
"What is Truth?" Asked Pilate

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Observing the Feast of F. D. Maurice

*"What is truth?" asked Pilate.
-John 18.38*

April the First! April Fools' Day!

Our foolish, fumbling, humanity likes to observe days and dates. So does our religion, whatever our religion may be. Indeed, one of the ways that religion orders our lives is by ordering our time. Most of the great religious traditions of the world have been responsible for creating what we now know as holidays, "holy days," "feast days."

New Year's Day, for instance, the beginning of an official new year, is a critical one of those official holidays. For most of western civilization, New Year's Day has been observed around the date of the Spring Equinox, around March 21. Christians also observed it around March 25, the date of the Annunciation to the Virgin Mary. But since they didn't have a lot of calendars and watches back in the Middle Ages, the common people had to rely on the religious community to announce that March 21, or March 25, had occurred and, thus, that a new year had occurred. Then, certainly by April 1, people should be observing the New Year.

But in 1582, Pope Gregory 12th instituted a new calendar which decreed that the New Year would begin January 1, not anywhere near March 21, March 25, or April 1. If someone hadn't gotten the message, and was still observing the old year on April 1, that person became known as an April Fool. That's how we get today's tradition. (Of course, this account is contested!)

Even April Fool's Day is a result of religious people trying to keep time; and it wouldn't be April Fools Day without some kind of joke. I was heartened to read recently that archaeologists have unearthed what might be the world's oldest joke book. Well, it's really a clay tablet, from Mesopotamia, with jokes about the same things we joke about today: bodily functions and family. I can't tell any of them in this holy place.

We need a religious joke in this holy place. So here it is: *A Buddhist monk walks up to a hot dog stand and says, "Make me one with everything."*

But here's a better one: *"What do you get when you cross a joke with a rhetorical question?"*

Okay, enough foolishness. I greet you today from the Episcopal Church, from the worldwide Anglican Communion of

Churches, where we too keep a calendar of religious remembrances.

Thus, from our calendar, I bring you the observance of Frederick Denison Maurice today, “F.D. Maurice” as he is known. I give a brief nod to F.D. Maurice today, even as I more strongly salute you—the community of faith in this special school of theology.

First a nod to Maurice because he can teach some of us about the journey to ordination. In whatever tradition you find yourselves today, all of you who want to be ordained know that this vocational journey is a tangled one. First, our advisers and committees want one thing, and then they want another. Then, the person who really supported our ordination is no longer on the approval committee, and we have to prove ourselves over and over again. This vocational tangle does not even have to involve ordination, does it? Whatever our vocational journey, we face examiners and interrogators, and even professors, who, in our darkest moments, seem like either bumbling fools or uninformed accusers.

“Tell us your story!” they insist, over and over again. Ah, our stories. Wow. How many times will we have to review our spiritual journeys and also explain that curious foolishness in the years in between?

Well, let me tell you a realistic truth: this tangled ordination journey is representative, even when, especially when, it is discombobulated, and inconsistent, and full of fumbler who don’t even know us but who are yet judging us. Every tradition does the ordination and theological training journey and differently, and every tradition changes the way they do it constantly; they promise it will be a better journey this time. But it never is.

It’s the same one. This inconsistency and constant uninformed evaluation is itself the preview of what is to come. As inconsistent and uncaring as it is, it is an accurate way of preparing for vocational life in the Church. Ordination, in any Christian tradition, is an entrance into a life of inconsistency, foolish discombobulation, uninformed judging, wildly erratic communities, and so on. Welcome. You are already in it!

[Welcome to the joke! Hey! A priest, a rabbi, and an imam, walked into a bar. The bartender looked up and said, Hey! What is this? Some kind of joke?]

F.D. Maurice was subject to the same ill-informed judgments. He was almost not ordained as an Anglican priest—first because he was raised Unitarian and could not claim doctrinal belief in the Trinity—but also because the Christian tradition of his era was cluttered with polemic partisanship and competing sectarian interests—sort of like our Christian and political landscape today, actually.

And it might have been fine for him were he not ordained. He was into other things. He was into social reform and social justice; he was into community. But, unlike some of our secular social reformers of today, his sense of community actually led him more closely to Christian orthodoxy. It was through his social work that he came to realize the truth of the doctrine of the Trinity. That is when he became able to take the oath that enabled him to be ordained an Anglican priest.

