WHEN TRUTH IS ON TRIAL

Turning Points (Part 5)

Text: John 18:28-40

Introduction to the Scripture

If you go to Harvard University today, you will find people wrestling with the great issues of life. That seems particularly appropriate given the fact that the University’s motto is Veritas – the Latin word for Truth. The original motto of the College was a bit longer. It once read “Truth for Christ and the Church.” A Harvard student named Kelly Monroe became concerned that people on her campus had lost the capacity to recognize Truth, so she and some colleagues organized something called the Veritas Forum. Today, the Veritas Forum has been established at Stanford, Yale, and some 70 other secular university campuses, with about 200,000 participants nationwide.

The forum’s purpose is to explore what Jesus Christ has to say to “the hardest questions of the university, society, and the human heart.” Like Chuck Colson’s Wilberforce Forum, Veritas helps people see the staggering influence that Christian thought and practice has had on the development of the world’s most life-enhancing science, ethics, and politics. It presents a powerful intellectual case for confidence in doctrines like the authority of the Bible and the resurrection of Christ.

But Veritas’ greatest aim is not to win people over by reason. For reason can take us only so far. Even sharp minds can miss the Truth where the heart is hard -- as our scripture lesson this morning attests. Let’s turn together to God’s Word…

Power In Plainclothes

They looked like they’d just stepped off the bus from the backwoods. For hours, the lady in the faded gingham dress and her husband in the homespun suit had sat politely in the outer office of Harvard University’s executive office. “The President is a very busy man and you don’t have an appointment,” the secretary had said. ”That’s alright, we'll wait,” the lady replied. For three hours, the secretary had ignored them, hoping the couple would become discouraged and go away. They didn’t. Finally the aide poked her head through the President’s door: "Maybe if they just see you for a few minutes, they'll leave.” He rolled his eyes, sighed and said, “Bring ‘em in.”

It didn’t take long for the President to be sure he was wasting his time. The couple explained that they’d had a son who’d attended Harvard for a year, but then had tragically died. “My husband and I would like to erect a memorial to him, somewhere on campus,” the woman said. "Madam," he said gruffly, "I sympathize with your loss, but you must understand that we can’t put up a statue for every person who attended Harvard and died. If we did, this place would look like a cemetery.” "Oh, no," the lady quickly added, "we were hoping to put up a building.”
The President glanced again at the couple’s threadbare clothes, stifled a chuckle, and said: "Oh, a building! Do you have any earthly idea how much a building costs? Why we have over seven and a half million dollars in the physical plant at Harvard." For a moment the lady was silent and the president was pleased. He could feel the interruption coming to an end. Then the lady turned to her husband and quietly said: "If that’s all it costs to build a University, Lee, why don’t we just start our own?" Her husband nodded. The president’s face wilted. And Mr. and Mrs. Leland Stanford got up and walked away, heading West.

The encounter at the executive office at Jerusalem that morning must have seemed like a pitiful waste of time to Pilate too. It was the habit of Roman officials of that time to get to the office by 6 a.m., take care of business, and then head off to the spas or games for the day. Knowing this pattern well, the Jewish leaders were careful to bring Jesus to the Praetorium sometime before 7. The Nazarene had already been tried and found wanting in three separate Jewish trials conducted over the course of that long bitter night. First Annas the high priest, then Caiphas the head of the ruling council, then the entire Sanhedrin had interrogated Jesus. They’d had him blindfolded and beaten, and confirmed a verdict settled months before that this presumptuous hick from Israel’s outback simply must go.

Regrettably, however, Rome had taken the power of execution away from the Jews, so to the Governor they’d gone. They would tell him that Jesus was a rebellious threat to the peace Pilate sought to preserve. Because these men were deeply concerned to honor God’s truth, especially at the Passover time, they refused to enter Pilate’s Palace -- lest their contact with a gentile render them ceremonially unclean. Fortunately, Pilate agreed to come out and, after a quick exchange, the Governor and the Interrupter made their way inside.

The Great Question

What happens next is one of the most momentous conversations ever held. The encounter comes to a climax when Pilate asks if Jesus claims to be the King of the Jews, as his jurors assert. Jesus answered, "You are right in saying I am a king. In fact, for this reason... I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me." And it is here that the Governor counters with one of the greatest questions ever posed. Pilate asked: “What is truth?”

It seemed to be the question that has occupied scientists and poets, theologians and philosophers, statesmen and teenagers since the dawn of history: What is life truly about? What is the essential structure or meaning at the marrow of the mystery of our existence? What is the gold standard by which societies may measure their ethics? What is the unmovable plumbline against which human beings can rightly align their beliefs and behaviors for greatest blessing? “What is truly true?”

Then again, it is also possible that Pilate meant something else entirely by that question. Maybe he was saying, “Who believes in Truth with a capital ‘T’ anymore?”
“Your truth, the Sanhedrin’s truth, Rome’s truth, my truth… What kind of truth are you talking about? Isn’t it a matter of perspective?”

