

John 18:28-40

Last week, we ended with Peter's denial after the cockcrow at daybreak. Jesus is in the praetorium, with Pilate, following his arrest and handing over or betrayal by Judas. Judas Iscariot was first introduced into the Fourth Gospel in the story of the feeding of the multitude. The word "Iscariot" is believed to be a description of Judas' character, a title that got attached to him in the synoptic gospels and that, in time, through common usage, came to be thought of as part of his name, which was unusual, since at that time, surnames were not used. It was likely derived from the word *sicarius*, which means "political assassin".

For John to introduce Judas as the one who was lost and then to assert that his lostness was predestined in order that "the scriptures might be fulfilled", suggests that Judas was far more a symbol than he was a person of history - a symbol who, over time, was literalised by people who did not understand the way John's characters were drawn into the community's memory of Jesus.

There is no reference to Judas Iscariot in any written Christian source prior to his introduction in Mark's gospel in the early years of the eighth decade. The first crucifixion and resurrection stories are found in Paul's epistles, which, along with his martyrdom, occurred prior to the writing of the first gospel. Paul makes absolutely no mention of Judas. If Judas' treacherous act had been a literal part of history, is it at all possible that a trauma of such magnitude would never have come into Paul's epistles? Not even once does Paul mention Jesus being "handed over" or betrayed.

Judas' name is the name of the Jewish nation, Judah, the difference being in the Greek spelling. By the first century, Judah was not a nation, but a province of a nation which by then was called Judea. The word "Jew" meant a citizen of Judah or Judea.

Details of Judas' biography woven into the New Testament appear to have been lifted out of other traitor stories, out of the Hebrew scriptures, strengthening the case that Judas is a mythological, literary creation, not a person of history. John does not mention "thirty pieces of silver" in his gospel, a detail added by Matthew alone. This recalls the prophet Zechariah, where the shepherd is bought off for "thirty shekels of silver". Only Matthew tells of the traitor hanging himself, which may be drawn from the story of Ahithophel, who betrayed King David, and when the betrayal backfired, went out and hanged himself.

The treachery was even more repugnant because he had eaten at the king's table, yet still raised his hand in treachery against the king. John identifies the traitor as one who "breaks bread with me at this table". Only in the Fourth Gospel is the bread handed specifically to Judas. Judas looks like a compilation of the traitor stories in the Jewish scriptures. Judas is the symbol of those who prefer death to life and darkness to light. He is one who cannot make the transition from death and darkness into life and light. As such, he represents those in his day and ours who cannot or will not enter the Christ experience, or those who try to snuff out the life

that opens a doorway into a whole new understanding of life.

Remember that John's Gospel is written on two levels. One level tried to recall the original Jesus. Many decades had passed between the crucifixion and the writing of this gospel, so the task of recollection was not easy. The second level tried to understand Jesus as he was filtered through the Johannine community, a group that interpreted Jesus through the lens of the traumas which engulfed them in their own time near the end of the first century. In the passion and crucifixion of Jesus, it is not the historical memory of Jesus that is front and centre; rather, the current life experience of the community is the prism through which the story is told.

By the time the Fourth Gospel was written, the Johannine community had faced three defining realities. The Christian faith was born as a movement within the synagogue. The followers of Jesus were known as the "followers of the way", a distinct subgroup that never wanted to be separate from Judaism. These followers only wanted to expand Judaism to include Jesus, just as Judaism had been expanded many times in the past to include such figures as Isaiah, Hosea, Amos, Micah and other prophetic voices.

The tensions between the old tradition and this new possibility were at least tolerable until external circumstances such as the outbreak of the Jewish-Roman war in Galilee in 66 CE, made the price of any tension more costly and threatening. When the war expanded into Judea, Jerusalem and its Temple were destroyed by the Roman army in 70 CE and Judaism entered a struggle for survival. By the time

hostilities ceased at Masada in 73 CE, Judaism had lost its nation's home, its holy city, its Temple and its priesthood. No longer tolerating any revisionist movement, the Johannine community was forced to flee Jerusalem. With increased tension between the orthodox leadership and this challenging revisionist movement, somewhere around 88 CE, the orthodox leaders of the synagogue expelled the followers of Jesus.