In his great work, titled *The Kingdom of Christ*, published in 1838, he 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. He comes to espouse something called “Christian socialism,” not Marxism, mind you, but a brand of socialism that led him closer to Christianity. His Christianity was not a system of dogma, but a social reality of faith.

Maurice faced detractors and accusers throughout his life, accusers like Pontius Pilate who asked Jesus about his kingdom. “Tell me about your kingdom,” asked Pilate. “What is your story,” asked Pilate. “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, if Maurice had faced Pilate in his ordination interview, Maurice would have answered this way.

“Truth is community,” is what he would have said. After all the study, Christian truth is not simply a system of dogma that is inculcated into us, a system that seems far removed from human reality. Instead, pure and simple, truth is community. It is relationship, faithful and honest relationship.

Later on, F. D. Maurice would lose a perfectly good teaching job at King’s College, London, because he published something that did not meet the orthodox standards of the day. Again, it had to do with the kingdom of heaven. “Eternity,” said Maurice, is not that time in heaven that is “world without end, forever and ever, amen.” Eternity does not mean everlasting time.

Instead, like many of us in this room, Maurice had studied Greek with Carl Holladay, and he had learned well. He knew, in Greek, that the word “eternity” does not mean everlasting,” he said. Eternity, in Greek, means “no time,” or “outside of time,” a-ionos. Without time. Eternity means to be in that moment that has no beginning or end. It is the holiness of the moment. F.D. Maurice might also add that those moments occurred in community.

His remarks got him expelled from King’s College, London. So, he helped develop Queen’s College, for women, furthering his work in strengthening the social order of the day.

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?” That is a question that will be asked of you, in the church, over and over again, no matter whether your position is an ordained one or not.

Your study here in a Christian seminary, I hope, gives you some answer to that question, and in a truly unique way. I don’t think any other graduate school education takes on that question in the same way. Business schools sure don’t ask that question. Medical schools don’t. Even graduate programs and physics and science don’t ask the question in the same way. They are interested in how things work: the human body, the universe, the economies of the world. Their truth is how those things work.

In seminary, you are seeking the answer to something else. “What is truth?” What an outrageous, ambitious, and even obnoxious question! It can seem even like an arrogant question! Who can suppose to provide an answer to that?

Well, we do. We who work in and for the church, the people of God, the community of faith. We who try to represent holy grace in the midst of human suffering and pain, hardship and injustice, even death. What is truth, what is God’s truth in those circumstances?

Don’t give up on that hugely grand, and arrogant question! It is revealed here in this community, and in every vital church across the world. Here, in the study of ancient bible texts and stories, in the crazy and twisted chapters of church history, in human psychology and spirituality, even in the pedantic pages of church administration and church order. Our world needs people who can speak truth in it, and to it. This is what seminaries, and churches, are to teach us.

“What is truth?” Truth is a lonely brother, a twin brother who had once tricked his twin out of his birthright, coming home after twenty years to engage that same betrayed brother again. Jacob had to return to Esau. Jacob had to go back to his community. He had to return, even though he was afraid of the legitimate anger Esau might have towards him.

So tense and anxious was Jacob, so fearful was he, of this return to Esau, that he was up all night wrestling, wrestling with something, or someone, or maybe God. After that mighty struggle, Jacob realizes he has seen God, he has wrestled with God, and has lived.

On the next day, it is Esau, the offended brother, who rushes out to meet Jacob first. Esau rushes out just like the prodigal father. Jacob is so surprised and overwhelmed with grace that he looks at Esau and says, “Surely, surely, to see your face is like seeing the face of God.” He knew what God looked like because he had wrestled with God the night before.

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, that is what we are at this seminary to proclaim. 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. Justice is faithful relationship, and the truth is faithful relationship.

I salute you today, you who live and work and study and love in this particular community. You are answering a question that no one much dares to ask so boldly these days. What is truth?

But the answer we discover here, and which we proclaim, is not simply another dogma, or another competing partisan opinion, or another grand mechanical system, or another money-making strategy.

The truth is community. The truth is your community of faith, a community of honest and genuine relationships, where people share both sin and forgiveness, both struggle and joy, both holy tears and holy laughter.

Should such foolishness be allowed in an educational institution, a school of graduate studies at that?

Of course. It is our answer to the question, "What is truth?" It is Christian community. Christian community, the Body of Christ, is wisdom, holy wisdom, God's wisdom, which seems like foolishness in the eyes of fumbling humanity. But, for us, it is the power of God.

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