

INTRO TO THE GOSPEL

Before we hear this morning's Gospel, there a bit of the "truth" I want to talk a bit about that today. I want to talk about it because it matters – to Jesus's history and ours – and it matters to "Jews" all over the world...past, present, and future.

Last week's Gospel reading, as well as today's, are rife with references to the "Jews". For years, I've preached on these readings, and for years I've felt uncomfortable with the language.

Apparently I wasn't the only one because in 2012 the Consultation on Common Texts (our scripture readings) engaged biblical experts, church historians, and liturgical leaders, including a forum with consultation and participation of Jewish scholars.

The road from 2012 until today has been a long and painful one to the Jewish Jesus's crucifixion. This morning I want us to listen to – and hear – this text in what may be a new way – a way that not only tells the story, but addresses the anti-Judaism that has overridden the story for centuries as we engage Pilate's conversation with the "Jews" and Jesus.

I want to share parts of the report that was rendered as a result of this consultation. During the early ministry of Jesus, his followers constituted one among multiple competing groups within the larger family of Judaism. Groups referred to in the NT included Pharisees, Sadducees, the followers of John the Baptist, and Zealots.

Jesus shared a concern with the Pharisees for the interpretation of the Law in daily life and an expectation of the near approach of the Kingdom of God with the followers of John the Baptist.

The Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, preserve some of the complexity of Judaism in the time of Jesus, including Jesus's criticism of specific groups, especially the Sadducees and Pharisees, but that criticism was not significantly different from the hard language he used with his own disciples. It was never used to suggest a religious group of which Jesus and his followers were not a part.

The relationship of Christians to other Jewish groups is less clear in this morning's Gospel, and generally ignores the close connections of Christians to other Jewish groups.

John's Gospel was written in the context of the beginnings of the parting of ways between church and synagogue a half century after the lifetime of Jesus and often uses the word "Jew" to refer to those Jews who opposed Jesus's teaching.

This has caused great harm to Jews then, and it continues to do so now, by contributing to a common misreading of the Gospel story – that Jesus died because of the behavior of non-Christian Jewish people, rather than because of the decisions by Roman officials or the sinfulness of all humanity.

This morning I'd like us to hear this Gospel reading apologetically, with confession and lament for the centuries of history of reading these texts in ways that have caused or fostered discrimination and violence against the Jewish people.

I invite you to listen now, hearing the word "Jew" in the context of a small group of leaders who opposed Jesus' teachings, as opposed to all Jewish people who are our siblings in faith.

HOLY GOSPEL: JOHN 18:28-40

Lector: Then they took Jesus from Caiaphas to Pilate's headquarters. It was early in the morning. They themselves did not enter the headquarters, so as to avoid ritual defilement and to be able to eat the Passover. So Pilate went out to them and said, "What accusation do you bring against this man?" They answered, "If this man were not a criminal, we would not have handed him over to you."

Pastor: Pilate said to them, "Take him yourselves and judge him according to your law." The Jews replied, "We are not permitted to put anyone to death." (This was to fulfill what Jesus had said when he indicated the kind of death he was to die.) Then Pilate entered the headquarters again, summoned Jesus, and asked him, "Are you the King of the Jews?" Jesus answered, "Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?"

Lector: Pilate replied, "I am not a Jew, am I? Your own nation and the chief priests have handed you over to me. What have you done?" Jesus answered, "My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here." Pilate asked him, "So you are a king?"

Pastor: Jesus answered, "You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice." Pilate asked him, "What is truth?" After he had said this, he went out to the Jews again and told them, "I find no case against him. But you have a custom that I release someone for you at the Passover. Do you want me to release for you the King of the Jews?" They shouted in reply, "Not this man, but Barabbas!" Now Barabbas was a bandit.

This is the Gospel of our Lord.

Praise to you, O Christ.

Let us pray: God of truth, too often we bend truth to fit our needs. Show us how to recognize and follow your truth, made real in the love and life of your son, Jesus, in whose name we pray. Amen.

What. Is. Truth. What is truth as we know it as we hear, once again, this morning's very familiar scripture? A history lesson on how Jesus was brought ever closer to his crucifixion. A crucifixion with purpose and plan.

