

Title: Jesus as King or as truth?

Text: John 18:33-39

Rev. Sharon Smith

**Objectives:**

- To lean into the mystery of God and our vocation as Christian seekers, where truth is a process and not a certainty
  - To encourage us to live into our questions in community – to give space for variations in our discoveries.
  - The answer to the question: What is truth? Is silence. A silence which invites us to tell our story.
  - To consider the Kingdom of God as solidarity and not power.
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**O to be a person who lives from a deep still-point of truth.**

My favourite photograph of Archbishop Desmond Tutu, was taken in 1985. He was seen walking resolutely across a dusty street wearing a black cope and holding his hand high. He stepped between the South African police and a group of Soweto Rioters.

The tension was high.

Tutu abhorred violence.

And that day he spoke from his **deep still-point of truth** as he calmed both armed police and armed rioters. They went their separate ways.

(from: Tutu: The Authorised Portrait. By Alistair Sparks and Mpho A. Tutu)

On Friday, Canadian Priest Laurel Dykstra and parishioner Lini Hutchings, from Salal and Cedar, were sentenced to 7 days in jail. They were arrested after chaining themselves to a tree within five metres of the Trans Mountain pipeline.

They were calm and voiced their truth - that they were acting to protect Indigenous lands.

(sourced from: <https://www.thestar.com/vancouver/2018/11/23/anglican-priest-gets-seven-days-jail-time-for-trans-mountain-protest.html>)

Episcopalian Priest Rev. Margaret Bullitt-Jonas writes of the moments preceding her arrest for environmental activism at the Boston State House.

She says: “As we waited to march - One by one we offered a word – preparing ourselves to risk arrest.

“Ready.”

“Resolved.”

“Grounded.”

“Centered.”

Each one finding their **deep still-point of truth**.

They were clear about their approach: to be non-violent in action, speech, and spirit.

(sourced from: <http://revivingcreation.org/standupcharlie-risking-arrest-for-climate-justice/>)

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**It is one thing to give verbal ascent or a nod to truth.**

**YET quite another to consider how we will enact truth, live it out, embody it.**

Pontius Pilate's character in our gospel depicts this human dilemma.

Ever felt that uncomfortable sense of not knowing what to do?

We look around us, outside of ourselves to find the answer.

We go to this friend and ask their opinion and then to this one... but it always comes down to this: No one can answer our questions for us, they are ours to discover.

Such a quest lies at the whole purpose of being human; for this we were born, to search for the mystery of our being.

*(Contextual Bible Study Notes on John 18:33-39 by John Riches)*

**Finding our deep still-point of truth.**

And the author of the fourth Gospel describes Pontius Pilate's search for answers beautifully.

We enter the story of Jesus, the God-man, on trial. We are half way in.

He has already been questioned by a leader of this religious group, Caiaphas a high priest (think here Bishop or even Primate).

The religious authorities could not prosecute Jesus under their law (they had tried to stone Jesus but that had failed).

Because they can't do anything else, they bring Jesus before the Roman Governor, Pontius Pilate who was given authority over the military, judicial, economics of this political and religious underclass referred to in this text as "the Jews".

They bring Jesus before Pontius Pilate, for capital punishment (even though they did not trust Pilate for he was known as uncompromising and as a bully (Josephus).

*(Gerard Sloyan: John – Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching)*

And this is where we enter the scene.

Jesus is on trial before Pilate.

And Pilate is wavering. He is in between. He does not know what to do.

The scene of this epic dialogue is a fascinating movement in and out of power. Back and forth. A wavering. The aerial view must have been like watching someone pace back and forth deliberating, unable to make up their minds.

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The religious group who are opposing Jesus are positioned outside. They refuse to go inside the governor's headquarters because it is deemed unclean by religious law.

Pilate and Jesus are positioned inside.

And for the remainder of chapter 18 and 19, Pilate walks back and forth – inside to outside again and again.

Isn't that what happens when we deliberate – we move from inside our private conversations in our head (known to God alone) and outside where there is political pressure, social pressure economic pressure.

Pilate is wavering. He does not know what to do. Inside, outside, inside, outside.

Words like: "Ready." "Resolved." "Grounded." "Centered."

