

Week 4: “What is truth?” (John 18:38)

The way of the cross is concerned about following Jesus on our journey in this world. Discipleship to Jesus reveals the truth about ourselves and our lives. The gospel writers were all deeply concerned about the truth of Jesus and sought to situate the ministry, cross and resurrection of Jesus squarely in this world. The gospels announce the nearness of the kingdom of heaven, while also revealing a God who dwells within human history.

The gospel writers were concerned that Jesus be understood as the truth of the good news, never removed from the historical context of the world. All of the gospels place the Passion narrative of Jesus in the context of a trial before Pontius Pilate, governor of the Roman province of Judea from c. 26 to 36 CE, during the reign of Tiberius. Pilate is further documented outside the New Testament by Philo of Alexandria, the historian Josephus, Roman historian Tacitus, and in a first century stone fragment on display at the Israel Museum in Jerusalem.

Each of the gospels contains Jesus’ trial before the Sanhedrin and before Pilate. Matthew writes that the Sanhedrin had settled on the charge of blasphemy (Mt. 26:65-66), while Luke writes that the Sanhedrin, knowing Pilate would not act on a religious charge of blasphemy, instead brought a three-fold political charge against Jesus of 1) political subversion, 2) opposing taxes, and 3) claiming to be a king (Lk. 23:2). These charges were crafted to seek a hearing from Pilate as well as the maximum penalty of death.

Yet Pilate found no compelling reason to find Jesus guilty of the charges. In Luke, Pilate asked three times, “Why? What crime has this man committed?” (Lk. 23:22). Yet seeking to appease the crowds, Pilate released Barabbas, who had been imprisoned for insurrection and murder, while handing Jesus over to be crucified.

The first of this week’s images of Christ (below), was painted by Russian-Ukrainian realist painter, Mykola (Nikolai) Ge (1831-1894) titled, “What is Truth?” (*Quid Est Veritas?*) and shows perhaps the most dramatic moment of Jesus’ trial in John’s gospel. This painting, like



many of Ge’s later religious paintings was banned from exhibition for its human portrayal of Jesus. Ge’s later works also foreshadow the symbolism and emotion of Expressionism.

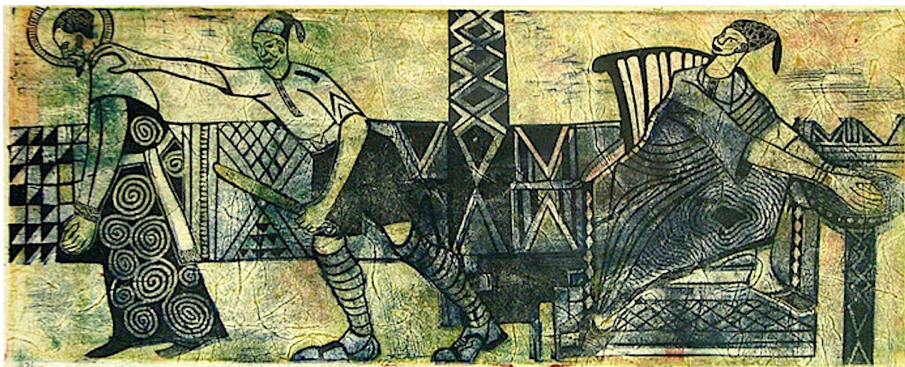
In this painting, Jesus, who has just said, “Every one who is of the truth hears my voice,” stands in a shadow in front of Pilate, who gestures asking, “What is truth?”

Chapter one of John describes the truth of the Word, “the true light that enlightens everyone was coming into the world... And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth” (Jn. 1:9, 14). Ge has chosen to paint Jesus realistically without any supernatural light, instead implying that Pilate is the one who remains unenlightened about the truth of the man standing before him.

Though Jesus stood before Pilate, it was really Pilate who was on trial before Jesus. Though Pilate had authority over the penultimate matters of this world, it is Jesus, whose kingdom is not of this world, who possesses ultimate authority over all things. He is “*the way, the truth and the life*” (Jn. 14:6). Ge’s painting invites the viewer to answer the question - “*What is truth?*”

The second image of Christ (below) is a linocut print made by Bruce Onobrakpeya (1932-) titled “Station One” in *The Fourteen Stations of the Cross* (1969). Onobrakpeya is a Nigerian painter, printmaker and sculptor, whose works are in the National Gallery at Nairobi, the Vatican Museum, the British Museum, the Victoria and Albert Museum, the Tate Museum, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and the Smithsonian. Though Onobrakpeya studied in the U.S., his work is firmly rooted in the context of Nigeria where he taught at St. Gregory’s College, Lagos, Nigeria. Onobrakpeya pioneered Nigerian printmaking using daily patterns and colors from historical and daily contexts in Nigeria.

This print renders the moment Pilate washes his hands of responsibility while a soldier leads Jesus away for crucifixion (Mt. 27:24; Luke 22:26). Onobrakpeya has depicted Jesus and Pilate as ethnic Africans wearing Nigerian garments, while showing the soldier dressed in contemporary uniform. In this way, Christ is presented as the one who suffers along with all who suffer unjustly in this world. Onobrakpeya’s work is an example of decolonizing and



liberating art, which had been taught under colonial rule, by allowing artistic expression through African ethnicity and indigenous patterns and motifs.

Onobrakpeya’s paintings and prints work to liberate Jesus from one dominant ethnic and cultural perspective, opening the view to Jesus as the liberator and Savior of the world – the truth for all humankind.

Matthew records that Pilate “*washed his hands before the crowd, saying, ‘I am innocent of this man’s blood; see to it yourselves’*” (Mt. 27:24). Evoking the words of Isaiah 53:8, “*By a perversion of justice he was taken away,*” this print describes the moral failure of both religious and political leaders that led to the trial and execution of an innocent man.

Both Ge and Onobrakpeya used their different contexts in dialogue with the gospel narrative of Jesus’ suffering for all people. Because Ge chose to depict Jesus with a realism that did not glorify him, we are allowed to see the truth about our humanity that is always under the judgment of the world, while Onobrakpeya allows us to see the humanity of Jesus suffering unjustly before the powers of this world.

Jesus describes the truth of himself and of our humanity, “*In the world you will have trials, but be of good courage, I have overcome the world*” (John 16:33). The truth of Christ Jesus is his continuing liberation, of all who follow him, from sin and the limitations of this world. Christ allows us see the truth of life together in him and community with others. What is truth? Jesus is the truth of human history who frees us to follow him and serve our neighbor. Amen.