The Johannine community was now in a new situation. With their messianic expectation, how could they continue to relate themselves and this Jesus to the Hebrew scriptures, if they were no longer to be a part of Judaism? They now settled into the post-Judaism phase of life, marked with a deep hostility toward the synagogue leaders who had excommunicated them. This was when the phrase "the Jews" entered the Johannine writings as a symbol for the enemies of the followers of Jesus. Now they had to define themselves not as a subgroup of Judaism, but as separate from the Judaism from which they had been expelled.

In this new context the tensions now became internal. So they tried to redefine themselves outside the context of Judaism. They wrestled with how far they could go in speaking about the Jesus experience as a God experience without making discipleship something that many of their own members, who had been raised in Judaism, found impossible to affirm. These formerly Jewish disciples might be able to see Jesus as the fulfilment of Jewish expectations, but could they go to the place where God and Jesus were so closely identified that they could hear Jesus make the claim of oneness with the Father? Could they be comfortable with the suggestion

that Jesus might have applied the divine name of “I AM” to himself?

Seeking a common mind on these issues, brought another split in their community: those who could not make this developing transition broke away and returned to the Synagogue. To the Johannine community, those who left were seen as traitors. Others wavered between the two camps as doubters, as those who might abandon Jesus, might deny him, as those who were always on the verge of falling away – before finally finding the courage to move into a new place and to embrace a new vision. And there were also some at the core of this community who were always faithful to their new vision. They came to be known as the ideal disciples, even the beloved disciples. In the passion story, the Fourth Gospel develops characters who symbolize each of these historical responses.

Finally, the hostility of the world had to be embraced and endured. This struggling Johannine community was separated from its Jewish roots and torn internally in its attempt to see Jesus as the determinative life for their vision of the future. Now, looking outward, they found themselves facing the Roman Empire. The human symbol of this world, the person who was the highest Roman official in Judea - Pilate - became the “face” of that world. When Jesus confronts Pilate in the passion story as told by John, many themes are being addressed, from the meaning of truth to the meaning of kingship. But everything in this gospel’s long confrontation between Jesus and Pilate refers to real issues in the life of the Johannine community. This passion story is not history and must not be read as such. It is not a record of the final events in the life of Jesus. It is an attempt to make sense out of

the life that the members of this community were living near the end of the first century.

To read John's Gospel literally is to never understand it. We need to see John's story of the crucifixion, the resurrection, the gift of the spirit and the consequences of these acts as John understood them – new life, new consciousness, and a new doorway into the mystery of God. John's purpose in composing this "new" gospel, is to bring us into a dimension of life that we have never before known. It is to bind together the former Jewish expectations with a new sense of God as mystical oneness.

The trial before Pilate, longer in John than in the Synoptics, consists of seven scenes. The first three begin outside the praetorium, where the religious authorities, who have brought Jesus from Caiaphas to Pilate, are waiting outside in order to avoid ritual defilement.

Caiaphas and the Sanhedrin want Jesus dead, but having failed in their repeated attempts earlier in the gospel, they need Pilate to do their dirty work for them. While they may remain outside, like us when we avert our gaze from injustice or cruelty perpetrated on our behalf, they are defiled by their complicity.

The movement between Jesus inside and the religious authorities outside continues the back-and-forth begun with Jesus inside and Peter outside. Where the connection between Peter and Jesus was love, here the political and religious elite are bound in a union of violence, contempt, and fear.

John will shape the figure of Pilate to suit his personal, literary and mythological needs. The long, beautifully drawn, intense dialogue between Pilate and his condemned prisoner, Jesus, is crucial to John's understanding of the crucifixion. This is not the recollection of a confrontation that actually happened in history. This literary composition is deliberately designed to move the Fourth Gospel's story of Jesus to its grand climax. It is designed to say to early Christians, for whom this gospel was written, that in their conflict with the power of Rome in their generation, they must be open to the possibility that the Romans seemed to come closer to understanding Jesus than did the Jews. Winning the approval of the Roman Empire might well have been one of John's goals. His text suggests that Rome itself perceived Jesus' power even though neither the Empire nor its representative, Pilate, was able to act upon it. There is also a clear need to victimize the orthodox Jews. This long Pilate-Jesus dialogue is one more step in his masterful portrayal of the revealer of God working against the power of religion as well as the power of the government.

