

What is truth?

John 18:28-40 (NIV)

²⁸ Then the Jews led Jesus from Caiaphas to the palace of the Roman governor. By now it was early morning, and to avoid ceremonial uncleanness the Jews did not enter the palace; they wanted to be able to eat the Passover. ²⁹ So Pilate came out to them and asked, "What charges are you bringing against this man?"

³⁰ "If he were not a criminal," they replied, "we would not have handed him over to you."

³¹ Pilate said, "Take him yourselves and judge him by your own law." "But we have no right to execute anyone," the Jews objected.

³² This happened so that the words Jesus had spoken indicating the kind of death he was going to die would be fulfilled. ³³ Pilate then went back inside the palace, summoned Jesus and asked him, "Are you the king of the Jews?"

³⁴ "Is that your own idea," Jesus asked, "or did others talk to you about me?"

³⁵ "Am I a Jew?" Pilate replied. "It was your people and your chief priests who handed you over to me. What is it you have done?"

³⁶ Jesus said, "My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jews. But now my kingdom is from another place."

³⁷ "You are a king, then!" said Pilate. Jesus answered, "You are right in saying I am a king. In fact, for this reason I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me."

³⁸ "What is truth?" Pilate asked. With this he went out again to the Jews and said, "I find no basis for a charge against him. ³⁹ But it is your custom for me to release to you one prisoner at the time of the Passover. Do you want me to release 'the king of the Jews'?"

⁴⁰ They shouted back, "No, not him! Give us Barabbas!" Now Barabbas had taken part in a rebellion.

Pilate asks Jesus, what is truth? And on the surface that seems to be a pretty good question. What is truth? Since I was a little kid I have had an insatiable desire to know the truth about things. I would drive my parent's nuts pulling things apart, toys, clock radios, PowerPoints – they drew the line at the cat – and when I worked out how they worked I would lose interest and leave dismembered pieces of electronics all over the house. You see I just wanted to know the truth about things, so much so that I would abandon my university degree in Actuary to do three years of philosophy, the study of what is truth, I desperately wanted to work out what is true. At the end of all that study I discovered that most philosophers are weirdos and extremists who argue that just because you can't know everything with certainty you really can't know anything and that's just bonkers because if you are willing to work hard enough to examine the evidence there is a lot you can be reasonably sure about.

Now we might look at the world around us and despair at the state of truth in our society, what with; fake news, alternative facts, our total disbelief in what politicians say and our view that the only group we trust less than politicians are journalists. But historically speaking truth has always been tricky for us human beings because of our biases. Most human beings decide what is true long before we start to examine the evidence.

Here are ten things that I believed to be true because I never looked at the evidence I just assumed they were true because that's what we human beings do.

1. I have believed that it's harmful to pick up baby birds and return them to their nests, because it will cause their mothers to reject them – NOT TRUE!
2. I have believed that the blood in my veins is blue – NOT TRUE!
3. I have believed that there are different areas of the tongue dedicated to different tastes – NOT TRUE!
4. I have believed that Chameleons change colour to blend in with their surroundings – NOT TRUE!
5. I have believed penguins mate for life – NOT TRUE!
6. I believed Napoleon Bonaparte was short – NOT TRUE!
7. I have believed that the earth revolves around the sun – NOT TRUE!
8. I believed swimming after eating will give you cramps – NOT TRUE!
9. I believed there was widespread panic after Orson Welles' 1938 radio broadcast of *The War of the Worlds* – NOT TRUE!
10. There was a time when I believed that Adam and Eve were tempted by an apple – NOT TRUE!

It is part of the human condition to both believe things without evidence and disbelieve things without evidence because of our biases, which is a great pity because there is nothing which builds our character like the search for truth, it builds wisdom into our life, it builds discipline and it builds understanding, as Solomon the wise said in proverbs 23:23

Buy the truth and do not sell it; get wisdom, discipline and understanding.
(Proverbs 23:23)

So what I want to do with our remaining time this morning is to challenge us all to be truth seekers, because that's what God wants. As Jesus said *...true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks* (John 4:23). Jesus challenged each of his disciples and he challenges us all, to be personally responsible for searching out the truth, to be personally responsible to ask, and to seek, and to knock.

⁷ "Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. ⁸ For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened. (Matthew 7:7-8)

To get a feel for what's at stake concerning truth seeking, I want get close and personal with two prominent figures in the Easter story who killed their search for truth because of two common human faults that are the cause of terrible evil and suffering in this world. But before we get into that let's spend a little time with the central character of Easter, Jesus.

Jesus: Most serious historians believe that you truly existed, because there is a long list of hostile pagan and Jewish writers who didn't like you, who thought you were rubbish, but were very clear that you were a real person born in Judea and crucified in Jerusalem.

