, instead of the "Last Sunday of Pentecost," today is known as "Christ the King" Sunday. What a beautiful description of the Sunday that precedes the Advent season, when we prepare ourselves for the birth of our Lord and Savior ... Christ the King Sunday!

Today's Gospel reading, I thought, was an intriguing representation for Christ the King Sunday. Today's Gospel is Jesus' trial before Pilate and before his eventual crucifixion. What a curious, yet appropriate, choice to share the message of Christ the King.

For me, however, what is even curious-er, is the Gospel reading ends with verse 37, yet the paragraph and dialogue between Pilate and Jesus continue for one more verse. Verse 38 reads, "Pilate asked him, 'What is truth?'"

Hmmm ... why do you suppose those who determine the lectionary readings for each Sunday chose to not include verse 38? Does it not fit in? Does it start a new line of thought? I wonder, "Why?"

Let me share verses 37 and 38: Pilate asked him, "So you are a king?" Jesus answered, "You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice." Pilate asked him, "What is truth?"

You may recall that I majored in philosophy in college. And you may recall from your college philosophy courses that the question, "what is truth," is a philosopher's favorite question – going all the way back to even before Socrates.

Additionally, "the mission of Bethany College – who we honor today – is to educate, develop, and challenge individuals **to reach for truth** and excellence as they lead lives of faith, learning and service." To reach for truth. But, what is truth?

Call me nuts or call me brave, but this morning, as president of Bethany College and as a philosopher, I would like to chase that question. What is truth?

First, let's return to the Gospel lesson or, more specifically, the dialogue between Jesus and Pontius Pilate. In Mel Gibson's 2004 movie, *The Passion of the Christ*, this was a powerful and moving scene. Jesus broke from speaking Aramaic and spoke to Pilate in Latin. For me, I felt as if I were in the room with them as an observer.

The Lutheran Study Bible's comment on verse 38 reads, "Jesus is tried before Pilate, while Pilate is 'on trial' for whether or not he will believe in Jesus."

Perhaps, this is an important lesson for us as we prepare for this year's Advent Season. Are we, like Pilate, 'on trial' for whether or not we truly believe in Jesus? Is Christ the ruler of your life?

Next, let's turn to the study of truth as a subject of philosophers for the last several thousand years. Aristotle defined truth as, "to say of what is that it is, and of what is not that it is not, is true" (*Metaphysics*). Well, that's no help!

The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy states, "The problem of truth is in a way easy to state: what truths are and what (if anything) makes them true." That's perhaps a little better, but still not much help.

Of course, philosophy really complicates the issue by, believe it or not, having theories of truth, such as, the Correspondence Theory, the Semantic Theory, the Deflationary Theory, the Coherence Theory, and the Pragmatic Theory. These, and philosophy, are really no help!

Next, the Gospel of John, if my count is correct, mentions truth more than any other book in the new or old testament. Apparently, “truth” is an important concept. In the first chapter, the Gospel of John reads, “The law indeed was given through Moses; grace **and truth** came through Jesus Christ” (1:17).

The Gospel of John confuses us even more when Jesus describes himself as, “I am the way, **and the truth**, and the life” (14:6).

As I best recall from my philosophy major days, there is a strong influence of Plato in the Gospel of John. Perhaps, no better example is John’s use of truth. Truth was a question Plato himself tackled. In Plato’s work, *The Republic*, he gave us an interesting way of looking at truth. He approached truth with the allegory of the cave.

Inside a dark cave, imagine a group of individuals chained since birth. Additionally, their heads and their gaze are chained and fixed on one spot on the cave wall. Behind the group is a fire. Between the fire and the group, objects move and cast shadows on the wall. The group watches these shadows and believes this is their reality; this is truth. Even though, they are seeing only shadows.

Now, suppose someone from the group escapes or is released. That person would feel compelled to stand up and turn around. But, that person would be blinded by the sunlight coming into the cave from the entrance. The objects would appear less real than their shadows appeared. Leaving the cave, the person would be able to see the sun and would know what is real and what is not real; would know the truth.

Once enlightened, shall we say, the freed individual would feel compelled to return to the cave to free the group, with the truth, from their physical chains and their chains of ignorance. The group, however, believing they know the truth, would criticize and reject him.

While this allegory was written centuries before the life of Christ, it is a remarkable prophecy of Christ in the world. Perhaps Pilate should have paid more attention when he studied Plato’s *Republic*. He might have known the truth when he asked Christ, our King, “what is truth?”

So, after all this jibber-jabber, what is truth? For me, the truth comes down to this Sunday, Christ the King Sunday.

Last weekend, I drove to Denver, Colorado to attend a Bethany College event. Somewhere in western Kansas or eastern Colorado, I again listened to my CD of Handel’s *Messiah*. (Of course, that would be the Bethany Oratorio Society’s CD of Handel’s *Messiah*.) As I reflected on this sermon, Handel, for me, answered the question. More specifically, one of the early, beautiful chorus songs did. The song based on Isaiah 9:6: “For to us a child is born, unto to us a son is given, and the government shall be upon his shoulders. And his name shall be called Wonderful, Counselor, The mighty god, the everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace.”

I guess, after all this, I’ll simply conclude by returning to where this mess began, the Gospel of John: “and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free” (8:32). And, for us as Christians, the truth is: “For to us a child is born, unto to us a son is given.”

AMEN.