

‘What is truth?’ This is a question that has been discussed by many down the ages. A question, originally posed by Pontius Pilate 2000 years ago, but one on which many philosophers have dwelt and which people still discuss to this day. In fact, in a world of fake news, social media twisted reality, and post-modern thought, where everyone’s personal truth is valid, is it not even more important for us to be able to come to some sort of conclusion?

Today’s passage in John is focused on the trial of Jesus in front of Pontius Pilate, but in digging into what is going on here, we are going to see that it is not just the person of Jesus that is on trial, but the idea of truth itself. In fact, truth is one of three big themes, along with rejection and power, that we will focus on today, and which I pray will enable us to leave here, yearning for God’s truth and not the world’s power.

Our passage today is the first three scenes of a series of seven that take place in and around Pilate’s palace. In these scenes we see Pilate scurrying in and out of his palace as he oscillates between the Jewish leaders on the outside, and Jesus on the inside.

Show verses and inside/outside.

This in, out, in, out, isn’t an ancient version of the hokey-kokey, but is emphasising the dichotomy that we are presented with in this passage, and setting up the two sides of what is really going on, the battle between truth and power, and the trial over which one we should follow.

We are therefore going to have a look at each scene in turn:

1. v.28-32: outside the palace
2. v.33-38a: inside the palace
3. v.38b-40: outside the palace

Scene 1: where we will see how the Jewish leaders’ rejection of their moral authority reveals their pursuit of the world’s power

Read v.28

Imagine the scene. It is now early morning, the night after Jesus has been arrested. Jesus has been up all night being tried by the high priest. He has faced, as Sam put it last week, police brutality, at the hands of the religious officials, he has seen one of his closest friends disown him, and is now being dragged in front of Pilate, the Roman governor, the most powerful man in the region, the personal representative of Caesar, the Roman Emperor, the most powerful person in the world. Feel the exhaustion, the tension, the sense of anticipation as to what is going to happen next. I know how hard I have found it trying to do even simple tasks when on very little sleep – as any parent will know, being up multiple times through the night with a newborn leaves you with very little capacity for the following day. So imagine what it must have felt like for Jesus, hauled up on made up charges in front of the most powerful man in the region, having been totally abandoned by those closest to him, and doing this all on no sleep. And yet, as we will see in the second scene, what Jesus says is, as is always the case with Jesus, some of the most profound and revealing things imaginable.

However, in this first scene, the camera is fixed, not so much on Jesus, but on those who have bought him into this situation, the Jewish leaders, and Pilate, the one on whose decision the following actions depend.

So the Jewish leaders bring Jesus before Pilate and there are a couple of things that their actions and their argument with Pilate reveal.

Firstly, feel the irony of the situation. John, in just a couple of verse, completely dismembers the Jewish leaders and their real motivations.

Read verses 28b-30

The leaders stay outside the palace because it is a Gentile house – Pilate is not a Jew and so to enter his palace would be entering the house of a Gentile, which would make the leaders ceremonially unclean. And anyone who was ceremonially unclean would not be able to celebrate the Passover, which was happening during that time. But feel the irony. The leaders want to be seen to be clean so that they can celebrate the Passover, the meal when the Israelites would remember the sacrifice of a lamb that was made to rescue them from slavery. Imagine if the leaders had gone into Pilate's palace, if they had broken those ceremonial laws and made themselves unclean – what would the people have thought of them?

And yet, by their actions towards Jesus, the leaders are showing where their hearts truly lie. They have just conducted a kangaroo court, under the cover of darkness, without any witnesses, in complete contravention to Jewish law, and have now dragged Jesus in front of Pilate without any charge to present:

'What charges are you bringing against this man?' asks Pilate. 'If he were not a criminal, we would not have handed him over to you' reply the leaders – they have nothing, and Pilate knows this.

Again, feel the irony, in their rejection of any truth about Jesus's innocence, they are, in fact, rejecting the ultimate Passover Lamb, who would die once for all, to rescue a people from slavery to sin.

And now we see what the leaders really care about. They have no concerns about the truth. What they really care about is their position, their standing in front of the people, the worldly power that they hold. Jesus is a threat to that. And so, to remove this threat, the leaders are willing to reject the truth, to abdicate any moral responsibility or standing they have, in favour of upholding what worldly power they possess, and to gloss over this with their continued religiosity of strictly sticking to the Jewish cleanliness rules.

As already mentioned, Pilate sees right through this and so runs his own power play. He knows that the Jews have nothing to pin on Jesus so tells them 'Take him yourselves and judge him by your own law'. Their response shows the extent to which they are all aware that their conversation is about power. In saying that they have no right to execute anyone, both the Jewish leaders and Pilate are recognising that this conversation is about power – who has power over physical life and death in this situation, and also how this power is supposedly trumping any claim to what is right or true.