(See <http://coldcasechristianity.com/2014/is-there-any-evidence-for-jesus-outside-the-bible/>)

Most of these ancient texts mention that you were known for doing miracles and healings even though they didn't believe they were real. At the very least your words preserved in the four gospels, show to us that you were the great moral philosopher. Your teachings about conflict, greed, self-righteousness and love remain breathtaking in their depth and wisdom. None of that is really in doubt, what is disputed is the claim you made to be the son of God, Emmanuel, God with us (see John 10:30-33, Mark 14:61-65) and it's because of this claim that you ended up in the sights of two very powerful men.

The High Priest Caiaphas: Without a true Jewish King you are arguably the most powerful Jewish man in Israel, You were appointed to the position of High Priest in AD 18 by the Roman prefect, Valerius Gratus, but you were always under the thumb of the previous High Priest Annas, who just happens to be your father-in-law. We know this because when Jesus was arrested, the temple soldiers took Jesus to Annas, before they took him to you, because he was the real power behind the Priesthood (John 18:12-14).

The role of high Priest has always been religious, you stood between God and the sin of the people, you made the big sin offerings in the Jerusalem temple, but in these days without a true Jewish King, you have also become a judge and administrator over the people.

Now, unlike the Pharisees in the North who had a series of run-ins with Jesus, you weren't particularly concerned about Jesus until very recently. That's when a number of reliable witnesses came forward to claim that Jesus had raised a man from the dead (John 11:45-47). That got your attention, a man claiming to be God's son, had people believing that he had the power to raise the dead. That sounded like trouble. While you didn't believe it for an instant, how could you, you're the high priest, your God's man, if God was going to visit Israel wouldn't you be the first to know? But it did terrify you, because you couldn't think of a worse way to disrespect

God than to falsely claim things in God's name and your Jewish history tells you that God virtually destroyed Israel because of that kind of sin. This Jesus was going to get you all killed (John 11:48). So it became very simple, Jesus had to die for the sake of Israel. That's what you demanded of the Sanhedrin (John 11:50-51). The only thing that stopped you grabbing Jesus and stoning him to death was his popularity (John 12:19) and it wasn't until the night of Jesus arrest that you came up with a brilliant plan, to avoid upsetting the people, get the Romans to execute Jesus on a trumped up charge of treason, lay the blame on the Romans (Matthew 23:3-5).

What is truth for you? You believe with all your heart, that Jesus is evil, a danger to Israel and that you are doing a good and holy thing in having him killed. But you're just like thousands of despots and tyrants throughout history, you are so certain that you are right, you are certain that you are doing this for a great and noble reason. But it is your certainty that kills your search for the truth, kills it stone dead. To be a seeker after truth you need un-certainty, you need humility because it is your certainty will lead you to do some very evil things this night.

Pontius Pilate: On the night Jesus was brought to your palace (John 18:28), with a written list of crimes from the Sanhedrin, you had zero interest in Jesus, he wasn't on your radar, he hadn't been mentioned in any intelligence reports on anti-roman activity. You were mostly annoyed that Ananias and his cronies seemed to be up to something and most of what went on that night was you trying to show them who was boss. That's why you asked the Jews to explain the charges to you even though you knew what they were, and you got some satisfaction watching them melt-down because they knew you were playing with them (John 18:29-30). Mostly you just wanted them to take their petty little problems and leave you alone, but they were like bull dogs and as soon as they used the "T" word in public, treason, you had to do something, because after all, you were the Roman governor.

In desperation you tried to figure out who this Jesus character was, so you had him brought to you and you tried to startle him with a blunt question: "*Are you the king of the Jews*"? But Jesus knew that this was pure Caiaphas, *is that your own idea, or did others talk to you about me?* Said Jesus. Then you admitted to Jesus you didn't have the foggiest idea about what was really going on, "*am I a Jew?*" you asked him, then you desperately asked Jesus to explain it all to you, "*what is it you have done?*" It's at this point that you entered the twilight zone that is Jesus. He talked about his kingdom being not of this world, yet he was a king. He talked about the truth like it was something you could possess and your response was that famous but mocking question you asked, what is truth?

