

“Truth? What is That?”

In the Gospel today, Jesus finds himself before Pontius Pilate. Pilate is nervous about this man. His wife has warned him to have nothing to do with him. Pilate seems to believe in Jesus' innocence. He seems to be doing his best to get Jesus off the hook. He has him scourged and crowned with thorns, hoping that will satisfy the crowd, but they beg for Jesus' blood. Pilate reminds the people that this is Passover time when they can reprieve and release a prisoner. By offering them a choice between the most notorious criminal of all, Barabbas, or Jesus, the harmless miracle worker and prophet, Pilate again hopes to appease the crowd and get freedom for Jesus, but the crowd will have none of it. They cry out for Jesus' crucifixion on trumped up charges and Pilate caves in. He washes his hands of this man's innocent blood and hands him over to the people for their lynch mob style justice.

Pilate sacrifices what he knows is good and true and right for the sake of political expediency. He is no better than Caiaphas, the high priest who says “It is better for one man to die for the people, than for the whole nation to be destroyed”. Yet Pilate has some integrity. He is troubled in his conscience by the decision he has made. It may seem like good logic: permit one innocent life to be sacrificed and you save many others. But this is the bankrupt creed of utilitarianism which believes that the right decision is always the one that produces the greatest good for the greatest number. But this not a game of numbers, a simple equation. This is about the value of human life. The moment it becomes OK to sacrifice one human life to save others, in that moment all other lives become expendable. Far from saving the majority, they are all now at risk because **unless all human life is sacred, no human life is sacred.**

Pilate thinks that he is making the best of a bad situation by allowing an innocent man, Jesus to be killed, to satisfy the crowd threatening to riot and cause trouble. But the right to life comes way above the good of preserving civil order in any hierarchy of values. The sacredness of every human life is a supreme value; it must be since **unless all human life is sacred, no human life is sacred.** This is why the Church teaches that the innocent life of the unborn child, a human being like any of us, has to be valued above a woman's right to choose. The right to life has to be the highest right of all otherwise none of us is safe; if innocent life is expendable, what does that say about my life? I'm far from innocent. I do believe in a woman's right to choose, but I believe that choice has to be made before a child is conceived. Once a human life has started it is sacred.

Some would say, “yes, I agree all human life is sacred, but the developing foetus is not yet a human person”. Personhood is not the issue here. Philosophers will never agree on what personhood means anyway. And if you go down that line, what about Jesus?

He wasn't a human person. He was a human being, but his person was divine. The fact is, a foetus is a human life, a human being. It certainly has life from the moment of conception and that life, that being, cannot be anything other than human. Personhood is not the issue here: the innocent life of a human being is.

I didn't mean to go down that path. But I did mean to make the point that Pilate's position here is totally morally bankrupt: no human life can be balanced against the good of keeping order in society. And it's very easy to see this if we look at the world today. Take the case of Asia Bibi. She is the Christian woman imprisoned for eight years in Pakistan for taking a drink of water from a bowl used by Muslim women. This was interpreted by them as a blasphemous act against the prophet Mohamed punishable by death. She was sentenced to death but very unexpectedly, but justly and rightly, reprieved by a court. But the crowd, the mob could not accept that and want the judgment overturned and are calling for her death, and that of the judges who acquitted her and any politicians who support the court's ruling. Would it be right to sacrifice her life to keep the peace? That is exactly what Pilate did.

And then there's the case of Matthew Hedges, the Durham University academic sentenced to life in prison just this week in the UAE on what are obviously and scandalously trumped up charges of spying, another judgment, like Pilate's, clearly imposed for political expediency.

There is an interesting dialogue between Jesus and Pilate about truth in the Gospel today. In reply to Pilate's question about Jesus being a king, Jesus says effectively that he is a king, but his kingdom is not of this world because his kingdom is built on truth and this world doesn't understand truth, doesn't guide itself by truth, relativises truth. Donald Trump is the supreme contemporary example of this: truth becomes what Trump decides it is, and it can change from day to day, it has no absolute value. When this happens, no truth can be relied on with the most disastrous consequences for us and our lives. Truth is an absolute which must be honoured as such. Pilate's question "Truth, what is that?" is perhaps not the deep philosophical question it might appear but rather a sure indication that he doesn't understand truth, as evidenced by his failure to be guided by it in his treatment of Jesus. The truth is, Jesus is an innocent man and that truth demands that his life should be spared at all costs. But Pilate ignores that truth and does what is expedient, what is comfortable, he takes the easier path rather than the true, moral direction. As someone once said, Abraham Lincoln perhaps, "a river becomes crooked by taking the easiest path, so does man".

When Pilate failed to live by the truth and uphold innocent life he gave permission for the kind of miscarriages of justice that have contaminated human society ever since and given support to all manner of corrupt practices that threaten not only the foundations of human society but the very freedom and rights of every one of us, as those recent cases show.

Jesus said “I came into the world for this: to bear witness to the truth; and all who are on the side of truth listen to my voice.” And if we as Christians fail to live by the truth, if we trade truth for lesser values for the sake of expediency, we fail Jesus, we do not listen to his voice, we are not on the side truth, rather we stand on the side of Pilate and we have all seen where that leads.