

## **The Crucifixion of Truth** **John 18:28-19:26**

*Post-modern philosophy is hostile to any claim to absolute Truth. It insists all such claims are potentially oppressive, for it is a short step from the arrogance which says "I have the Truth..." to the tyranny which says "...and therefore I must be obeyed". Biblical Christianity faces a major apologetic hurdle at this point since it must witness to one who was absolute Truth personified. The evangelist has an answer, however, to those who would accuse such a creed of implicit intellectual totalitarianism. This Truth does not carry a club but a cross. Crucified Truth oppresses no-one.*

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John and Bill sat glued to the television screen. "Match of the Day" was on and the two teams which John and Bill supported with almost religious devotion happened to be playing each other — Arsenal and Manchester United. There were only a few minutes of time left, and the score was nil-all. Suddenly the Manchester United star, Dave Beckham, surged up the right wing and played a beautiful cross into the Arsenal goal mouth where Andy Cole volleyed the ball past goalkeeper, Seaman, into the back of the net.

The mounting hum of the Manchester supporters erupted into a roar. John leapt from the couch and began to cavort around the room waving his arms like a native invoking rain. John was, needless to say, the Manchester United fan. As he looked once more at the screen, however, his wild dance froze in mid-air, and the ecstatic grin on his face turned to a blank stare of disbelief. "The linesman has his flag up for offside," observed the BBC commentator dispassionately. "Beckham is protesting but the referee is shaking his head. The goal has been disallowed!"

John groaned with disappointment, and then began to thrust an accusing finger at the screen.

"What's wrong with that referee's eyes?" he demanded. "Anyone could see that pass was OK."

"It looked offside to me," volunteered Bill, looking considerably relieved.

"Well, you would say that, wouldn't you?" retorted John, "you having been practically born and brought up at Arsenal. I'm telling you, we was robbed! That was a goal—fair and square!"

Bill shrugged his shoulders. "The ref didn't think so," he replied with just a trace of smugness in his voice. "And that's what counts, you know."

"Rubbish!" insisted John indignantly, "What counts is the truth! And the truth is that was a goal!"

Well, was it or wasn't it?

You will say, "How can I judge, Roy? I wasn't there, and soccer isn't my game anyway"; which is fair enough. But suppose you had been there. Would you have been in any better position to determine whether John or Bill were right about that pass? No doubt the BBC commentators went on to debate the issue at length with the aid of slow-motion replays from multiple camera angles and expert interpretation of the offside law as currently defined in the rule-book of Association Football. But do even they have any right to say whether it was a goal or not?

John, you remember, insisted that what counted was "the truth". But when it comes to disputed goals in a football match where does the truth lie?

It is an interesting question. And one that has far-reaching implications in our late twentieth-century world. For, to quote the title of a recent book, truth is stranger than it used to be.

We used to think like John, you see, that there was an objective truth out there which was accessible to an impartial and rational mind. It was the essence of the scientific method to determine that truth, and once it was thus established, it could not be questioned by any sensible person, since it was an indisputable "fact". But our confidence in that kind of rationalistic certainty is rapidly evaporating at the end of the twentieth century. The area of scientifically established "facts" is shrinking. We no longer have a public domain of objective truth to which appeal can be made. We have only the TV presenter's analysis, the prejudices of the man-in-the-street, and the referee's decision. Truth is no longer a fact. It is an opinion. At least, that is how a lot of people see things these days.

Take the person I had an argument with recently. She was a highly articulate, intelligent young lady and she had taken exception to a remark I had made in my sermon at the wedding we had both just attended. We had been talking for about five minutes I suppose and we were not getting very far. At length she came out with the sentence I was waiting for. I must have heard it several hundred times in such conversations over the last few years:

"What you're saying may be true for you," she said, "but it isn't true for me."

