
"What is Truth?" Asked Pilate

**An article from the *Cathedral Times*
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(an edited version of Sam Candler's Sermon at Emory University, April 1, 2014)

This week saw, among other things, our observance of April Fools' Day! Our foolish, fumbling, humanity likes to observe days and dates. So does our religion. Indeed, most of the great religious traditions of the world have been responsible for creating what we now know as holidays, "holy days," "feast days." Even April Fool's Day, some say, is a result of religious people trying to keep time. But April 1, in our Anglican tradition also marks the observance of Frederick Denison (F.D.) Maurice.

In his great work, *The Kingdom of Christ* (1838), F. D. Maurice sees the kingdom not as some distant goal, which we attain in the heaven of the afterlife. He sees the kingdom as a present reality, exemplified in the community of the Church, and in the just social systems that the Church represents. This is "Christian socialism," not Marxism, mind you. This Christian socialism was not a system of dogma, but a social reality of faith.

Like most of us, to some degree, Maurice knew adversity. His road to ordination was bumpy, and he faced detractors and accusers throughout his life, accusers rather like Pontius Pilate: "Tell me about your kingdom," Pilate asked Jesus. "What is your story? Are you a king or not?" Pilate seems to vacillate between impatience, irritation, and an actual interest in who Jesus is.

"What is truth?" Pilate finally asked Jesus. And that question has stayed with us ever since.

If F. D. Maurice had been on trial before Pilate, he would have answered this way: "Truth is community." Christian truth is not simply a system of dogma that is inculcated into us, a system that seems far removed from human reality. Rather, pure and simple, truth is community. It is relationship, faithful and honest relationship.

The question asked of F.D. Maurice, and Pontius Pilate's question to Jesus, "What is truth?" is not a bad question. It is not an heretical question, and it is not a question to be avoided.

"What is truth?" What is God's truth in the midst of human suffering and pain, hardship and injustice, even death? What is truth? What an outrageous, ambitious, and even obnoxious question! Who can suppose to provide an answer? But we ought not to give up on this hugely grand, and even maybe arrogant question!

"What is truth?" Truth is a lonely brother, returning home after twenty years to reengage his betrayed twin. Jacob had to return to Esau, to go back to his community, even though he was afraid of the legitimate anger Esau might have towards him. So tense and anxious was Jacob, so fearful of this return to Esau, that he was up all night wrestling with something, or someone, or maybe God.

The next day, it is Esau, the offended brother, who rushes out to meet Jacob first, much like the prodigal father. Jacob is so overwhelmed with grace that he looks at Esau and says, "Surely, surely, to see your face is like seeing the face of God."

That moment of grace, of deep and mysterious and passionate grace, is truth. It is not easy and oftentimes not comfortable. That moment when Jacob sees the face of God is the moment, the eternal moment, of graceful community.

Friends, the truth that the world seeks, is found in communities of struggle and grace, in communities of ordinary people trying to be faithful and just with one another. The truth is found in communities of faith, of honest and genuine relationships, where people share both sin and forgiveness, both hardship and joy, both holy tears and holy laughter.

"What is truth?" This truth is wisdom, holy wisdom, God's wisdom, which might seem like foolishness in the eyes of fumbling humanity. But, for us, it is the power of God.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Sam Candler". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

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