

THE GREAT DECEIVERS

Jesus is standing before Pontius Pilate, on trial for his life.

Pilate asks him, *“Is this right what they say of you? Are you a King?”*

“My kingdom is not of this world,” says Jesus. *“I came to witness to the truth.”*

“Truth?” says Pilate. *“What is truth?”*

Pilate lived in a world where nobody knew what truth was anymore.

As a Roman soldier he had seen many countries conquered by Rome, each nation with their own religions and their own gods. All insisted that their way was the true way, their god the true god. All had trusted in these gods to save them from the Romans and all had been disappointed. Their only hope was that their gods might take revenge at some future date but I do not think Pilate lost much sleep over that.

As a politician, he lived in a world full of suspicion and violence. You could trust no-one. The conquered countries were riddled with terrorist groups who were just waiting for a chance to attack. Corruption was rife in high places. Politicians could be bought if the price was high enough. Julius Caesar himself was assassinated-stabbed in the back- by the man he had thought of as brother and friend.

In Pilate’s world, truth had become no more than the word of the highest bidder. He who could afford to spend the most on propaganda and bribes would gain the highest credibility. And he who had the greatest political power would be credited with the most effective religion.

It was not long before the ancient gods of Rome were replaced with the Emperor himself. He had the money. He had the power. Therefore he might as well be god and everything he said be taken as infallible.

“What is truth?” yells Pilate at Jesus.

“I have the power to crucify you. That is the only truth I know and the only truth you should be concerned with.”

But the Roman Emperors, despite all their power, were not gods. They were human. They could make mistakes, they could be deceived. Their power might be based on very shaky foundations because the people they trusted, the stories they believed, the resources they relied upon could and did let them down.

And these Emperors themselves could tell lies, they could falsify evidence. They could make promises to their people which they would fail to keep. So the people who worshiped them as gods would, sooner or later, be let down.

What is truth? asks Pilate. Somewhere along the line his world has lost the plot.

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Do you remember when “The Da Vinci Code” was published? It caused a lot of outrage because it claimed to expose this great conspiracy within the Christian church to conceal the real truth about Jesus. I decided at the time that I should read it and find out what all the fuss was about but I must confess that before I had got halfway through it I thought that this was one of the silliest books I had ever read and that, if I were the Pope, I would not waste my breath denouncing it. I would either consign it to the humour department of the papal library or use it to line the papal cats’ litter trays. It was nothing more than yet another make-a-fast-buck-by-writing-about-sex-and-intrigue novel only this one had a religious slant. I could not believe than anybody would actually take it seriously.

Religion has never coped well with uncertainty, with admitting to only a partial knowledge. It has often felt obliged to present men and women with an unquestionable history, an unshakeable doctrine and an infallible code for goodness and satisfaction.

“Do this; believe this and you will look upon the face of God himself.”

“Do this; believe this and you will never be unhappy again.”

“Do this; believe this and you will reach personal perfection.”

Thousands of people have taken this on board. They have confidently expected to reach a state of “nirvana.” They have squeezed their lives dry and crushed their personalities into non-existence in the hopes of meeting the necessary requirements. They have poured out time, talents and money in the quest. They have divided and sub-divided the religious community again and again in their desperation to create the perfect cult. Yet the majority have been disappointed.

They have not become perfect, they have not acquired a pain-free life and they have encountered questions to which they have found no answers. Then, either they have come to despise themselves or come to despise God. Like Morse, Jesus was angry, very angry with people who made false promises to others on behalf of God.

There is no sin in knowledge which is only partial. There is no sin in ignorance. We are human, not gods.

Sin lies in arrogance- in proclaiming that we do know the truth, the whole truth, the absolute truth. Sin lies in megalomania- in pronouncing our partial knowledge to be the absolute truth and using it to gain power over others. Sin lies in setting ourselves up as god and insisting that there can be no truth other than that which we know.

What is truth? asked Pilate.

Is it the truth of the Emperor who says “because I am powerful I must be infallible?”

Is it the truth of the politicians who compete to pay the highest prices for their party propaganda?

Is it the truth of the religious fanatics of various persuasions who keep their sacred books in locked boxes along with their minds and their lives?

Or is it something to do with this man who is standing in front of him, saying nothing, because his truth cannot be explained in words alone?

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Jesus was never very good at giving straight answers.

Jesus was never very good at keeping to the rules.

For Jesus there was only one truth and that was God: God, the father of all, the power above all power, the wisdom above all wisdom. And no-one came to know the truth about God through words and rules. You came to know the truth about God through love- God’s love for you and your love for God. And this was something which grew and developed through life and through eternity. It grew with you, it developed with you, it became stronger in your times of weakness.

This relationship with God was based on faith and trust, not on certainty. It was nourished by humility and not by self-reliance. Understand this reality of God and you stood a chance of growing in knowledge without slipping into arrogance; of growing in goodness without side-tracking into self-righteousness; of growing in strength without giving way to megalomania; of enduring doubt and pain without giving up on God. This was the truth that Jesus taught, truth which could not be learned like a school lesson or imposed as a discipline. It was truth which must be experienced.

But how could he explain this to the man in front of him for whom truth had become the word of the highest bidder?

How could he explain it to the religious leaders for whom truth had become a means of gaining power?

How could he explain it to the people for whom truth meant triumph and who would look on his crucifixion as proof that he had lied to them or had been deluded himself? Jesus said nothing more. He went to his death. No-one knew exactly what happened after that. Conspiracy theories about the resurrection have abounded over the centuries and you can find the first of these at the end of Matthew's Gospel. No-one has been able to prove scientifically or historically what happened to the body of Jesus. But millions of people have encountered him as a living reality and have learned what truth is through knowing him and walking with him through life.

We heard the story of just one of these: Saul of Tarsus was a man who liked his truth neatly wrapped and not to be questioned. So certain was he that what he knew was absolute that he was prepared to kill any who questioned him. Truth, for him, meant power. But something happened which threw him-physically and spiritually. He encountered the risen Jesus Christ and, as a result of this encounter, set aside everything he had formerly known and started again from the beginning.

What is truth?

I know only Christ and him crucified.

The arrogance had gone. The lust for power had gone. The false promises had gone.

The self-deception had gone. *I know only Christ and him crucified.*

St Paul-as Saul became- tries to prove nothing. He simply tells his ongoing story and invites others to discover the truth for themselves. And others did discover it, including the Roman Emperor Constantine himself. And people are still discovering today that Jesus Christ is the way, the truth and the life.

Do not trust anyone who claims to have all the answers.

Trust only the one who holds out his hand and invites you to walk with him.

Amen.