

## **Sermon, 26 November 2006—Christ the King**

Daniel 7:9-14; Psalm 93; Revelation 1:1-8; John 18:33-7

Last Sunday I explored one of the phrases from my first sermon here, in which I had said that two of the most difficult things for Christians are to see what Scripture is saying clearly and to speak what we know about God truly. Last week, the Gospel passage we read itself prompted us to wonder what it means to see Scripture clearly, since an unidentified startling voice interrupted Jesus' speech saying "let the reader understand!" This Sunday the same thing happens: Jesus, standing before Pilate, says that he has come to bear witness to the truth and that all who belong to the truth recognize his voice; he speaks what he knows about God truly and we listen. This sounds cozy enough: listening, sitting in our comfy churchy chairs, is a receptive effortless activity. If only it were always so easy to appear righteous!

Of course, remember Jesus says this, bound and beaten, in front of Pilate, knowing that power over his flesh has been give to the Roman tribunal. This conversation in the Gospel of John between Pilate and Jesus is deeply interesting. John is leading us to wonder if someone unschooled and indisposed in religious thought, someone committed to a secular way of being in the world, can recognize and hear the voice of God. Pilate's duty is to establish whether or not Jesus is making seditious and political claims. So he asks Jesus whether or not he is the king of the Jews, and when that gets him no answer he can use, he tries to confirm that Jesus is at least claiming to be king of something, Caesar's rival. This is the secular mind on display, running to exhaustion on the squeaky hamster wheel of its presuppositions.

Jesus understands Pilate's anxiety and gives him a functional answer, constructed in terms Pilate can understand. Jesus says, "If I had any pretensions to political rule, if I were trying to found a rival state and army,

then my followers would have offered armed resistance at my arrest.” Pilate can see that this did not happen, so, by Pilate’s standard, there is no threat to Rome here. Jesus goes further explicitly: “my kingdom is not from this world.” Jesus really means that truth and self-deception are different realms and that we cannot arrive at the former from the latter, but Pilate doesn’t see that. Jesus says that he has come to bear witness to the truth and that those who belong to the truth, who are rooted in their ability to speak accurately about reality, which for John is the realm of God, hear him and listen to him.

Pilate’s response, given in the verse following what we heard today, cuts short their exchange with one of the most intriguing questions in the Bible: “what is truth?” I wish I knew if John meant that as a sneer, or a snap, or a snicker, or even a sigh. John at least shows that Pilate, the secular functional mind, faced with ultimate concerns, is disoriented and dismissive.

But John writes nothing casually. He is the most ironic and layered of the four Gospel writers. Pilate’s apparent dismissal—“what is truth?”—is the most serious question that a secular materialist brings to religion. Do you have an explanation of reality that has greater scope than mine? Can you account for more of the evidence than I can? Does your version of how the world runs test out more accurately than mine? For John, those who believe in Christ hear and bear witness to the Word, who is with God and is God, who made all things, whose life is our light; that is to abide in truth, because it is to abide in the source of all, the template of Creation. John drew on the deepest philosophy of his day to conceive and articulate those words. That is our challenge: can we in our own day bear witness to what we have heard so that others recognize the truth?

Well, I think we can only do that if we lose our mind, if we appear to stand on the verge of abandoning our soul. In order to understand the early

Christian writers and to join them in following Jesus, hold onto their sense that the human being was made up of body, soul, and spirit. Our body is our actual limited location, our pleasurable instrument and vulnerable habitation. Our soul is the seat of reason and vital energy, where passions erupt and need to be steered, where our connections with others driven by our natural desires are confirmed and fostered, and where our sense of identity as an ego among egos is maintained. Our spirit is the transcendent portion of our self, the portal open to divinity and to all those powers greater than our selves. It matters to our dear older brother Paul, for example, that the Spirit of Christ has been given to us by adoption and grace, so we now can call God “Abba” just as he did. Notice that it is not a new soul, still less a new body, but a new spirit that we have been given, from which our new creation springs.

Why does this matter? Because we are unable to solve the debates about truth from the seat of our ego. We must change our mind. We must, for the purposes of knowing truth, abandon our defensiveness and paranoia about our soul. Why? Because the soul is not disinterested. Our soul is where our managerial, ambitious, competent, frightened sense of self resides. This is where we shore up our identity in order to give ourselves direction and power and protection. This is where we track our personal story, gripping just as tightly our resentments and terrors as we grip our pleasures and triumphs. All this must go, if we are to know the truth. All our investment in an outcome in which we survive looking good must be abandoned, if we are to speak truly what we know. We must lose our mind.

So, my dear sisters and brothers, if you hope to speak truly, look to the other two parts of the human self, as early Christian writers knew them.

