Readings: Revelation 1.4b-8; John 18.33-38

One of the wisest, but perhaps most cynical, pieces of advice I’ve been given is the phrase, “Never ask a question to which you might get an answer you don’t want to hear.” It was intended as training in how to speak to your line manager. But I first experienced its wisdom as a preacher. One of the joys of speaking to diverse congregations is that I’ve often had at least one person around who, when I was moved to ask a rhetorical question, was more than ready to answer it. In one parish I remember asking ‘When Jesus was deserted by his disciples where were you?’ To which one enthusiastic congregant replied, ‘In the loo!’ In another parish I recall asking, ‘Do you have a saint who inspires you when your journey of faith is lonesome and weary?’ And a man shouted out, ‘Elvis! He’s the king!’

It seems like Pontius Pilate hadn’t got the message about rhetorical questions. Here is Pilate, regal and serene, somewhere between an imperious interrogator and a curious journalist, firing questions at this bedraggled prisoner who’d been deserted by his followers and rejected by his people, looking for Jesus to confirm his status as a rebel by claiming to be the rightful king. Jesus isn’t interested in talking about who’s in charge. He’s got something more important to talk about. He’s talking about the truth. He says, ‘This is why I was born. This is why I came into the world: to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.’ Pilate realizes he’s out of his depth. So he shrugs his shoulders, rolls his eyes, and asks a rhetorical question. ‘What is truth?’

Pilate asks the question as a joke, with a sarcastic, disingenuous, cynical, dismissive sweep of the hand. But what he’s done, without realizing it, is to ask the most important question in the world at the most important moment in world history. This scene in the governor’s headquarters has brought together, face to face, the two most explicit answers to the most important question of them all. What is truth?

Let’s think about Pontius Pilate’s answer to that question. Pilate is a pragmatist. He’s a realist. He’s got his employers in Rome to keep happy. He’s got the Judaean leadership to keep sweet. And he’s got the excitable crowd to keep docile. The Roman Empire may be puffed up with high-minded rhetoric about peace and glory, but on the ground he’s got to be ruthless and clear-headed and single-minded. Otherwise he’s going to be stitched up by Rome, double crossed by Jerusalem, or slaughtered by the crowd. Truth is a concept he’s got no use for. It’s just fluff. He’s interested in what works, what functions well, what keeps the show on the road, what ensures everyone’s happy, what ticks the economy over and leaves the coffers full.

You can’t understand this story unless you see the appeal of Pilate’s perspective. Our country is still ruled by people like this. This is the mindset that dominates politics, high finance, big business, major sports, and almost every sector of the economy. Pilate isn’t a monster: he represents what most people think, most of the time. ‘Just get the job done and spare me the philosophizing. Just make the thing work and ask questions later. Life’s too short. Don’t make it so complicated. What’s truth got to do with it? Just do it.’ There’s a lot of Pilate in each one of us.

But face to face with Pilate is Jesus. Jesus says, ‘Truth is the whole reason and meaning of my existence.’ What is Jesus saying? What is truth?
Truth is for Jesus, and for us, a statement of conviction about the past. It’s not just a general understanding of how the world goes round, but a specific story about the way God has worked in history. God made the universe as a companion, made the world as the theatre of glory, made humanity to bear the divine image, called Israel to be a blessing to all nations, showed in liberation and covenant an eternal purpose to be with us forever, in Jesus embodied that commitment with wondrous love and overcame all that inhibited our shared life, and at Pentecost gave us a guarantee that what had been with us in Jesus would never leave us. That’s truth in the form of a story, as a reality enacted in flesh and blood, in history.

But truth is not confined to the past. Truth is a promise for the future. What is true is ultimately what will always be. All these things will pass away, but truth names what will never pass away. When we ask ourselves ‘What is truth?’ – when we look up into the wide blue yonder and feel how small we are, when we see all the busyness of the commuter, the worker bee, the milky way – this is most often the sense we have in mind. What does it all amount to? What’s the point of it all? Where’s it all going? Jesus’ word for this is kingdom. Kingdom is where we are with God, with one another and with the renewed creation. It’s not the same as creation because it’s not just the way things were meant to be. It’s the way God makes things after they’ve gone wrong. In the kingdom we don’t have perfect bodies and spotless characters: we find that God has improvised on our flawed bodies and fragile characters and made us into something beautiful together. When we glimpse moments like that we sense we’ve got a glimpse of the kingdom.

