

John 18:28-40

As we approach Easter we will be reflecting on Jesus' trial with Pilate. And we'll be looking at John's version, I'm tackling the first half and Vincent will be looking at the rest next week.

But here's your starter for ten, take a moment to confer with your neighbour to answer the following question...

How many ruling royal families are there in the world today? **SLIDE 1**

Well according to a couple of sources on the internet there are thought to be 29...

And here they all are... **SLIDE 2**

Now for a follow up question and an opportunity to weed out any republicans, ask your neighbour 'in a best case scenario what would you say was the job of a King or Queen?' **SLIDE 3**

Well what did you come up with?

All interesting answers, but the reason I ask is that our passage this morning has at its centre Jesus confirming his royal status and defining the job he has come to do. And as we approach Easter we're going to reflect on that job and it's implications.

Turn in the bible behind you to page 1026 and to John 18 vs 28. **SLIDE 4**

We're going to read the first part of Jesus' trial before the Roman governor Pilate starting in vs 28. The passage has several characters in it so I've asked a bunch of folk to read it to us, we have

Dan playing the Jewish leaders

Paul playing Pilate

Edward is Jesus

And Caroline will be our narrator...

As they read our passage together, look out for Jesus' job description.

So did you see the statement about Jesus' purpose?

It's vs37 isn't it **SLIDE 5**

Jesus answered, 'You say that I am a king. In fact, the reason I was born and came into the world is to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me.'

And as we reflect on this, I want us to consider **SLIDE 6**:

1. What it means that Jesus claims to testify to the truth.
2. The nature of truth
3. A choice that needs to be made

But first a bit of context... **SLIDE 7 (BLANK)**

Jesus' trial has come about because of the Jewish religious leader's growing opposition. Throughout the book of John, they have felt increasingly threatened by his popularity and teaching. So much so that in chp 11 (vs49) John records their decision to have him killed.

Now flick back a page to the start of the chapter 18, where their plan begins to play out. The first part of the chapter is focussed on Jesus' arrest in a garden. From vs 19 John records the initial questioning Jesus faced in front of a Jewish leader called Annas. He hopes to find some incriminating evidence that will justify a death sentence. But his questioning achieves nothing so he sends him to the current high priest, Caiaphas.

Following this next interrogation we know, from Mark and Luke's books, that the court decide that Jesus is guilty of blasphemy; falsely claiming to be God which is a crime that justifies the death sentence.

But because the Romans are in charge, the Jews have no authority to enforce it. So in vs28 they take their prisoner to Pilate to have him carry out the sentence, which is where our reading starts.

The first thing Pilate wants to do, in vs 29, is establish the charges.

Clearly a charge of blasphemy, which is a theological issue, is of little consequence to Pilate, and his opening question to Jesus, in vs 33, about his royal credentials suggest that the Jewish rulers have already reframed their charges as a political problem; here is a rebel king with intent to over throw the Romans.

You can see this change in their accusation in vs 12 of the next chapter.

But Pilate remains unconvinced so questions Jesus directly.

He wants Jesus to confirm his royal status. The emphasis in his opening question is all on the word 'you'. Are **you** the king of the Jews? Almost asked in disbelief. It's clear everything about Jesus' status is completely against Pilate's expectations.

Jesus' answer, in vs34, is in effect to say 'it depends', 'it depends on what you mean by the question, are you asking out of your own curiosity or are you simply repeating the charges?'

Pilate's response confirms that he is just passing on the accusation; it has got nothing to do with him.

So now Jesus can answer Pilate's question properly and challenge the political problem the Jews have said he represents to Rome.

Jesus explains that there is something bigger at stake than the political overthrow of Rome. He explains that his kingdom is not defined by a physical territory with borders, otherwise, Jesus says, his arrest, at the start of the chapter, would have been met with resistance. The fact Jesus was arrested so easily confirms that Jesus' kingship is different to the charges that have been presented.

But in vs 37 Jesus does confirm that he is a King.