Such a sentiment comes close to being platitudinous these days. It is the way arguments always end up. You are not allowed to say to the other person "I think you are wrong" any more. That would be intolerant. To be politically correct you have to affirm their right to hold their opinion on the matter, and the legitimacy of its truth claim. It is a bit like John saying to Bill, "Well, the pass may have been offside as far as you are concerned, but it wasn't offside for me. The referee may have the official authority to determine the score that goes in the record book. But even he cannot arbitrate the truth of the matter absolutely either. No one can. The truth is inaccessible— lost in a confusion of equally valid perspectives and mutually contradictory opinions.

This of course is what post-modernity is all about. In many respects the emergence of virtual reality in the computer world is powerfully symbolic of what is going on in our culture generally today. Truth is widely regarded as something self-manufactured and provisional. It no longer seeks to constrain consent with an imperious "this is a fact and you had better believe it!". It offers instead the much more modest invitation, "this seems like a nice idea, why not try it for size?"

Post-modernity is thus relativist and pluralist. And it has brought with it a new kind of scepticism. I saw on the wall of a Cambridge student's room some months ago a large poster bearing the words

"Descartes said the only thing he was certain about was his doubts... ..but how could he be so sure?"

That's post-modernity for you, the erosion of cognitive certainty is now so radical we are no longer even sure of our doubts. We have lost our intuitive feel for truth. And what it has resulted in, of course, is not just atheism, but pandemic gullibility. G.K. Chesterton commented years ago that when people stop believing in the truth, they don't believe in nothing, they believe in anything! And that is exactly what has happened. Post-modernity has rejected Cartesian scepticism and embraced instead the eclectic and pluralistic credulity of New Age. Believe in anything you like! Poltergeists, mystic crystals, magic, reincarnation, transcendental meditation, UFO's, X Files...if it helps you feel more emotionally integrated, if it develops your imagination or puts you in touch with your innate spirituality, then go for it. Post-modernity rejects all authoritarian grand unified theories of Truth, and offers instead the philosophical equivalent of Legoland. Everyone is free to gather together whatever pieces they like and build them into their own Disney-truth construction of reality to play in. And I suppose if life were just a game, like a game of soccer, and if it were only goals and offside decisions that were in dispute, then maybe it wouldn't matter too much.

The trouble is, I was talking to that particular young lady at the wedding about Jesus. She didn't like it, and I don't blame her! Jesus is a profoundly disturbing person, especially if you share the post-modern perspective on truth, as she clearly did.

Do you notice the outrageous claim Jesus makes in our reading from the gospel of John for instance?

"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."

(John 18:37)

Talk about politically incorrect! Jesus insists, you see, that he has something to offer far stronger than mere personal opinions. He offers truth—and by that he clearly means sovereign truth. Truth of such an absolute quality that it gives him the right to be our king; to master us, to control our decisions, our plans, our very lives. It is not a question of each of us constructing our own truth, but of aligning ourselves with the absolute truth of which he, uniquely, is the personification.

Which of us welcomes such an intrusive authority? I can well understand why that young woman objected to the idea. But instead of simply saying "No! I reject Jesus' claims", you notice she wanted, in typical 1990's post-modern fashion, to cast our debate in the form of a legitimate difference of perspective. "It may be right for Jesus to be your Lord," she affirmed generously, "but that doesn't mean he has to be mine."

"But what if his claims to be the Son of God are true?" I protested. And that's when she came out with that dreaded argument-paralysing sentence:

"That maybe true for you, but it isn't true for me!"

As I say, she is far from alone in defending such a point of view. And in some ways I sympathise with it. For it is self-evidently the case that no human being has infallible access to absolute truth. It would be arrogance to suggest we did. But does that admission commit us to a slippery slope from which there is no exit until we slide through the trapdoor marked total scepticism? Does it mean we have no access to any kind of objective truth at all? I mean, maybe I am being naif, but surely that pass by Dave Beckham was either offside, or it wasn't. The goal was either rightly or wrongly disallowed. Isn't that so? Even if Bill and John argue about it, their argument is about reality, not some illusion in their minds. Truth may be stranger than it used to be these days, but it surely going too far to suggest that we don't believe that truth exists anymore. If we did believe that, how would we ever try anybody in a court of law for instance? The administration of justice depends upon being able to make the distinction between true testimony and perjury; it depends upon a jury being convinced "beyond reasonable doubt". If truth is as inaccessible as that young lady at the wedding seemed to be suggesting, even such a qualified certainty must always elude us. And every judicial decision must for that reason be fundamentally unsafe.