If you want to speak truly, look to your body and its actions. Where is your body invested? Where do you spend your time and your money? What

do your body's actions tell you about what you actually value? Never mind what you say you intend, never mind what you hope someday to accomplish, never mind what you repeat to yourself as your motivations. That precisely is how the mind keeps you from knowing the truth. The question is simple: where do you find your flesh active? Remember the Word became flesh, so that we might know the truth.

If you intend to speak truly, listen to your spirit and its detachment. Where are you at ease and open to what transcends you? Where do you reach the horizon of your understanding and gaze beyond it to what you cannot comprehend? What do moments of inner emptiness tell you about what you actually trust—or more often fear? Never mind your attempts to explain the deep stirring you encounter there, never mind your metaphysical speculations or creedal affirmations, never mind your eagerness to name and tame the powers in the abyss of your spirit. That precisely is how the mind keeps you from knowing the truth. The question is simple: where do you find your spirit relaxed, open, and detached? Remember the Spirit of God blows where it will, so that we might be born anew into the truth.

If you will speak truly, look to the bodies of others, look at the actions that affect their bodies, for pain, for comfort, for relief. Where do you find genuine suffering, that is, the deprivation or the torment of the body, not the self-absorbed rehearsal of resentments and reluctances? How can you assist in lessening the pain of those whose bodies are at risk and under siege? How can you provide or allow the consolation of their flesh? Never mind your explanation of the insurmountable hurdles of economic impediments and social expectations and culturally bound moral injunctions. That is how your mind keeps you from entering into the truth. Do you care for the flesh? The Word became flesh; look to it.

If you will speak truly, listen to the spirits of others, listen to their testimony of what gives them serenity and gratitude, what enables them to sit easily and openly in the world. Where do you find genuine stability, that is, an equanimity and inviolability of being, the anchor of a soul? How can you participate in increasing simplicity, the light-handed and light-hearted human pilgrimage through the world and beyond the ego? How can you provide for what gives life and light to the human spirit? Never mind your suspicion that the spiritual formulations of others are not orthodox or your impatience that their explanations neither plausible nor coherent. That is how your mind keeps you from abiding in the truth. Do you make room for the Spirit? Remember the Spirit blows where it will; listen for it.

I am bold to say that this is how Anglicans believe. The Anglican way is not laissez faire and indifferent, but pragmatic and agnostic: it is pragmatic in caring for the flesh and agnostic in making room for the spirit. It knows that the truth of God is one truth; that the truth of salvation does not violate the truth of creation, but perfects it. It knows that the truth of God is one truth; the insights of one age and the convictions of one people are a single line of sight, and we must listen carefully to each other to begin to glimpse the full comprehensive three-dimensional vision of God.

To conclude, I have a confession to make. I have said that the most difficult things are to see clearly what Scripture is saying and to speak truly what we know about God. But these are not the most difficult things for Christians. The most difficult thing is to live faithfully. We strive to read clearly and to speak truly in order to live faithfully. But it is more accurate to say that only if we live faithfully can we read clearly and speak truly.

Living faithfully is not a matter of belief. To claim that belief is the sum total of faith is precisely the cunning of this Enlightenment-based

secular society we hack our way through, which is smugly confident that religion has no claim to truth, but only a crumbling toe-hold on opinion. If we consent that religious faith is only a matter of personal belief and private behavior, we concede that we have nothing to say—nothing to condemn!—when we face the torment of human bodies in our economic arrangement of society and the denial of human value in our mechanistic understanding of nature. We live in a world whose truth claim is that we are consumers, that we are known by the manipulation and arousal of desires for what we do not need. Neither flesh nor spirit actually needs what drives us to the mall, even at Christmas; it is only our souls' restlessness and disorientation. In a world that sees us all as consumers, what we end up consuming most is each other.

We cannot live faithfully if we hate the flesh and fear the Spirit; you might say we cannot even be true Episcopalians. If we live faithfully—attentive to the needs of the flesh and to the longing of the spirit—we can begin to hear the truth to which all Scripture bears witness and to see clearly what is there. Go further: only if we delight in the flesh that God creates and plunge into the spirit that God sanctifies can we begin to know how to speak truly, that is, to honor the flaws and pleasures of the flesh and to respect the depths and incomprehensibility of the spirit when we speak. It is simple. If we are to follow Jesus, if we are to be citizens of that realm where Christ is King of Kings and Lord of Lords, then we must love human beings and we must pray, as we see that he did. Then we will be able to live faithfully, to see clearly what is in Scripture, and to speak truly what we know, so that we may come to abide in God and in Christ Jesus, in whom the fullness of God is pleased to dwell among us, and praise the One God, the Eternal Source, the Only-begotten Word, and the Life-giving Spirit, for all eternity, as we do this day.