The problem was that at the beginning you didn't know what the truth was at all, which made making a decision difficult because you didn't know what the implications might be. You needed more time to work this out, so you began to stall. You offered to release Jesus, they turned you down. Then you had Jesus flogged and tortured with a crown of thorns to see if that would satisfy their blood lust but, no dice. You then you turned to the crowd and flat out refused to convict Jesus and its'

at this point that the Jewish delegation made a new accusation; *“he claimed to be the son of God!”* they said. This really threw you for a loop, so you took Jesus back inside and you asked him a whole bunch of questions about who he really was, but Jesus would not speak to you, and that drove you crazy. You put your finger in Jesus face and said, *don't you realise I have power either to free you or to crucify you.* You could never ever forget what Jesus said;

"You would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above. Therefore the one who handed me over to you is guilty of a greater sin." (John 19:11)

That was like a red hot poker into your heart. You the Roman governor, the most powerful man in that part of the world, you were being told by a bleeding prisoner totally at your mercy, that you didn't really have any power in this situation and in your heart of hearts you felt that it was true. Because nothing that you did was working. You kept arguing, on and on about releasing Jesus, but in the end the Jews wore you down and you, gave up and washed your hands of Jesus. (John 18:28 – 19:16, Matthew 27:24). You see Caiaphas killed his search for truth because of his certainty, you killed your search for truth through your lack of moral courage. How many people over the years have been dragged from their homes by soldiers, with friends and neighbours peering through the windows knowing that this is wrong but not having the moral courage to say, this is wrong! Whole people groups have been killed while their neighbours silently washed their hands of it all. Of this the German pastor Martin Niemöller is famous for saying:

*First they came for the Socialists, and I did not speak out—
Because I was not a Socialist.*

*Then they came for the Trade Unionists, and I did not speak out—
Because I was not a Trade Unionist.*

*Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out—
Because I was not a Jew.*

*Then they came for me—and there was no one left to speak for me.
(Martin Niemöller)*

You killed your search for truth through your lack of moral courage.

Jesus: The only person who did not kill the search for truth that night, was you Jesus, you were both amazingly humble and full of courage, you were all about the truth.

Ananias and Pilate: truth killers both, one by certainty and the other by cowardice, could you have acted in any other way? What do you think?

Ananias: I know that you are totally certain that Jesus could not have been Gods son, so it must been very disturbing for you to discover that after people claimed that Jesus had risen from the dead, that there was a large group of your priests who joined the believers of Jesus (Acts 6:7). What were they thinking? How did they come to believe this?

Pilate: One of the ironies of that whole night was that the only person who seemed to know the truth about Jesus was one of your soldiers, he said: "Surely he was the Son of God!" (Matthew 27:54)

Pontius Pilate: You are the one who famously said; what is truth? But you were mocking Jesus when you said that (John 18:37-38), because Jesus had claimed to be about the truth and you don't believe in any of that eastern philosophical mumbo-jumbo, you believe in power, your power, Roman power. So what kind of man are you? Neither of the two main Jewish historians of the time, Josephus and Philo, liked you very much. They described you as a harsh ego maniac, but to be fair they were Jewish and they were biased. However, you did have a habit of upsetting people. Your predecessor, Valerius Gratus, took off the Roman insignias whenever he entered Jerusalem because Jews found metal images offensive. You on the other hand made sure all those Roman images were up front and centre whenever you made the trip into Jerusalem, it made quite the kerfuffle and you didn't care. Eventually you were recalled to Rome because you suppressed an uprising in Samaria by killing quite a lot of the people.

Irony – that the two men who gave up on the truth about Jesus would be two figures who became historical anchors for the truth of the story of Jesus through archaeological discoveries.

The Bones of Caiaphas

There was an exciting archaeological discovery in November 1990. Workers constructing a water park south of the Old City of Jerusalem accidentally uncovered a burial cave. In the cave were a dozen limestone chests that contained bones. These types of chests, known as ossuaries, were primarily used in the first century A.D. One of the chests had the word "Joseph, son of Caiaphas" carved on it. The bones were that of a man that had died at approximately the age of sixty. Because of the lavish decoration on the burial chest there is a high probability that these were the bones of Caiaphas the high priest - the one who charged Jesus with blasphemy. This would be the first physical remains ever discovered of a person mentioned in the Bible.

The Pilate stones

The artefact, sometimes known as the Pilate Stone, was discovered in 1961 by an archaeological team led by Antonio Frova.^[12] It was found as a reused block within a staircase located in a semicircular structure behind the stage house of the Roman theatre at Caesarea, the city that served as Rome's administrative centre in the province of Judaea.

...]S TIBERIÉVM

...PON]TIVS PILATVS

...PRAEF]ECTVS IVDA[EAE]

Jewish document that indicates the change to crucify Jesus instead of stoning him

The Babylonian Talmud is a commentary on Jewish laws composed between A.D. 500-600 (Neusner/Green, 69) Therein is a text about Jesus' death. The Tractate Sanhedrin (43a) contains this passage:

Jesus was hanged on Passover Eve. Forty days previously the herald had cried, "He is being led out for stoning, because he has practiced sorcery and led Israel astray and enticed them into apostasy. Whosoever has anything to say in his defence, let him come and declare it." As nothing was brought forward in his defence, he was hanged on Passover Eve.