

## **A dangerous truth**

John 18:33-37

November 22, 2009

Have you ever been part of a conversation that went something like this?

*So, do you have anything planned for dinner?*

*Why?*

*Would you like to go out to eat?*

*Are you saying you don't like my cooking?*

*No! I like your cooking!*

*You're just saying that because you have to.*

*No, I really do like your cooking. What are you fixing tonight?*

*I thought we were going out.*

Have you? If you have, you can surely empathize with Pilate!

Jesus had been brought to him by a group of Jerusalem dignitaries. They wanted Pilate to try him and give him the death penalty. After meeting with them and hearing them out, Pilate went back inside the palace to examine Jesus. This is how the conversation went ...

*Are you the king of the Jews?*

*Who wants to know? You or somebody else?*

Actually what Jesus said was this:

*Does this question come from you or have others told you about me?*

He won't let Pilate play the part of disinterested observer. He won't answer the question secondhand. He asks Pilate to commit himself, to get involved, but Pilate wants to keep his own personal thoughts and feelings out of it.

*Do you think I'm a Jew? This is between you and your people! What did you do to them?*

It's another seemingly simple question.

*My kingdom does not belong to this world. If my kingdom belonged to this world, my followers would fight for me.*

Huh? But, at least as far as Pilate is concerned, the conversation is back on track.

*So ... are you a king, then?*

*You say that I am. I was born and came into the world for one purpose, to speak about the truth.*

At which point Pilate might have said:

*Are we having the same conversation here?*

No, they were not having the same conversation. Pilate wanted to keep it simple: ask a few simple questions, get to the bottom of the dispute, make a judgment, and be done with it. In his mind, it had to be about politics. It had to be about power. It had to be about turf. If Jesus presented a threat to the Jewish leadership, it must be because he had tried to undermine or usurp their authority, because he had laid claim to a position of power which they cannot abide.

*Are you the king of the Jews?*

Pilate sees an intrafamilial squabble, two factions in one religious family vying for supremacy. But Jesus sees it differently.

*If it was about power, my followers would be fighting the Jewish establishment on my behalf.*

Jesus knows it's not about power, but about truth. It's not his ambition, but his truth-telling that poses a threat. Truth itself is dangerous. Jesus got himself in trouble, Jesus got himself killed, for speaking the truth.

Jesus said:

*Not a single stone [in the Temple] will be left in its place; every one of them will be thrown down.*

He spoke the truth, but it was a truth nobody wanted to hear, especially those who were invested so deeply -- politically and economically and emotionally -- in the institution of the Temple.

Jesus said:

*How hard it will be for rich people to enter the Kingdom of God!*

He spoke the truth, but this truth offended the rich and bewildered the poor who could dream no better dream than to be rich.

Jesus said:

*If you want to save your own life, you will lose it; but if you lose your life for me and for the gospel, you will save it.*

He spoke the truth, but who can bear it? Who has will enough or courage enough to give themselves away?

Jesus said:

*I am the resurrection and the life.*

He spoke the truth, but it was nonsense to the doubters and blasphemy to the true believers, because God and God alone is the giver of life.

Jesus said:

*How terrible for you, you hypocrites! You give to God one tenth of everything, even of the herbs -- mint and dill and cumin -- but you neglect justice and mercy and honesty!*

He spoke the truth. He made them see themselves as they really were, but they could not -- we cannot -- bear to see ourselves as we really are.

Truth is dangerous, and just as Jesus put himself at risk by speaking the truth in his day, so may Jesus' people pose a threat when we speak the truth in our day:

- when our loyalty to God relegates all other loyalties to second place, whether to family or church or country;
- when we speak of the sins, as well as the virtues, of the marketplace;
- when we deny that enlightened self-interest provides the best foundation for equal justice and equal opportunity;
- when we find joy not in getting things or achieving success or winning respect, but in loving Jesus;
- when we expose the hypocrisy in our nation, in our churches, in ourselves.

Truth is dangerous. But the truth will set you free!

Today, on this Thanksgiving Sunday, can you bear to face the truth? About your self? About your life as it is? Do you have courage enough to go there? Do you have faith enough to be counted among those who belong to the truth?

Or will you be content to mouth the cliches, to sing the songs because they are there to be sung? Will you count your blessings, but leave unspoken your doubts and your fears and your questions and your pain? Will you thank God for family and job and church and nation because that's what you supposed to do, ignoring for the sake of thanksgiving the brokenness in your family, the frustrations in your job, the divisions in your church, your nation's failure to live up to its own ideals?

If you do, what purpose do you serve? If you do, what Lord do you serve? Because our Lord Jesus is the truth-teller. Our Lord Jesus is the truth-bearer.

This is genuine thanksgiving: to look things as they are in the face, to see the truth and tell it, to see the truth that God is there in the midst of life as it is, to see the truth that God is there in the midst of your life as it is, and so to be able to say, from the deepest parts of your soul, *Thank you!*