Like Jesus, each year we're invited to walk through Lent with purpose and plan. A plan towards deepened understanding of God, of Christ, of ourselves, of "truth" perhaps?

Lent is geared towards both humility and growth. Last week Dick Werpy sent me a note. He'd just watched the movie *Conclave*, and was moved by the speech of Cardinal Lawrence that appeared in the movie. I'd like to share some of it with you now, with thanks to Dick, and Cardinal Lawrence in preparation for the revealing of the new pope:

"The mystery of God is greater than our understanding. We are called not to possess the truth as if it belonged to us, but to seek it together, listening for the voice of the Spirit. If there were only certainty and no doubt, there would be no mystery. And if there were no mystery, there would be no need for faith.

So as we enter this conclave and take up the grave responsibility placed upon us, let us not look for a man who claims perfect certainty. Let us instead pray that God will grant us a pope who understands the weight of doubt, who listens with humility, and who seeks the truth not in pride but in faith. Let us pray for a shepherd who knows that belief is not the absence of doubt, but the courage to continue trusting God in the midst of it."

While Cardinal Lawrence's words speak to the election of a new pope, it points us, today, to our Good Shepherd, Jesus, who demonstrated both his doubt and his courage in trusting his trust in God's promise as he journeyed towards his crucifixion. But what does that mean for us, today, as we hear an ancient text with hearts searching for meaning?

In her book, *"Untamed"* Author Glennon Doyle says this, "Jesus walked straight towards his own crucifixion. First the pain, then the waiting, then the rising. All of our suffering comes when we try to get to our resurrection without allowing ourselves to be crucified first."

By surrendering to the process, Jesus experienced the glory of the resurrection. And he teaches us to do the same – not to fear the pain of the choices or voices or the actions of ourselves or others, but to allow ourselves to feel that pain; to let it shape us; to allow God to use it to grow us into all that God created us to become in the first place. For the glory of God’s kingdom that is here and still yet to come.

Essentially, we are all Barabbas. Every one of us. Thieves facing death...until...until our redemption, otherwise known in the theology of the ELCA as “atonement.” An atonement that is complete; an objective act performed by Christ for all people, received individually through faith.

In our tradition, it’s not viewed as an act of vengeance, but, rather, as an act of love: The love of God and the love of Christ. An act that brings all humans and all creation into a new relationship (shalom) with God, freeing all victims from oppression and all sinners from guilt.

We see the cross as the focal point where God’s wrath against sin – not people, but sin – is satisfied. We see the resurrection as validation of this victory over sin, death, and the devil. We see this atonement as a gift of God’s love and mercy, not a way to appease a vengeful God, but the means by which God removes the barrier of sin to reconcile the world to Himself.

Could it be, then, that the “truth” Jesus speaks of is the power he was given to embrace the pain of the world’s sin without allowing it to rob even one of us of the life God breathes into us, day after day?

All of us. Jesus took our place, feeling the pain of sin imposed by those around him; and he did it willingly, so that the world could experience resurrection with him. So that the world could know what life could be like when not weighted down by the power of sin. Jesus gives us – the Barabbas in us – and the world another chance at life.

Could it be that the “truth” Jesus speaks of is the power he’s been given to embrace the pain of the world’s sin without it allowing it to rob even one of us of the life God has given?

Could it be that the “truth” we’re to confront now is the justice God desires for the world? Justice that demands an end to racism and extremism and polarization. A justice that condemns exclusion in the name of Jesus, starvation of body and spirit, and war in the name of power?

Could it be that the “truth” that the life and death and resurrection Jesus slowly reveals is one which honors all life, all humanity, all creation, and demands that we care for, nourish, and nurture it in the very name of God?

I wonder...I wonder what it felt like for Barabbas. I wonder what impact Jesus taking his place on that cross had on him. One could only hope that his response would be unimaginable gratitude and a joy so great that it changed the way he looked at the people around him.

I wonder if it moved him ever closer to what Jesus’ life calls the world to: Laying down whatever power we wield, dying to self, living lives of sacrifice and service, and honoring the teachings of Jesus: Compassion, forgiveness, generosity, caring, and love. I wonder how it’s moving us.

One truth is certain: God is love. Christ is love. We are loved. The world has been redeemed. Let’s live our redemption in love. Amen.