Now it's possible to read Jesus' statement 'You say that I am a King...' as meaning 'that's your word not mine'. So for the avoidance of doubt, it's worth clarifying that we know from the other gospels (Matthew 27, Mark 15 and Luke 23) that Jesus' answer is 'Yes, it is as you say' plus an earlier NIV translation renders Jesus' answer, here in John, as 'You are right in saying I am a King'.

So he confirms he is a king, but he has not come as a rebel bent on overthrow; his job, the very reason he was born is to testify to the truth. And whoever is for truth will listen to him.

So 1. what does it mean that Jesus testifies to the truth? SLIDE 8

What image is conjured up for you when you hear that someone is going to testify? You probably think of someone giving evidence as a witness in court. **SLIDE 9** And this is true for Jesus too.

His claim to testify to the truth means that he is bearing witness to the way things really are; and principally bearing witness to his own unique identity. **SLIDE 10 (BLANK)**

Earlier in the book, in John 14 Jesus has made an audacious claim to his disciples that he is the way, the truth and the life; so in other words, here in vs 37, Jesus claims that the reason he was born was to show people that he is God and fundamentally to explain the truth about what matters to him; the reality of his judgement on humanity and his rescue plan.

And this theme is something that we see repeatedly in John's book.

There is a phrase said by Jesus that appears again and again.

This version of the NIV has it translated as the phrase 'Very truly I tell you...' older versions of the NIV translate it as 'I tell you the truth...' or 'What I'm about to tell you is true'.

Throughout the book John notes 26 occasions when Jesus says this phrase. So all through the account of Jesus' life he has been repeatedly testifying to the truth; pointing to the reality of his identity and his purposes.

Here are 3 examples when Jesus uses this phrase:

Talking about his authority and identity **SLIDE 11**

John 5:19

Jesus answered, "What I'm about to tell you is true. The Son can do nothing by himself. He can do only what he sees his Father doing. What the Father does, the Son also does."

Talking about salvation, his rescue plan

John 5:24 **SLIDE 12**

"What I'm about to tell you is true. Anyone who hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He will not be found guilty. He has crossed over from death to life.

Talking about the problem we face

John 8:34 **SLIDE 13**

Jesus replied, "What I'm about to tell you is true. Everyone who sins is a slave of sin.

The point is that standing in the dock Jesus says that there is a bigger view of life than the here and now and he has come to bring the truth of it to us, to help us understand it, to see its consequences and give us the opportunity to listen and respond. **SLIDE 14 (BLANK)**

And if his followers are characterised by their allegiance to his testimony rather than opposing Rome, Pilate has to recognise that Jesus is a victim of a conspiracy. He has no intention to overthrow the Romans.

But it's clear in vs 38 that Pilate is not interested in hearing any more, and abruptly ends the interrogation with the question 'what is truth'?

how would you answer that question?

2. The nature of truth

What is truth?

SLIDE 15

Turn to your neighbour and ask them Pilate's question ...

Always good to start with a definition, my dictionary had five definitions **SLIDE 16:**

TRUTH

1. The actual state of a matter
2. Conformity with fact or reality
3. A verified or indisputable fact, proposition, principle, or the like.
4. The state or character of being true.
5. Actuality or actual existence.

Much of these definitions ring true for us when we think about issues of justice and law breaking don't they?

Truth is something we can see being valued in society when it focuses on issues of right and wrong. None of us like being lied to. Think of scandals that have hit the news recently (as ever, no shortage of them):

- Our politicians: **SLIDE 17**

The now ex minister Chris Huhne and his former wife convicted of deception and lying in court,

- Think of the accusations of sex scandals that surround the likes of **SLIDE 18**

Jimmy Saville, Lord Rennard and Cardinal O'Brien

- Or the recent food scandal of horsemeat being sold as beef. **SLIDE 19**

In all these matters we want to know the truth of the matter, we want any attempt to cover these things up to be brought into the light so that justice can be done. We want these wrongs to be made right; for the victims to know justice and for the perpetrators to experience the consequences of their actions. Right? **SLIDE 20**
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But there is also another kind of truth that many of us are familiar with. For many truth changes when we consider lifestyle choices. We live in a very diverse community here in East London and its obvious that not everyone believes the same things about issues of life and death.

