“What is Truth?” (John 18:28-40)

We are in the series of “The Transforming Power of the Gospel” studying John’s gospel together. We will look at the last part of Chapter 18 today. Chapter 18 describes the process of Jesus finishing the Last Supper with His disciples and going to the cross. The fact that Jesus is going straight to the cross is emphasized by Peter and Pilate. Peter was with Jesus at first. He followed Jesus along with another disciple. But after he made one mistake, he walked away from Jesus immediately. Pilate went back and forth between Jesus and the Jews, between the truth and the world, and in the end, he remained in the world. Today, we are going to look at the scene of Pilate, and the theme is “What is Truth?”

1. What is Truth?

John 18:28-40 NRSV
Then they took Jesus from Caiaphas to Pilate’s headquarters. It was early in the morning. They themselves did not enter the headquarters, so as to avoid ritual defilement and to be able to eat the Passover. 29 So Pilate went out to them and said, “What accusation do you bring against this man?” 30 They answered, “If this man were not a criminal, we would not have handed him over to you.” 31 Pilate said to them, “Take him yourselves and judge him according to your law.” The Jews replied, “We are not permitted to put anyone to death.” 32 (This was to fulfill what Jesus had said when he indicated the kind of death he was to die.) 33 Then Pilate entered the headquarters again, summoned Jesus, and asked him, “Are you the King of the Jews?” 34 Jesus answered, “Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?” 35 Pilate replied, “I am not a Jew, am I? Your own nation and the chief priests have handed you over to me. What have you done?” 36 Jesus answered, “My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here.” 37 Pilate asked him, “So you are a king?” Jesus answered, “You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.” 38 Pilate asked him, “What is truth?” After he had said this, he went out to the Jews again and told them, “I find no case against him. 39 But you have a custom that I release someone for you at the Passover. Do you want me to release for you the King of the Jews?” 40 They shouted in reply, “Not this man, but Barabbas!” Now Barabbas was a bandit.
Q: What did the Jews do after Jesus' trial at the high priest's? (v.28)

“Then they took Jesus from Caiaphas to Pilate's headquarters. It was early in the morning. They themselves did not enter the headquarters, so as to avoid ritual defilement and to be able to eat the Passover.”

The Jews brought Jesus to Annas first (John 18:13). Annas then sent Jesus to Caiaphas (John 18:24). After the trial, the Jews brought Jesus to the governor Pilate (Matthew 27:1-2). They handed Jesus over to Pilate, but they themselves did not go inside the palace. It was because they thought it would make them unclean if they enter the house of a Gentile (Acts 10:28).

During the Passover, the Jews not only offered sacrifices, but also ate a special meal as part of the festival (Deuteronomy 16:1-3; 2 Chronicles 30:21-22). They thought if they went into the house of a Gentile and became unclean, they would not be able to partake of the meal, and if they could not partake of the meal, they would not be able to fulfil the law of the Passover, which was only once a year and very important. They were trying to establish their own righteousness by keeping the law, even while they were carrying out their terrible scheme to put Jesus to death.

The Jews had no regard for the horrible error and sin of denying and killing Jesus, whom Moses wrote about (John 5:46), the Bible testified about (John 5:39), and God the Father Himself testified about (John 5:37), and He was the Lamb of God to take away the sins of the world (John 1:29). They did not even reflect on what they were doing.

Yet, they tried to observe their own teachings by avoiding entering a house of a Gentile so that they would be kept from defilement. And they were very concerned not only about not being able to eat the Passover meal, but also teachings about food that would eventually pass through their bodies after being eaten (Mark 7). It is just as Jesus said regarding the teachers of the law and Pharisees, “You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel” (Matthew 23:24).

This is a warning to us all. If we think that we are good Christians, accepted by God, pleasing to God, and righteous by doing things like fervently participating in church activities, diligently reading the Bible, praying for a long time, giving large amount of donations, doing good deeds, and showing kindness to others, etc., but if we don't reflect on ourselves through the Word of God, we are just like these Jews.

Q: What did Pilate do? (v.29)
“So Pilate went out to them and said, "What accusation do you bring against this man?"