I think that is what makes this part of the gospel story so especially interesting. For John is recording for us the story of Jesus on trial. First, before the law of the Jews represented by Caiaphas the high priest. And then before the law of Rome represented by Pontius Pilate. Before each of these courts Jesus protests his innocence and insists he has done nothing but witness to the truth. But the tragic outcome is that, instead of being vindicated, these two courts sentence him to death.

That is the irony John wants us to observe and to reflect upon... the irony of a world which conspires in the crucifixion of the truth.

How does it happen? Why does it happen? I want to suggest to you that John's story is framed to give us two vital insights into that question which are of vital relevance to our elusive quest for truth at the end of the twentieth century:

We crucify truth because of prejudice... the prejudice of minds that are too sure they already have the truth.

We crucify the truth because of cynicism ... the cynicism of minds that no longer believe in the accessibility of the truth.

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## **1. The prejudice of minds too sure they already have the truth**

### **John 18:19-23**

I guess we could have hoped that, of all people, the religious leaders of Judea would have recognised the moral and spiritual pedigree of Jesus. But sadly, all the gospel witnesses agree that it was the Jewish hierarchy, the visible church of the Jewish community, that more than any other body was responsible for Jesus' death. It was they who got him arrested. It was Annas and Caiaphas, the first century equivalent of the archbishops of Canterbury and York, who personally pressed charges against him.

It was, of course, a kangaroo court; they knew, as Jesus did, that such judicial proceedings were irregular. According to Jewish law, you could not try anyone after dark and the evidence of independent witnesses was indispensable to secure conviction. Without such corroborative evidence, even a confession of guilt was not sufficient to condemn a man. That's why Jesus here demands that they bring in the witnesses.

But their response to this proper and even legal demand is to stoop to the bullying interrogation techniques of the Gestapo; they slapped him round the face! By comparison, Jesus is commendably self-restrained and dignified.

"I'm only asking for a fair trial," he insists, "Is that such a crime?"

We know from the other three gospels that much more transpired at this hearing with the high priest than John records here. False witnesses were indeed wheeled in and the entire Jewish council met. Eventually, Jesus was put under solemn oath and is forced to reply to the direct challenge, "Are you the Son of God?". In reply he affirmed, "I am. And you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of the Almighty and coming in the clouds of heaven." Whereupon they convicted him of blasphemy and sentenced him to death. All this additional detail John has left out; no doubt he assumed his readers were already aware of it. Since his was the last gospel to be written, many of his readers would already be familiar with one or more of the synoptic gospels.

Nevertheless it is the same essential picture that he is describing for us. A malicious prosecution without a shred of proper legal process. It is quite clear that this court had made up its mind about Jesus long before his arrest. This judicial hearing was not to determine what justice demanded, it was to execute an outcome they had already decided upon.

I want you to notice especially what they say in 19:7, speaking to Pilate: "We have a law, and according to that law he must die,"

That is ironic of course because the law they are referring to is the law of Moses—the law of the Bible, the law of God! But how inadequate that law now seems, wielded by this prejudiced judiciary. But sadly, that is how it often is when people are convinced that they already hold unchallenged title to the truth. Blinkered religious orthodoxy can find no space to give unbiased consideration to a man like Jesus. He claims to be the Son of God and that is heresy, that is blasphemy, the law says death for such a crime. No tinge of self doubt could be allowed to interfere with their certainty on the point. It is always dangerous when people are too sure they already have the truth, and even more dangerous when they consider themselves its appointed guardians.