As far as the Jewish leaders and Pilate are concerned, there are two kingdoms: for the Jews, the legitimate kingdom of Judea; for Pilate, the legitimate kingdom of Rome. That's it. But, Jesus indicates there is yet another kingdom – the very kingdom of which he has been preaching since the beginning of his ministry, a kingdom that is not from 'here' but "from another place". This kingdom of God, of Heaven, is different from the earthly kingdoms; it is 'other', it is invisible, with relatively upside-down values and perspectives.

Insofar as he is a king, it is not of a kingdom Pilate would recognize as such. Jesus is operating in another realm. He is struggling not to survive, but to open life to new realities that are beyond the power struggles of the political world over which Pilate presides. Pilate is portrayed as listening closely and trying to discern the meaning implied. He is still a seeker. He is looking beyond the limits of his words.

Pilate's first attempt to interrogate the prisoner is undone when Jesus shifts the dialogue from Pilate's questions about kingship "of this world" to the question of truth. Pilate, a symbol of the world, asks the question the world always raises: "What is truth?" The short answer would be, "I am." The light coming into the world is full of grace and truth. Grace and truth come into the world through him. People doing the truth come to the light, and everyone who belongs to the truth recognizes the shepherd and listens to his voice. True worshippers worship in spirit and truth.

Those who continue in the word of Jesus are freed by the truth, sanctified in truth, and sent into the world with the Spirit of truth dwelling in them. Jesus is true light, true bread, true vine. His flesh is true food and his blood true drink.

Modernists and post-modernists of the last 60 years think they are the first ones to question truth. Truth is important to John, perhaps because of his interaction with those influenced by Greek thought or perhaps out of his own search for truth.

Our own culture has lost its mooring with regard to truth. We hear about 'fake news'. We hear people talk about 'your truth and my truth'. We don't know what to believe any more. We can pick our own flavour of truth by selecting a news network

that simply agrees with our own way of seeing the world. And which one is right? Which one has the truth? They are all missing the truth. The truth, in the end, lies in Jesus: his word, his life, his teaching.

Jesus' truth, his testimony and his person, is an expression of the divine love he embodies and comes to reveal. This truth brings comfort, freedom, and joy. But it is still uncomfortable to many. Grounded in God's being extending itself in love for the world, God's truth is from above and offers a peace "not as the world gives". For those embedded in the view from below, whose identity is grounded in power and fear, the truth of God's transforming love seems either irrelevant or threatening.

Pilate doesn't stay long enough for an answer to his question. Maybe he loses interest in the truth even as the question is leaving his lips. Or maybe it is more than he can bear. Pilate tries; he really does. He actually sees the injustice of this situation, but his goal is keeping the peace, not necessarily executing justice. He returns to those who want Jesus dead. He makes them a provocative offer. It is also like waving a red flag in the face of Jesus' accusers. To admit the kingship of Jesus would bring their religious defences crumbling down. Their religious system, like all religious systems, was created to win divine favour from an external deity. The kingdom of life - born of the spirit - is one in which there are no religious boundaries, not even a boundary between God and human life. Threatened deeply, the Jews have to play the traditional human survival card. So they cry out: "Not this man, but Barabbas."

Jesus is a king yearning for the communion of hearts. This is the truth he has come to proclaim: not power for the sake of power, but the power of love and compassion that heals, liberates and gives life, that calls people to live in love with him.

How often in our world today truth is chained, silenced, hidden, pushed away. And how often those who speak the truth to abusive power are silenced. How often we ourselves have refused to follow our conscience and the call of truth and justice because we were afraid of losing our job, our friends, or power of some sort. Such fear darkens our world and makes us lose the truth of who we are.

Truth is like a tiny light, the light of our conscience, which, in a mysterious way, is the ruler or the “king” that governs our being. It is like the eyes of a child, the song of a bird, the gentle flower. But we are often too busy to notice, too frightened to listen and to see. We even crush this inner conscience, the ruler or “king” of our being. We become slaves to our fears and prejudices, slaves to what others want us to be. Let us not keep the king of love and of truth enchained. May that tiny light of truth always shine in you!

Amen.