

Good Friday
Isaiah 52: 13 - 53: 12
Psalm 31: 2, 6, 12-13, 15-16, 17, 25
Hebrews 4: 14-16; 5: 7-9
John 18: 1 - 19: 42
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We want the truth. Our hunger for truth is a basic human instinct – an instinct that is every bit as real as the desire for love or riches. Present us with a mystery, and we feel compelled to unravel it. That’s why the works of Agatha Christie have sold in the billions. It’s why people sat through countless episodes of “Lost” or “The X-Files.” We know “the truth is out there” and we intend to find it. At a deeper level, the quest for truth is the reason there’s a university sitting on this bluff. It’s there in our motto: *Veritas vos liberabit*. “The truth will set you free.”

Fragments of truth continue to turn up from time to time. But the pure, unalloyed, mother lode of truth – the liberating kind -- can be hard to come by in this world. Perhaps its rarity makes it seem all the more precious. During the years of Jesus’ earthly ministry, things were different -- because Jesus himself is the truth. Where Jesus was, the truth was so powerfully present, that one could almost feel it... The truth threatened to overflow its banks and flood into the consciousness of anyone who met Jesus.

In the Book of Exodus, God spoke to Moses from a burning bush. When Moses asked for God’s name, God replied, “I AM who am.” In today’s gospel, Jesus questions the soldiers who have come to arrest him. When they say they are seeking Jesus, the Nazorean, he tells them, “I AM he.”

These words, so similar to those spoken by God to Moses out of the burning bush, strike the soldiers like a hammer blow -- revealing to them at some deep, unconscious level, the truth of Jesus' identity. They retreat a few steps, and fall helplessly to the ground before the Son of God. And they remain there -- until Jesus himself reminds them of what they have come to do. The truth is so powerfully present in Jesus, that a few seemingly simple words from him cause it to physically overwhelm his persecutors.

Everyone who met Jesus came face to face with the truth, and was judged by it. It was impossible to sidestep the issue. Jesus is the Way, the Truth and the Life. Accept it. Or deny it. No maybes. No Fifth Amendment. No refusal to confirm or deny.

Simon Peter knew the truth. His faith in Jesus led him, during the calm before the storm, to proclaim confidently, "Lord, I will lay down my life for you." But the truth has consequences. Discipleship has a cost, and it was a price that Peter wasn't yet ready to pay. When he was tested he denied the truth: And the cock crowed.

And what of Pilate? He intended to judge Jesus, not be judged by him. He was unconcerned with the fine points of Jewish theology. He was a man of the world, impatient with religious squabbles. He wanted only to dispense justice when it was practical to do so, and to keep the peace when it wasn't.

Under questioning, Jesus says to Pilate, "The reason I was born, the reason I came into the world, is to testify to the truth. Anyone committed to the truth hears my voice."

Pilate, the pragmatist, responds, "Truth! What does that mean?" Poor benighted Pilate. Of all the jaded, world-weary cynics who have

asked that question before or since, he was the only one who asked it while staring truth straight in the face.

Like everyone who encountered Jesus, Pilate had met the truth, and would be judged by it. He was cleverer than most. He didn't want to commit himself. He wanted to wash his hands of the whole matter. But in the end, Pilate handed Jesus over to be crucified.

Pilate resorted to irony -- so often the last recourse of an able intellect under siege. He tried to be sarcastic. He had an inscription attached to the cross:

Jesus the Nazorean, The King of the Jews

It was an attempt at sarcasm, but the truth overwhelmed his malicious wit. The inscription was true.

Truth can be hard to find in this world. . . but today it cannot be avoided. It confronts each of us in the wood of the Cross on which our Savior died, held out for us to kiss -- to embrace -- to make our own. There can be no evasion. Bravado, finely crafted rationalizations, ironic winks, and empty gestures are equally futile. They will not serve. This is our "moment of truth." How will we respond? *Veritas vos liberabit.*