So here, in this first scene, outside the palace, we see worldly power being promoted over truth.

Before we look at the second scene though, let's pause here for a moment and consider why this matters for us. We might be tempted to look at the Jewish leaders and think, 'what hypocrites!'. And we would be right. Here are a bunch of people intent on their religiosity and presenting themselves as morally upright, when really they are rejecting and abdicating any sense of moral authority, or standing that they have. They want to be seen to remain clean, so that they can celebrate the Passover, and on the outside, they are following the rules – by not going into a Gentiles' house, they are not making themselves ceremonially unclean. But on the inside it is a different story, they are full of hatred, falsehood and moral bankruptcy. Why does this matter for us? It is because we ourselves do the same thing. We in our actions and thoughts are prone to hypocrisy. We might not do it at the same magnitude, but all of us have been guilty to some extent of either glossing over the truth to

protect what worldly power or standing we have, or of using our religiosity to cover over our moral bankruptcy. The risk might come in different forms, but the tendency is there within all of us. For example, how often have we, in conversation, not outright lied, but left out key details that might paint us in a less favourable light than if we didn't mention them, all for the sake of trying to hold onto whatever small amount of worldly power we might hold. Alternatively, have we misrepresented a situation so as to make ourselves look better than we are, glossing over the real truth in order to gain a better standing in the eyes of others. Might it be that this has even spilled over into our Christian lives – serving in more visible ways at church, praying more or longer prayers, looking to 'humbly' exaggerate something that we have done, in the hope that it glosses over some other area of our life where we know we are not living fully for God?

In each of these situations, this first scene speaks directly to us, calling us to repent of the ways in which we are more like the Jewish leaders than we would often care to admit.

Having had our first scene outside the palace, with the focus being on worldly power, we now move inside the palace, where the conversation shifts and we are confronted with the other side of the debate – the issue of truth.

Read verses 33-38a

As I said, the big issue we need to consider as we listen to the conversation between Pilate and Jesus is that of truth. However, notice what is on Pilate's mind when he first addresses Jesus:

'Are you the king of the Jews?'

This is a question about power. Pilate wants to know whether this man stood before him is genuinely a threat to his power, and therefore whether he is going to need to do something with him to maintain his position. However, whereas, I imagine Pilate would have been hoping for a straightforward 'yes' or 'no' from Jesus, he gets a series of questions and statements that increasingly baffle and frustrate Pilate.

'Is that your own idea, Jesus asked, or did others talk to you about me?'

This is where we begin to see Pilate's beliefs about truth and power being challenged. Instead of giving answer the simple yes or no that he wants, what Jesus does here is effectively say to Pilate 'it depends'. Christopher Ash puts it helpfully – he says, when Jesus asks this question, he is effectively asking Pilate, is your question Roman or Jewish, your idea of kingship a Roman one, or a Jewish one? If it was a Roman question, then the idea of kingship is about power and control. If Jesus is a king in the Roman sense, then he poses a threat to Pilate's power. However, if this is a Jewish question, the emphasis is different. The King of the Jews is the Messiah, God's promised King, who would rule with justice and truth.

In asking this question though, Jesus is shining a light on where Pilate's heart lies – is Pilate concerned about worldly kingship and power, and how he holds onto what he has, or, is he more concerned about God's idea of kingship, and truth?

Pilate can't seem to comprehend this though, and so tries to push Jesus further on why he has been brought in front of Pilate in the first place:

Read v.35

Again, Jesus's response is not what Pilate expects. Instead of outlining his actions during his ministry, or claiming his innocence, Jesus makes this proclamation about his kingdom, highlighting that his

kingdom is not focused on how the world views power, otherwise, his followers would be there fighting for him – think of how Peter reacted when Jesus was first arrested, jumping in with his sword to cut off the servant's ear. But now, none of that, there is nobody fighting to rescue Jesus, nobody planning a daring escape plan, because that is not how Jesus's kingdom works.

Pilate thinks he's caught up at this point and jumps back in – Aha! Got you! You are a king! – he knows what he's dealing with now.

But Jesus continues: v37b

Yes, Jesus is a king, but not in the way that Pilate expects, or the world sees kings, as the holders of worldly power. As Jesus says, his kingdom is one of truth – it is a different type of kingdom, not predicated on trying to lord it over others, not built on power imbalances that abuse and disadvantage people for the benefit of others, but a kingdom built on God's truth.

By this point, Pilate has lost it – he has no idea what Jesus is on about and so with his immortal phrase 'What is truth?', rejects Jesus, rejects his kingship, rejects God's truth, and storms back outside.