Pilate came out from the palace. He went to where the Jews were and asked them why they had handed Jesus over to him. At that time, Jesus was inside the palace (John 18:33). Pilate went back and forth between inside the palace with Jesus and outside with the Jews many times after this. Instead of staying in his own residence, where he had received Jesus and continued to listen to Jesus' words, Pilate went outside to the Jews and began to listen to their words. This became the cause of Pilate’s difficulties and failures.

Q: What was the answer of the Jews? (v.30)

“They answered, "If this man were not a criminal, we would not have handed him over to you."

When Pilate asked them why they were making the accusation, they replied that they were handing Jesus over because he had done something wrong. But they didn't specifically point to Jesus' crime.

Q: What was Pilate's suggestion? What was the response of the Jews? (v.31)

“Pilate said to them, "Take him yourselves and judge him according to your law." The Jews replied, "We are not permitted to put anyone to death."

Pilate said that if Jesus had done something wrong to the Jews, why didn't they just judge him according to their own law? This is very reasonable. The Jews, however, refused Pilate's suggestion, saying that they were not capable of carrying out the death penalty.

In fact, the Jews were able to carry out the death penalty following their own law. That's why Jesus could say, "He who is without sin among you, let him be the first to throw a stone at her (John 8:7)." If stoning is not allowed following the Jewish law, they would have had clear reason to accuse Jesus of injustice then. However, the Jews who tried to trap Jesus with their words left without a word to say back. In short, the Jews could have carried out the death penalty according to their own law. In fact, the Jews stoned Stephen to death without the governor's permission (Acts 7:58).

Q: Why did the Jews, who could have carried out the death penalty, not do so? (v.32)
“(This was to fulfill what Jesus had said when he indicated the kind of death he was to die.)”

The reason why the Jews wanted to kill Jesus was because they believed that he had blasphemed God by equating himself with God (John 5:18). Those who blasphemed God were to be stoned to death (Lev. 24:16). In fact, the Jews once tried to stone Jesus to death (John 10:30-31). But the way of Jesus’ death, which the Bible indicates and Jesus himself spoke of, was not by stoning.

John 3:14
And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up.

John 12:32-33
And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.” He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die.

Jesus said that He would not die lying down on the earth, but would be lifted up from the earth to die. In order for Jesus' words, or God's words, to be fulfilled, God worked on the consciousness of the Jews so that they would go to the trouble of handing Jesus over to Pilate, instead of carrying out the death penalty according to their own law. The death of Jesus on the cross seems to have been orchestrated by the Jews, but it was certainly in accordance with the will of God. God was at work even here.

The fact that Jesus died on the cross does not mean that he failed in his mission as the Christ. The cross of Jesus is definitely the fulfilment of God's plan of salvation.

Q: What was Pilate's question to Jesus? (v.33)

“Then Pilate entered the headquarters again, summoned Jesus, and asked him, "Are you the King of the Jews?"

Pilate tried his best to figure out why the Jews handed Jesus over to him, not judged him according to their law. He thought this man would go against Romans. So, Pilate asked Jesus, "Are you the king of the Jews? But, you don't look like it.”

Q: What was Jesus' answer? (v.34)
“Jesus answered, "Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?"

When Pilate asked Jesus if he was the king of the Jews, Jesus asked him in return, "Are you saying this because you think I am a king in the sense of someone who competes with the Roman emperor, or is it because you have heard others testify that I am a king, that is, the promised liberator, savior, and God to be worshiped and praised?" Jesus began to testify of himself by telling Pilate that he is a king.

Q: What did Pilate say? (v.35)

“Pilate replied, "I am not a Jew, am I? Your own nation and the chief priests have handed you over to me. What have you done?"

Pilate asked him back, "Since I am not a Jew, I am not talking about a king or a savior in the sense of the one that the Jews have longed for from way back. If that's what you are, then why did the Jews and chief priests treat you like a criminal and hand you over to me, the governor, the authority of the Roman Empire? Who are you?"

Q: What was Jesus' answer? (v.36)

“Jesus answered, "My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here."