Would not have been Pilate's descriptors.

And it is in this complexity of internal and external conversation that questions are posed. Questions of authority and questions of truth.

Are you a King? Are you their king?

Jesus picks up Pilate's insecure deliberations and asks:

Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?"

Jesus is really asking about the process of his conviction.

Were Pilate's questions coming from deep inside of him or were they copied from what he had heard from others?

Discovering our convictions, is an ongoing, gradual process of living.

Living out our questions - not by the answers that others give but by our own journey of discovery.

Every person who follows Christ, is invited to listen deeply for words of truth. Truth about:

How shall I live?

What should I do?

**To consider how we will enact truth, live it out, embody it.**

Frederick Buechner rewrites the conversation between Jesus and Pilate (with some poetic licence) in a book called: Telling the Truth.

It goes like this:

"Pilate says: What is truth? And by way of an answer the man with the split lip doesn't say a blessed thing. Or else not saying anything, that is the blessed thing."

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“We are all of us Pilate in our asking after truth – and when we come to church to ask it, the preacher would do well to answer us also with silence because the truth... is silence – not an ordinary silence, silence as nothing to hear, but silence that makes itself heard if you listen to it the way Pilate listens to the silence of a man with a split lip” (page 14)

The answer to What is truth? Is silence.

Not the silence that stops us sharing our stories. But the silence that refuses to offer a one size fits all gospel.

The truth of God’s kingdom, embodied in Jesus, the Christ:  
Is not a creed and not a statement of membership.

But rather the Christian truth “leads us into the mystery of God... not into the possession of a set of simple certainties. Truth is ultimately unknowable; beyond our grasp; the search for truth is marked by paradox: it is a never-ending quest, marked nonetheless by moments of discovery”.

*(Contextual Bible Study Notes on John 18:33-39 by John Riches)*

**Finding momentary deep still-points of truth.**

**And then living out from that centre, embodied truth.**

On this Reign of Christ Sunday, we are inclined to hold onto certainty and not paradox.  
We are presented with powerful images of Christ as King.  
And we are surrounded by images of royalty.

These testimonies of Christ as Powerful King have historically opened up the way for the Christian Church to act in ways that I am not proud of.

- Colonialism, conquering land, cultural genocides.

In this story, Pilate asks Jesus about his personal position as King...

And instead Jesus refers to a kingdom (basileia):

This Kingdom is not like a human seat of power and control. Rather it is a place where God reigns – a reign that is different to what we might think.

Jesus’ kingdom is not what we would expect from our cultural constructions of Kings.  
It is not a kingdom of strength, not a kingdom of power, not a kingdom that uses violence.

Jesus washes feet, he is with the poor, he was himself marginalized.

“The figure of God embodied in Jesus is crucified unjustly. Which stands for the solidarity of God. Jesus was persecuted.” (John Caputo, *The Weakness of God*).

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And so there is always a deep tension inside me as I experience this Reign of Christ day.

Jesus as King?

Or Jesus embodying a truth?

The truth of a kingdom that deconstructs our very notions power and authority?

So... let us invoke Pilate's question which is also our question: What is truth?

And receive Jesus' silence as it invites us to move back and forth between the different biblical testimonies, "recognizing that in different contexts, each of us will be required ... to align ourselves with one sort of testimony [of truth] or the other"

And as we do so, "it will be important to remember that at that very moment, others, in other circumstances... will be speaking very differently, heeding different witnesses."

*(Walter Brueggemann, Old Testament Theology)*

Living out our questions:

Are you a King? What kind of King are you?

What is truth?

As if we are on board a ship on a stormy sea that moves from left to right and left to right and somehow in the midst of it finds the centre.

Like Pilates motion inside and outside.

Trying to find his centre.

Trying to arrive at that still point.

That moment of quiet where a word of truth can be received – a word for our particular circumstances.

I invite you this week as we move into Advent, to make space for moments of silence.

Where we can be present to our questions, to our deliberations, to be still.

And where in silence - a true word of God may be made real to us.

**Our deep still-point of truth.**

So that we may become an embodiment of God's Kingdom.

Enacting Christ's solidarity with a lonely world.

Amen