The very word "truth" becomes distorted in such hands into a weapon of oppression, just as the law of Moses did in the hands of these high priests. There was a time of course when the Christian religion operated in just such an oppressive fashion in Europe. During the Spanish inquisition brave Galileo was persecuted because he dared to suggest that the earth moved around the sun, when the ecclesiastical referees of medieval Catholicism had already decided such a suggestion was "off-side". Would that those of us who belong to the protestant tradition could claim that we have displayed a more commendable model of open-mindedness. But the reformers were responsible for their share of persecution too. And for precisely the same reason: they also were too sure they had the truth!

Miller's fine play *The Crucible* tells the horrifying tale of the Salem witch trials, another classic case of a community that was too sure it held the truth. It is no coincidence that the play was written in the early 50's, during the McCarthy era. The 20th century has seen its share of witch-hunts too. I wish I could tell you that Bible-believing Christians had learned the lessons of history and were free from repressive knee-jerk paranoia. But sadly, intolerance of one kind or another still prejudices many. That's why the word "fundamentalism" has acquired such nasty connotations.

The only safe way to oppose error, if you suspect that an error is being made, is by refutation, never by repression. Refutation is an exercise of the intellect, whereas repression is an act of power. It is to the shame of the church that it has on occasions during its long history used its power to silence those who challenged its version of the truth. And insofar as our contemporary post-modern culture seeks to unmask that kind of ideological authoritarianism, it has to be applauded.

The irony, of course, is that these days the weapons of intellectual intimidation are not being wielded not by the church anymore, for the authority of the church has long since waned. No, the people who are displaying intolerance these days are post-modernists, like that young lady at the wedding. She was very shrill in her opposition to the things I wished to affirm about Jesus. There is in fact a conspiracy of academic terrorism these days aimed at silencing those who do not subscribe to the subjectivist, pluralist, relativist version of political correctness that now prevails. The truth gets mangled by such prejudice today just as much as it has been mangled in the past by authoritarian ideologies.

This is the first reason the truth always get crucified: when people are too sure they already have it. Could that be our problem? Some of us call ourselves Christians, perhaps, but who in our bigotry and narrow-mindedness actually have more in common with Caiaphas, the high priest, than Jesus of Nazareth. Others of us, perhaps, are militant non-Christians: we know "the Bible is a load of nonsense" and "nothing that preacher can say is ever going to convince us otherwise."

"Bang! Bang! Bang!"

That isn't the sound of nails being hammered I can hear, is it?

## **2. The cynicism of minds who no longer believe they can find the truth**

### **John 18:37-38**

"What is truth?" asked Pilate.

I want to ask what lay behind that cryptic parting enquiry? Is it the question of a man who is contemptuously sceptical, a man like Caiaphas who sees Jesus as a dangerous fanatic? I don't think so. No, this seems to me much more like the wistful question of cynic. A Roman who in his

youth, perhaps, dreamed of finding some truth to live by, but had long since given up that hope and is left with only the agnosticism of a perpetual question mark: "What is truth?"

It is quite clear that Pilate was convinced of Jesus' innocence. He knew that this was no subversive, plotting revolution against the state for Pilate had interrogated dozens of such men and Jesus did not fit into that category. It was obvious to anyone that this man had never wielded a sword in his life! And as he himself observed, his followers didn't constitute much of an army either. In any case, if he had been an anti-Roman subversive there's no way the Jewish council would have surrendered him to Roman justice. They would have made a hero of the man!

No, Jesus' crime had to be something to do with religion, not politics. Pilate knew enough about these Jews to work that out.

And having established that, one might have hoped that Pilate would have insisted upon Jesus' release from custody. He certainly pronounces him "not guilty!", and not just once but three times! That being so, why do we read:

Finally Pilate handed him over to them to be crucified.(19:16)

The answer, it seems to me, is tied up with that cynical question: "What is truth?" As we said at the beginning, once the courts stop believing in the accessibility of truth, the very idea of justice loses its meaning. A world without truth cannot distinguish between right and wrong. It's a world where political pragmatism triumphs over moral principles.