Towers of Truth

In a recent address here at the church, Josh McDowell pointed out that there really are an awful lot of ways of defining what’s true. Some people claim that something is right or wrong based on sincerely feeling that it is right or on the consequences it might produce for us. Some define truth in terms of the pain or pleasure that a particular action causes others. Some people determine what’s “good” on the basis of its conformity with the values of a particular culture. Some of us evaluate an idea or action on whether or not it is consistent with what our parents taught us; or whether it is practically enforceable; or whether or not it is legal.

People will tend to grant the notion of objective truth in the scientific realm of reason and evidence, but increasingly less so in the allegedly subjective realm of morals or culture or religion. Polls have repeatedly demonstrated that the majority of Americans now believe that all values, beliefs, lifestyles, perceptions, or truth claims are equally valid. “What is truth,” after all but somebody’s definition.

And then came September 11. Suddenly, we were confronted with the full implications of this “generous” attitude toward Truth. You see, the men who took over those cockpits could rightly claim to be acting on the basis of ANY of the guidelines for “goodness” prevalent in our society today. There can be no doubt that they sincerely felt their actions were right. They judged that the consequences of their behavior would bring eternal blessing to them and tremendous pleasure to millions of others. Crashing those planes was completely consistent with the values of their particular subculture and with what at least some of their families had taught them. In the terms of their scriptures such acts were entirely legal.

So on what basis does anyone say they were wrong? How do we know that it’s not O.K. to crucify someone to advance your Empire’s version of peace as Pilate did? How do we know that it’s really wrong to perform female circumcisions? How do we know that our view of the unborn or homosexuality or the authority of our Bible is right? On what basis do we make those claims? Is that basis fundamentally different than Mohammed Atta’s? In other words, “What is truth?”

Truth Is A Person

There is an answer to that question, or at least a helpful perspective on it, provided it is held with humility. Josh McDowell reminds us that the word Truth literally means “conformity to the original.” Truth derives from the original or rather the Originator. We know that stealing is wrong because at the origin of the Universe is not a taker but a Giver. We know that murder is not OK because God is the creator of life. We know that adultery isn’t right because God shows Himself to be a keeper of covenants. We know that working incessantly is not correct because God models rest. We know that hatred
is not defensible because God is forgiving. We know that prejudice is inappropriate because God crosses and boundaries and breaks down walls in love. We know that bearing false witness is wrong because God always speaks the truth.

In the end, Truth can’t be derived reliably from our feelings or our rational minds. It can’t flow merely from our sense of what works, or our cultural and family background, or even our laws, whether civil or religious. It’s not that Truth is never found in any of these places. Often it is. But just as often, through the influence of sin, Truth gets distorted in these places, even in America, even in the Church, even in you and me. Ultimately Truth exists purely in the person and character of God alone. And Truth will be known and developed through us, only to the extent that we are in genuine relationship with God, only to the degree that we are responding humbly to His leading.

Harvard student Kelly Monroe says: “When Jesus declared, ‘I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life,’3 He was saying that [in the end] truth is not a theology, a vague philosophy, a law, or some principle for highly successful people. Rather, He was saying, Truth is a person, and you are face to face with Him…”4

I wish I could stand here today and give you intellectual proof positive that Christianity trumps every other worldview, that Christ is the one reliable Rock in a sea of relative opinions, though that is my deep conviction. But, if truth be told, these things do not account fully for why I believe. It is because one day He walked in ragged clothing into the office of my soul. Face to face with Him, I somehow understood that while I’d thought of myself as the President or Governor, I was meeting the true King. And that encounter became a turning point.

I started making risky commitments in response to His commands. I started to try to forgive and to give, to hold my tongue and to listen much more, to seek the Father’s face, to open my mind and heart, to pray and to trust – because He did these things. I still make so many mistakes and live with such doubts. I don’t have all the truth, but sense the Truth is slowly getting hold of me. And I am coming to recognize, more and more, that He is the only One with the resources to take the little college of human imagination and the fallen towers of our enterprise and build something truly great upon them, His eternal Kingdom. This I believe. I hope you do too.

Please pray with me...

From the cowardice that shrinks from new truth… From the laziness that is content with half-truth… From the arrogance that thinks it knows all truth, O God who is Truth deliver us. Where any of us have preferred the empire of our own ideas over the Kingdom of your Light, conquer us we pray for thy redeeming purposes. Having met you, face-to-face today, keep us from washing our hands of the awesome opportunity your fellowship presents. Take now the governance of our lives, O you who are our Way, our Truth, and our Life. Amen.

Address at Christ Church of Oak Brook’s Leading Lights Forum, February 12, 2002.

John 14:6

Discipleship Journal, Issue 120, pp. 70-73.