

What is Truth?

—Pilate’s snide question

Pilate asked the question, “What is truth?” It’s an easy question to ask, especially in the spirit in which Pilate asked it. But what is the answer?

John 18:37-38

¶“37Then Pilate said to Jesus, 'So you are a king, are you?' Jesus answered, 'You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I have come into the world, to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice.' 38Pilate said to him, 'What is truth?' After saying this, he went back out to the Jews and told them, 'I find no guilt in him’” (John 18:37-38).

1 Pilate’s Truth

When Pilate heard Jesus speak of “truth”, he asked, “What is truth?” It wasn't an enquiry. He didn't wait for an answer. He said it to justify himself. He went out to the mob, pronounced Jesus innocent, then had him flogged and handed over for crucifixion.

Pilate apparently went along with the idea that truth is relative. For him it was “truth” that Jesus was innocent, but for the Jews it was “truth” that Jesus was guilty. So Pilate in all “fairness” washed his hands and let the Jews follow their truth.

So much for relative truth! A good man was crucified because in a mob’s version of “truth” he was a criminal, and their truth was considered as valid as Pilate’s. Jesus is not the first victim of relative truth, nor the last.

A Dangerous Notion

This notion that there is no universal truth is very dangerous. If all truth changes from person to person and from situation to situation, there is no firm ground, no reference point. There's a valid contradiction for everything.

Pilate found no fault in Jesus, but the mob said “Crucify him!” and Pilate found it expedient to hear that as a valid contradiction to what he believed to be true.

2 Jesus’s Truth

Jesus had already answered the question, “What is truth?” before Pilate asked it— "I have come into the world, to bear witness to the truth; everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice" (John 18:37). When you listen to Jesus, you hear the truth. He is the voice of truth.

But few people give credence to absolute truth like that —truth applicable to “everyone”. “I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life; nobody comes to the Father unless through me” (John 14:6). Most people would treat that as nonsense.

Absolute Truth

If you've got a coat on, and I haven't, I might say, “It's cold”, and you might say, “It's not.” Both statements are true, mine for me and yours for you, because truth is relative and subjective in this case.

But when I say, “There is a God”, you might say, “No there isn't”. These statements are not both true, because they deal with something objective and exterior to what we feel or think. The statement “There is a God” is either true or false absolutely.

Don't quibble about this by asking questions like, “How do you define God?” or “Where is God?” because you are trying to make God subjective, an artifact of each person's own mind. You've changed the proposition from “There is a God” to “I am a god” —which I deny.

In Plato's *Protagoras*, Protagoras (paraphrased) says to Socrates, “What is true for you is true for you, and what is true for me is true for me.” This pagan notion, that truth is always personal and relative to self, is widespread today.

Jesus believed in absolute truth and made it the fundament of life. He prayed to his Father for his disciples: “Make them holy in the truth; your word is truth” (John 17:17).

He also said, “You shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.” (John 8:32).

3 The Mob's Truth

The mob saw Jesus as worthy of crucifixion, and the mob's truth held sway. Of course, it wasn't really truth at all. Yet today the will and beliefs of the majority, or the noisy minority, seem to be regarded as truth.

Issues such as abortion and euthanasia; homosexuality; and war; are decided by “community standards”. This means the view of the majority holds sway, or even of the minority when it has the clout. Other than this voice, no outside or higher authority is recognised.

The “truth” is predominant public opinion. People get so used to it that God is ignored as irrelevant or non-existent.

What God Tells the Mob

The Bible takes a dim view of community standards and mob morality. It views the community in general as “without hope and without God in the world” (Ephesians 3:12).

"They suppress the truth in unrighteousness... they became futile in their thoughts and their foolish hearts were darkened. Professing to be wise, they became fools... who exchanged the truth of God for a lie" (Romans 1:18-32).

"Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he shall direct your paths. Do not be wise in your own eyes; Fear the Lord and depart from evil" (Prov 3:5-7).

(source: Ron Graham)