But there’s another sense of truth, and you get an idea of it when you feel what an impoverished life Pontius Pilate’s living if he has all this wealth and prestige and pride and power but, when it comes to truth, all he can do is shrug his shoulders. It seems he has everything in the world except the only thing that matters. And that’s not just a conviction about the past or a promise for the future. That’s something very present. What thrilled people about Jesus and mesmerizes us today is that he modeled a new way of being with one another and with God. The offer of forgiveness for the past and eternal life for the future took away the regret and the shame and the fear and the anxiety that overshadows so much of human life, and opened up an unknown and unprecedented freedom and grace and creativity and trust. If you’ve tasted this truth, you’ll never be thirsty again.

So truth is three-sided. It’s about the past: we could call that faith. It’s about the future: we could call that hope. It’s about the present: we could call that love. And, dare I say it, we maybe need such a complex notion of truth to understand why Christians can so profoundly disagree with one another over the shape and ordering of their common life.

Some Christians are very focused on the truth of the past: what exactly was said in the scripture, what precisely were the arrangements in the early church, what beyond question is the right translation of this particular word. Other Christians, perhaps more to be found around these parts, are more oriented toward the truth of the future: what kind of community God calls us to be, how the church can look more like the kingdom, how we can live in such a way that anticipates the equality and peace and enjoyment of one another that constitutes a truly redeemed common life. It’s not hard to see why those with two such different notions of truth can completely misunderstand one another. Maybe that’s partly what’s happened this last week.

But if the greatest of these is love, then to be God’s church is to model a common life in which we can be present to one another; because forgiveness has dismantled the pressure of the past and eternal life has lifted the weight of the future. This is where truth hurts. In the past and future senses of truth we can surround ourselves with people who think the way we do. But if the truth is actually to be good news in the present, if it’s actually to be the embodiment of love, it’s got to offer a peace the world cannot give. Love means an amazing ability to be present to, to be with, to learn from, to appreciate, to be thankful for, even to cherish those with whom we profoundly disagree, by whom we’ve been hurt, and with whom we get very angry. If we love only those that love us, what good is that? Loving enemies is the painful truth. But it’s the truth that sets us free. It’s the
shocking, counterintuitive, otherworldly truth that Jesus embodied for us. Jesus loved Pilate. Who are you asking God to help you find strength to love today?

Pilate made the cynic’s mistake. He recklessly tossed out a rhetorical question. He asked a question to which he risked getting an answer he didn’t want to hear. He looked into the face of a man who’d said ‘I am the bread of life,’ ‘I am the good shepherd,’ ‘I am the resurrection and the life,’ ‘I am the true vine,’ ‘I am the way, the truth, and the life,’ and he thought he could speak of truth and just shrug his shoulders and laugh it off as if it were a ridiculous, unanswerable, absurd question.

John’s gospel doesn’t record Jesus answering the question. But that’s because the answer’s so obvious it doesn’t need saying. If you’ve read the previous 17 chapters of John’s gospel, there’s only one possible answer Jesus could give to the question, ‘What is truth?’: ‘I am.’ ‘I am’: the closest we get, with Moses at the burning bush, to the name of God; the closest Jesus comes to identifying himself as the heart of God, the two words that show that Jesus is everything that Israel longed for and everything that God has in store for us, all crystallised into a person in the present tense. That’s the simple answer to the question, ‘What is truth?’: I am. John’s gospel doesn’t record an answer to Pilate’s question because it offers us an opportunity to answer the question for ourselves.

Are you ready to answer that question for yourself, today? It’s been a miserable week for those who love God and love the church. But when we’re worn out with grief and hurt it’s time to fall back on first principles and face the most basic question of all. This scene in the governor’s headquarters distills the whole of the global history of philosophy down to a simple, stark alternative. What is truth?

Is it Pilate? Pilate shrugs his shoulders. For him, the question’s absurd. There is no truth. Life is just power and advantage and manoeuvring and making the best of it. Or is it Jesus? Jesus’ whole life has said, ‘I am.’ His answer exposes the absurdity of Pilate’s whole life. His whole existence is about giving us faith in the past, hope for the future and love in the present. Pilate, or Jesus? Which is your answer?