There are lots of views about what life is about which leads to a widely held view that no one has a full picture on what our true purpose is.

The best example of this kind of truth, that I could think of, is typified by the title of an album released in 1998 by a bunch of welsh musicians...

Any guesses?

the Manic Street Preachers fifth studio album 'This is my truth, tell me yours' **SLIDE 21**

The essence of the album's title explains a pervading view of our day; that we all hold a personal view about truth, but none of us have the full picture.

The conclusion is that no specific religion, or view about the world has the right to claim to be the only view; all positions are thought to be equally valid.

So as you've shared your faith with friends and family you may have heard the response:

'It may be true for you but it isn't true for me.' **SLIDE 22**

Or

'You can't say that my view is wrong; it might be wrong for you, but it's right for me.' **SLIDE 23**

A common illustration used to get the point across is where several blind men are trying to describe an elephant **SLIDE 24**. One of the blind men feels the trunk and reports that an elephant is thin like a snake. Another feels a leg and claims it is thick like a tree. Another touches its side and reports the elephant is as solid as a brick wall.

The story is supposed to represent how various religions can only understand part of God, while none of them can see the whole picture. If any of the blind men claim to know the full picture of God, of life and our purpose they're thought to be arrogant and intolerant.

So truth is often felt to be a personal and private thing, not something that anyone has the right to convert others to. This is known as relativism. And it is built on the belief that nothing is certain, that there are no absolute certainties – no absolute truth and no absolute right or wrong.

But the problem of this view is that it is completely inconsistent, it makes a claim about truth which it cannot hold for itself.

Think about it, the only way the elephant story makes any sense, is if the person telling the story has seen the whole elephant. The storyteller is holding a vantage point that allows them a view of the whole scene, the whole truth of the situation; a few blind men feeling the same animal.

So at the point when our friends might say, 'All religions only see part of the truth, just the like the blind men in the story', we should help them to see that they are claiming to hold the very knowledge they say no one else has. They are suggesting that they have the whole picture, the absolute truth about the situation. In other words, to say all truth is personal, is itself an absolute truth statement which is no longer relative. It has contradicted itself. Do you see?

And the contradiction is hugely significant. Let me explain. Here **SLIDE 24** is a bust of a greek philosopher called Aristotle who lived roughly around 300 years before Jesus' trial. He is thought to be one of the most important founding figures in Western philosophy. His writings cover many subjects, including physics, poetry, music, politics, ethics and biology. One of the subjects who wrote about was logic, which is a process used for how we go about learning things and reaching conclusions.

As part of his writings he developed a principle which is called the law of noncontradiction **SLIDE 25**, that remains a foundation for the logic we use today. The principle basically says that a statement cannot be both true and false at the same time.

Although complementary truth claims can be true, contradictory truth claims cannot.

For example, I could make two claims about this stand in front of me. I could say, 'This stand is a piece of furniture' and 'This is a lecturn'. These claims are different, but they can both be true. They are

complementary; they give two different bits of information which can both be true; this both a lectern and a piece of furniture. Make sense?

But suppose I make two exclusive claims: 'This stand is made of wood' and 'This stand is not made of wood'. These beliefs cannot both be true can they? They have contradicted each other. If one is true, the other cannot be.

This stand cannot be 'made of wood' and 'not made of wood' at the same time - that make sense?

The point is that in order to be able to say '*Christianity may be true for you but it isn't true for me.*', you have to abandon this fundamental principle of logic and everything based on it. And when that happens everything starts to unravel.

Let's go back to consider Vicky Pryce **SLIDE 26**, ex wife of Chris Huhne who has recently been convicted for lying in court and perverting the course of justice.

This is where our value of truth utterly depends on Aristotle's law of noncontradiction doesn't it? Take two contradictory statements which the judge in her trial may have been presented with:

You could imagine the prosecution saying Vicky Pryce lied in court about the speeding offense
And the defence would have said Vicky Pryce did not lie in court about the speeding offense

Both can't be right, can they? It can't be right for **me** that she lied in court and also, at the same time, right for **????** that she didn't lie in court, the whole basis of justice would collapse wouldn't it. Either she lied or she didn't, that's the basis of her trial and her conviction.