Jesus said, "I am indeed a king, and I have a kingdom, but it is not of this world. My kingdom will be built up in this world, but not by the things of this world, such as military might and economic power. My kingdom will not be ruled as a king in this world would rule his kingdom.

Q: Then, what did Pilate say? And what was Jesus' answer to him? (v.37)

“Pilate asked him, "So you are a king?" Jesus answered, "You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice."

Pilate confirmed with Jesus, "So, you are a king." Jesus replied, "If you call me king, I will be your king. I have come into the world to speak the truth, to live the truth, to show the truth, and as people listen to the truth, my kingdom will be
formed. If anyone knows the truth and abides in the truth, he will have me as his King and Lord of his life." Having testified of himself as King, Jesus now invited Pilate into his kingdom.

Q: What did Pilate say when he heard this? And what did he do? (v.38)

"Pilate asked him, "What is truth?" After he had said this, he went out to the Jews again and told them, "I find no case against him."

At that time, if Pilate had seriously thought, "What is this truth Jesus is talking about?" and stayed in the presence of Jesus and continued to talk with Him, he would have surely found the truth, been born again as a citizen of the Kingdom of God, and started to live eternal life. But Pilate turned his back on the truth, saying, "What is truth? What good is it?" And he left Jesus and went out to the Jews.

Q: What did Pilate ask and to whom? (vv.38-39)

"But you have a custom that I release someone for you at the Passover. Do you want me to release for you the King of the Jews?" Pilate stepped out of his dialogue with Jesus, the truth, and went to the Jews. And he asked them if they wanted him to release Jesus. But, do you remember that Pilate spoke directly with Jesus and found him innocent? He could see that Jesus was telling the truth, and he couldn't see any reason to execute Jesus with his own hands. He even called Jesus the King of the Jews. He felt that there was something powerful in the words Jesus spoke.

But Pilate did not continue to talk with Jesus. He listened to the voice of the Jews instead of listening to Jesus and making his own judgment on how to treat Him. He listened to the voice of the Jews and let their voices interpret what he sensed when he talked to Jesus.

Q: What was the Jews' answer? (v.40)

"They shouted in reply, "Not this man, but Barabbas!" Now Barabbas was a bandit."

The Jews replied in a loud voice, "It is not Jesus that we want to receive. It's Barabbas the robber."
2. The Power of the Truth

This is our take away for today, the essence of the gospel. That is “The Power of the Truth.” Pilate could see that Jesus was without sin. He sensed that Jesus was speaking the truth. But he did not stay with Jesus. He stopped listening to Jesus' words and went back to the Jews and listened to what they said about Jesus.

We may make the same mistake as Pilate. Instead of continuing to hear the truth from Jesus on our own, we listen to the words of men and the words of the world. We agree with what the world says about Jesus. The world is hostile to God. If we judge Jesus by the voice of the world, the answer will be obvious from the beginning. Even if we hear about Jesus and realize that He is wonderful, if we don’t stay in His word and live in the truth, we are just like Pilate. It is not the voice of the world that teaches us Jesus and the truth clearly. It is the Holy Spirit who does.

John 15:26
“When the Advocate comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who comes from the Father, he will testify on my behalf.

John 16:13
When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth.

If we listen to the wrong voice, it will naturally lead us to the wrong place. The truth is Jesus (John 14:6) and the Word (John 17:17). The truth is not something abstract or elusive like a philosophical concept. Jesus’ truth expressed at the cross shows that Jesus Himself is the eternal and unchanging truth and love. The power of God overflows in this truth.

The power of truth liberates people of all ages and nations from sin and transforms them into people who live in righteousness and love. It reconciles those who have been hostile to God. Those who destroy will become those who love, and those who take will become those who give. Those who hate each other will come together to praise God. This is the power of genuine truth.

For Self-Reflection

1. What do non-Christians say or think about Jesus?
- Before you believed in Jesus Christ, what did you think about him? Where did you learn those things?

2. Which parts of society go against Jesus’ rule by truth and love? What are the causes?

3. Have you ever experienced the power of the truth? What was the situation and what happened?