There is a little piece of mischievous graffiti going around in Cambridge at the moment which goes like this:

"George Washington couldn't tell a lie. Richard Nixon couldn't tell the truth. Bill Clinton can't tell the difference."

That is post-modernity all over. It cannot recognise the difference between truth and lies anymore. Indeed it is precisely at this point that post-modernity exposes its essentially irrationality and incoherence. Few generations have been more self-righteous than ours. We are always contending for justice, whether in Northern Ireland, or the former Yugoslavia, or the Middle East, or Tibet. We hail the protestors of Tiananmen Square and elevate them to the status of martyred saints! But if there is no truth then those brave students died for nothing. In a world without truth there are no causes worth dying for any longer. There is only the law of the jungle: survival of the fittest... "do others before they do you".

Of course Pilate handed Jesus over to be crucified. Pilate was a classic post-modern political pragmatist. Truth, insofar as the word meant anything for Pilate, was determined by sociological consensus. The people had voted; that's all that mattered. There's no truth beyond that. The art of politics is to align yourself with the opinion of the majority. If that means there must be abortion on demand, then let's have it! If that means all paedophiles must be castrated, then let's do it! If that means Jesus Christ must be crucified, then let's crucify him!

Do you notice how Pilate seems to hop backwards and forwards between the Jews and Jesus during the course of this trial. It is almost comic. He is playing the role of a negotiator who is seeking a political compromise, you see, rather than a judge who seeks to administer justice. First he passes the buck to the Jews and tells them to try Jesus. But they refuse. Then he offers an amnesty, but the Jews prefer Barabbas. Finally he has Jesus flogged and presents his humiliated and bloody figure before the Jews in a final attempt to assuage their antagonism. But still they are not satisfied. "Crucify him!" they screamed. And to his shame, Pilate did. His political career was at stake and for its sake he was willing to crucify the truth.

Are we? I know we are not politicians. I hope we have never condemned an innocent man to death. But that cynicism that informed Pilate is not rare among us, is it?

A couple of years ago I received a letter from a Cambridge student who once attended my church and was a keen member of the Intervarsity Christian Union. He wrote to tell me why he felt unable to call himself an evangelical Christian any longer. The reason he said was that he found evangelical Christianity "too self-assured", "too reluctant to accommodate other people's ideas", "too narrow minded", "too dogmatic", in short he had found it too unfashionably certain in this uncertain world. In my reply I sympathised with his disillusionment. I told him that I too was disturbed by the attitude that too often prevailed in the excessively defensive and rigidly doctrinaire evangelical churches which I knew he patronised since he left Cambridge. I told him frankly how I sometimes found myself embarrassed and frustrated by the bigotry and obscurantism of some of my ministerial colleagues who use the phrase "the Bible says" like a weapon in a highly irresponsible fashion to support a completely unwarranted authoritarianism in matters that really ought to be left to the conscience of the individual believer. I told him that in my experience there were far more claims to infallibility in evangelical churches than had ever been issued from the Vatican. I succeeded in my letter in disarming some of his hostility. Just a few months ago, he wrote back to me again and told me the real reason he had given up on evangelicalism. "I'm gay," he said. "I want to live a gay lifestyle. I've given up on Jesus and I'm reading Michel Foucault instead."

That could not be the real reason we embrace the cynicism of Pilate, could it? Not that we are all gay, of course, but that we have a moral agenda underneath our philosophical presuppositions. Is post-modernity's rejection of objective truth motivated by a desire for moral autonomy?