So, at the end of scene 2, what does this mean for us?

Hear the final thing that Jesus says to Pilate in this scene before Pilate storms out: 'Everyone on the side of truth listens to me'.

Are we listening to Jesus? Is he the one that we are turning to for the truth? There are so many competing claims on our hearts and our thoughts, but what is it that takes priority? If we are truly listening to Jesus, that should mean that he is our first port of call whenever we have questions, or have to decisions. In being the king whose kingdom is the kingdom of truth, Jesus is the one who speaks truth into everything: how we should approach our work; how we should parent; how we should relate to one another – we have recently finished our series looking at the church – it is Jesus who speaks truth into the ways that we as a church should love, care, forgive, encourage one another; how we should relate to the outsider. When somebody you know says something untrue about you, treats you unfairly, or twists a situation to their benefit, at your detriment, how do you respond? Our temptation in these sorts of situations is to listen to the world, to respond in a way that shows our hearts to be more concerned with the world's priority, with power. In the world's eyes, it might seem perfectly reasonable to respond in kind, to say something unkind, or untrue back, or gossip about that person behind their back to make yourself look more impressive. Alternatively, you might then hold a grudge and so not treat them with kindness later on. But that is not how Jesus's kingdom works. Listening to him means not pursuing our own power and position, but listening to the truth that Jesus says about how we should turn the other cheek, forgive our enemies, and look to love them instead.

The challenge to us here then, is not to do as Pilate does, say 'What is truth?', and reject the truth that Jesus brings through his kingdom in favour of our own, worldly perspectives; but to listen to Jesus, to recognise that he is the one who speaks truth into everything, and to yearn for his kingdom that is not built on self-serving power, but on God's truth.

Having rejected Jesus's truth, Pilate heads back outside for our third scene, which we are going to spend much less time on. Despite being utterly confused by what he has just experienced, Pilate recognises that he can't find any reason for Jesus being in front of him, that he is an innocent man, and instead, offers Jesus back to the Jewish leaders. However, their response again shows what it is their hearts ultimately understand. Instead of wanting to listen to the truth, coincidentally spoken by

Pilate, that there is no charge that can be held against Jesus, the leaders call for Barabbas. Barabbas was a violent man, someone who had taken part in an uprising, where he had been fighting for human power. And this is who the Jewish leaders want, showing very clearly that it is worldly power that they understand and are beholden to. And this is where our passage ends today, with the Jewish leaders rejecting Jesus, rejecting him as king, rejecting the truth of his innocence, ultimately rejecting him.

Next week we will see some further back and forth as Pilate continues to go in and out between Jesus and the Jewish leaders, but we know where this is heading. We know that this is the route to the cross that Jesus has to take.

We are therefore left with the question, which side of the trial do we fall on? Are we on the side of worldly Pilate and the hypocritical leaders; or on the side of Jesus and his kingdom of truth?

We would like to say that we are on the side of Jesus. However, we all know in our hearts that we are more often than not like Pilate and the leaders, than we are Jesus. Our natural inclination is to chase after worldly power, to hypocritically present ourselves as being more holy than we actually are. But this is why Jesus went through all of this in the first place, so that we can be on his side, so that we can be those who listen to Jesus and on the side of his kingdom of truth.

Looking back to v.32, the Jewish leaders call for the Romans to execute Jesus because they know that they cannot do so themselves. This death would be by crucifixion, the standard method of execution at the time, and would result in Jesus being hung up on the cross, which in Old Testament terms, which you can read about in Deuteronomy, would indicate to everyone that this person was under God's curse. And as truly awful as that is; an innocent man, convicted on non-existent, trumped up charges, sentenced to a death that expresses the curse of God being unleashed upon him, this is a death that, wonderfully, amazingly, is done for the sake of us. In the same way that the criminal Barabbas is released, sparing him from the punishment that he was expected to face, so Jesus's death releases us from the punishment that we would expect for rejecting God's kingdom of truth, and instead, allows us to stand on the side of truth, with Jesus.

So finally, if we are currently on the side of Pilate and the leaders, what is it that is stopping us from listening to Jesus? What is it about the world that means that we are willing to reject the king of truth in order to chase after its power? In the face of what we see here, may I challenge you that although you may end up obtaining whatever earthly power you are chasing, when it is eventually held up in trial against the truth of God, it will be shown for what it is: a self-serving pursuit of individual glory.

And on the other hand, if we are on the side of Jesus, we should give thanks. Thanks because even though we don't deserve to be there, Jesus went through all the humiliation and rejection that we have seen so far in John, so that we could be on the side of truth, with him.

Let's pray.