Now back to our trial in John 18, **SLIDE 27 (BLANK)** Jesus says in vs 37
the reason I was born and came into the world is to testify to the truth.

Firstly note he doesn't say **a** truth, no the reason I was born and came into the world is to testify to **the** truth.

Jesus' claim to truth cannot be true for me and not true for you, either his claim is true or it isn't - that's what Aristotle says.

And had Jesus answered Pilate's question with his claim in John 14 *I am the way, the truth, and the life*, he makes a claim that is either true or it isn't.

The law of noncontradiction established three centuries earlier won't allow Pilate, me or you to say 'that might be true for you, Jesus, but it isn't true for me...'

Instead Pilate is forced to make a choice, to listen or not. And here Jesus' point is crystal clear; those who are interested in the truth listen to him; those who aren't, won't.

So 3. A choice needs to be made. SLIDE 28

In vs 38 Pilate has understood that Jesus represents no political threat to Rome and declares the charges unfounded, but he doesn't go as far as to choose to side with truth; Pilate doesn't close the case and release Jesus.

Instead he gives the crowd the choice of Jesus' fate. Who should they side with? A known rebel called Barabbas or Jesus, who Pilate declares is innocent. The crowd face a choice and so do we.

John in his book wrote down a challenge to his readers in 20:31 **SLIDE 29**

'these [events] are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.'

John wants us to consider Jesus' testimony, to read his own eye witness account of Jesus' life and to decide for ourselves whether Jesus should be listened to.

Have you ever done that? Taken the time read a whole gospel cover to cover, like you would any other book? And what have you done with the questions that it has raised for you? Have you looked for answers or brushed them aside?

Are you a truth seeker or someone who prefers to live in ignorance? Your answer, John says has a profound eternal consequence. **SLIDE 30 (BLANK)**

Why? Well consider the timing of the trial, at the start of our reading, in vs 28 John tells us it's the time of the Passover festival. Many of us may know that the Passover is an overwhelmingly significant event in the Old Testament, one which God commanded should be remembered each year with a festival.

It's a shocking and stunning event carried at a time when the Jews had been slaves in Egypt for over 400 years. God calls Moses to plead for their release but Pharaoh, thought to be a God by the Egyptians, refuses repeatedly to listen until the Passover happens. You can read all about it in the first 15 chapters of Exodus.

In short the LORD brings judgment over Egypt because of their stubborn refusal to obey him and release the Jews from slavery.

In a devastating climax to the event he demonstrates his ultimate power over life by killing the firstborn of every household; and only those whose doorframes are painted with the blood from a sacrificed lamb are spared the dreadful judgement.

Exodus records that the LORD saw the blood of the lamb painted on the door and 'passed over' the household, sparing them from the terrifying punishment. The death of a lamb stood in the place of the death of the firstborn and finally Pharaoh relented and the Jews were released from slavery.

The whole event is a symbol for the reality, the truth, of the world. The Bible says that, in a similar way to the Egyptians, we all live under the shadow of God's judgment because of our stubborn refusal to listen to him. Remember one of Jesus' truth statements where he describes us as being slaves to our rebellion, our sin.

SLIDE 32

John 8:34

Jesus replied, "What I'm about to tell you is true. Everyone who sins is a slave of sin.

At the end of this trial Jesus will be led to his death. In the first chapter of this book, John the Baptist sees Jesus coming towards him and says, "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!"

John understood that Jesus' death stands in the place of ours, like the lamb in the original Passover. So we know that if we do not put out trust in the blood of the true Passover lamb, like the Jews in Exodus, we will face a similar fate to the Egyptians.

If we refuse to listen to Jesus' testimony, we will meet the full force of God's judgment. But to any who listen to the truth and put their trust in Jesus' death, the shedding of his blood will guarantee that God will passover us when his final judgment comes.

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So the trial is set during the Passover festival and Jesus claimed that anyone on the side of truth listens to him, so it's up to each one of us to consider Jesus' testimony, to read the account firsthand and decide for ourselves whether he is the true King to be followed and the Passover lamb who spares us from God's judgment. It's either true or it isn't.

What's your view?