

Our Lord Jesus Christ, King of the Universe (B)

Daniel 7:13-14

Ps 92

Revelation 1:5-8

John 18:33-37

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.”

As I was in the latter-stages of my return to the faith, I remember being quite struck by this concept of *truth* that is so prominent in Saint John’s Gospel. In many ways it seemed like a strange—even foreign—concept. Of course, in simple things we can still say that the statement $2+2=4$ is true and not false and so forth, but in a deeper sense it would be fair to say that the notion of truth is a rather controversial one in our day and age. After all, ours is a culture in which truth is often seen as *relative* – that I have *my* truth, you have *your* truth, and that any claim to objective truth—that some things are true for all people at all times—this claim is essentially out of bounds.

A prominent articulation of this was given by Justice Anthony Kennedy, a recently-retired judge on the U.S. Supreme Court, who famously wrote in a 1992 court decision that “at the heart of liberty is the right to determine one’s own concept of existence, of meaning, of the universe, and of the mystery of human life.” (Planned Parenthood v. Casey, 29 June 1992). So in other words, he argued that a key part of freedom is that we get to make our own meaning, we make our own reality.

A somewhat amusing example of where this approach can lead was in the news a little while back, with a 69-year-old Dutch man saying that he identifies as a 49-year-old, and that he is going to court to try to legally change his age, so he can “go back to work and meet (younger) women on Tinder.”

Now, this is perhaps a silly example, but the mentality that can lead someone to think like this is all around us, and we’ve all been affected by it. Indeed, Pope-emeritus Benedict regularly spoke of the presence of a “dictatorship of relativism” in our culture, which makes everything subjective, and essentially forbids any claim to objective truth. Of course, the claim that there is no objective truth is *itself* an objective truth claim, but then again, relativism isn’t so much a rational position as it is a *relational* one.

The appeal of relativism comes in part from its acknowledgement that we all approach reality from a certain perspective, with various biases borne of our personal life experience – which is true. It’s also an understandable attempt to reduce the possibility of conflict that can arise when people debate about objective truths.

However, it’s worth noting that Justice Kennedy’s declaration that we ought to be free to determine our own concept of reality and “the mystery of human life” was

expressed in a court decision that significantly expanded the legality and practice of abortion in the U.S. This fact is an indication that such relativism is not really as non-violent as it often claims to be, and that the freedom to determine for oneself “the mystery of human life” often comes at the expense of others.

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So anyway, having grown up in such a culture—and despite my lingering hesitation—I began to find myself intrigued by passages like today’s Gospel, in which Christ proclaims that his mission is to bear witness to the truth, and that all who are on the side of truth listen to his voice. There was something attractive about the concept of Truth-with-a-capital-T that Jesus was insisting on, even though I was still a little uneasy with it. Indeed, it is a concept almost tailor-made for our time.

Right after this Gospel passage Pilate responds to Jesus by saying, “Truth? What is that?” Because of this, some have jokingly called Pilate the “patron saint” of our relativist age – and indeed, the nihilist philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche once praised this remark of Pilate’s as being the only worthwhile statement in the entire New Testament.

The Greek word in the New Testament that is translated into English as “truth” is “*aletheia*”. The root word “*lethe*” means to conceal or to forget, and the prefix “*a*” signifies the opposite of something – so “*a-letheia*” literally means *to reveal*, or alternatively, *to stop forgetting*. So in the New Testament, truth is something that is both revealed, and in a sense *remembered*.

Now, Christ came to reveal the truth about God and about ourselves. In Jesus we see the definitive revelation of the face of God, and of a fully-alive humanity – one in perfect union with the Father. But on some level such truths are *familiar* – they ring a note of recognition. Upon seeing the truth of Christ, there is a sense in which we stop forgetting – that on some level we’ve already had the seeds of divine truth planted in our soul. This is why the truth is attractive.

Make no mistake, the truth is also challenging, because it forces us to re-evaluate ourselves and to question the ways that we are not living in accordance with truth. And our reluctance to engage in this challenging work of self-critique is why T.S. Eliot famously said that mankind “cannot bear very much reality.” But deep down, a life of truth is what we truly long for. Along with beauty and goodness, truth is one of what we call the “great transcendentals” – this-worldly signs of eternal realities, that draw us in and lead us beyond ourselves.

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Now, if “truth” is an unfashionable concept in our day and age, even more so is the concept of a *king* – and Jesus’ proclamation about truth in our Gospel passage is in the context of him acknowledging to Pilate that he is a king:

“Yes, I am a king. I was born for this, 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.”

The discomfort many have in calling Christ “King” in our day and age is somewhat understandable, given how suspicious our culture has become of any kind of authority. And we’ve certainly had enough bad kings over the centuries to make us a little wary of the concept.

But God’s ways are not our ways, and thank God for that. And deep down, I suspect we all have a longing to be like a faithful knight serving a truly *good* king. Deep down we know we’re not enough on our own – we know that if we tried to run everything ourselves we’d mess it up. We hesitate, because we’ve been burned by a series of bad kings. But the Easter mysteries confirm for us that Jesus Christ is a king whom it’s *safe* to trust, and whom it’s *safe* to devote our whole lives to.

Jesus says to Pilate that his is not a kingdom of this world. His kingship was not won on a battlefield, nor at a ballot-box, but upon a *cross*. His kingdom is one in which the first will be last, and the last will be first; in which the poor and merciful are blessed; and in which suffering is transformed into new life. He is a king whose mission is to bear witness to the truth.

So it’s worth asking ourselves: how much of our culture and how much of our lives are based upon lies? Little lies that make us look better than we are, that we tell to others and even ourselves. Practical lies in which our actions do not match the promises we make or the beliefs we profess. Lies in terms of thinking that we can do just fine without depending upon God for everything. We can get so caught up in deceiving ourselves and others that it becomes exhausting.

In contrast, Jesus says that by following him, “you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.”

Truth is a consolation. God—who is all truth—knows us better than we know ourselves, and he loves us more than we love ourselves. And when our time on earth is over and we meet Our Lord face to face, all will be revealed, nothing will be hidden. The truth will be obvious. Part of that truth is the fact that eternity is real, that together we have been entrusted with a mission upon which the world depends, and that our lives have consequences that transcend time.

We have a need for ongoing conversion, to be ever more aligned with the truth. But always with love. As Saint John Paul II used to say, the followers of Christ are called to witness to the truth with love. Truth without love can be harsh and even cruel; whereas love without truth is mere sentimentality. We need them both.

At the end of the day, we are Catholic not just because we may have been brought up in it, or because we like the community aspect, or the aesthetic, or we find the rituals psychologically helpful. We are Catholic because the Catholic faith is *true*, as

politically incorrect as that claim may be. And the Catholic faith is true, because it's founded upon Christ, the one who is truth Incarnate.

Next week we begin Advent, and we prepare for the coming of the King of kings, the Prince of peace, the One who is the way, the truth, and the life.

Ours is a passing world—our kingdoms come and go—but Christ's is a Kingdom that will *never* end, and next to his Kingship all earthly rule *pales* into insignificance. With his Blessed Mother, may we praise him—and follow him—all the days of our life. Amen.