One of the uncomfortable things the Bible says is that Jesus was crucified because of the sinfulness of the human race. Of course, sin is not a category that a truth-denying world can make any sense of. Sin speaks of a righteous God who holds each and every individual to account for the use they make of the moral freedom with which He has endowed them. Sin is about moral responsibility and in a world without truth, there is nothing and no one to be responsible to. But the Bible does insist that it was this factor of moral responsibility which more than any other lay at the root of what happened to Jesus. "We crucified the truth that day," says the Bible, "not because we did not believe in truth, nor because we did not believe deep down that the truth was in Jesus. We crucified the truth that day because in our rebellion and self-will we resented the threat which that truth placed upon our freedom of choice... he was crucified because of our sin."

But still that crucified truth offers himself to us.

### **A parable:**

*The traveller stood by the signpost, weary and perplexed. Around him, radiating out in all directions, were innumerable paths. But mist cloaked the hillside—thick and impenetrable—and the signposts was so weather-beaten, it had become quite illegible. "Which way should I go?" the traveller asked himself. "I want to find the way to the Fountain of Truth, but there are so many alternative tracks...which is the right one?" As he pondered the problem, three other travellers came up behind him journeying the same road by which he had arrived. "Excuse me," he said to the first, "can you tell me the way to the Fountain of Truth?" "Huh!" grunted the other scornfully. "You don't still believe in that rubbish, do you? These roads all lead nowhere. All that talk about the Fountain of Truth is so much mythological claptrap. If you take my advice, you'll pitch your tent right here by the signpost and make the best of what you've got." The traveller's face fell at the sceptic's words, but brightened a little at the sight of the second man coming up the road behind him. "Excuse me," he said, "can you tell me the way to the Fountain of Truth?" This man shrugged his shoulders. "Ah, who can say?" he said. "Myself, I am an agnostic on the question. Maybe it's this road, maybe it's that one...you can't possibly prove which is right and which is wrong, you know. The important thing is to be tolerant and open-minded. Feel free to choose whichever path you want, old man. I wouldn't dream of trying to influence your decision on the matter." The*

*traveller thanked the agnostic for his advice, although privately he had hoped for more precise guidance. Perhaps the third man would be more helpful. "Excuse me," he asked again, "can you tell me the way to the Fountain of Truth?" This time his fellow traveller smiled benignly in reply. "It is an unnecessary question, my friend," he said. "All roads lead there! They only appear to go in different directions, you see. Out there in the mist they circle around and converge at your desired destination. Follow whichever you wish and you will get there in the end."*

*The traveller frowned, unconvinced. His battered old map indicated the presence of cliffs in the area, down which an erring walker might easily fall if he took the wrong path. But which is the right one? He sighed with frustration and bewilderment. Then suddenly out of the mist, a fourth figure appeared. Unlike the others, he did not come up the road which the traveller had used to arrive at the signpost. Instead, he came down one of the other tracks, and a steep and little trodden one at that. "Excuse me," said the traveller once more, "could you possibly help me? I am looking for the Fountain of Truth. One person has told me there is no such place. Another has told me to be open-minded on the question and a third has told me all roads lead there. Can you tell me the right way?" "Indeed I can," replied the stranger. "I'm afraid those you've spoken to were just guessing. They've never been to the Fountain of Truth, you see, and can only speculate about the route. I, on the other hand, I live there. I am the truth. Come follow me." And as he held out his hand to lead him, the traveller saw there was a nail-print on his palm. Did he take that proffered hand? Or did he stay by the signpost? Could it be, when we come to the crunch, that we actually prefer our state of indecision? Could it be we are actually scared of the commitment involved in choosing that route? Could it be we fear that this Jesus, by his imperious truth-claim, is going to bind our lives in a straightjacket and rob us of our freedom? Fools that we are! Don't we realise that Jesus represents crucified truth? And crucified truth coerces nobody. Crucified truth bullies nobody. Crucified truth tortures nobody. Crucified truth addresses itself to men and women in their freedom, men and women who are aware that they do not know the truth. But men and women who are not so cynical that they will not believe the truth when he holds out his scarred hand to them.*