

The King of Truth

You're probably familiar with the scene: A young military lawyer, Lt. Daniel Kaffee played by Tom Cruise, examines a witness – Colonel Nathan Jessup, played by Jack Nicholson. The movie is *A Few Good Men*. The questioning becomes heated and Colonel Jessup asks Lt. Kaffee, "What is it you want, Lieutenant?" "I want answers," comes the response. "You want answers," smirks Colonel Jessup. "I WANT THE TRUTH!" shouts the young lawyer, to which the colonel responds equally loudly (SAY IT WITH ME NOW!), "YOU CAN'T HANDLE THE TRUTH!"

Col. Jessup then goes on to defend himself and his indefensible actions with words which – though they do not excuse his behavior – are nonetheless discomfitingly true. Jessup summarizes his defense with these words: "My existence, while grotesque and incomprehensible to you, saves lives. I have neither the time nor the inclination to explain myself to a man who rises and sleeps under the blanket of the very freedom that I provide and then questions the manner in which I provide it. I would rather you just said 'thank you' and went on your way."

It is a powerful scene. I recently saw it listed as one of the top 100 scenes of all films made in the 20th century. It is the climax to a well told story. So is the passage from the Gospel of John appointed for this Festival of Christ the King. In that scene – also something of a courtroom drama – Jesus stands at trial before Pilate, and as with the trial in *A Few Good Men*, the questioning turns to the matter of truth. Pilate is interested in only one question – whether Jesus is an insurgent king and therefore a threat to Rome.

Pilate's task as procurator of this third-rate outpost of the Roman Empire is bone-crushingly boring: maintain order and remit taxes. That's all; that's it. No innovative social programs to implement, no mid-term elections to campaign for, and certainly no debate over assuring that all people have access to adequate health care. Pilate is stationed on the far side of the Mediterranean for two reasons: to prevent rebellion in an occupied territory and to keep the drachmas traveling home to Rome to maintain and expand the empire, plain and simple. This Jesus constitutes a threat to Judean stability and therefore Roman domination only insofar as people acclaim him "king." Rivals to Caesar cannot be tolerated and must be eliminated. **The degree to which the crowds pledge their allegiance to Jesus is precisely the degree to which he is dangerous.**

Pilate may have been no lover of truth, nor even a man who pursued it. But the Romans were nothing if not civilized. A man deserves at least a hearing before he is condemned to a gruesome death, and Pilate grants as much to the paradoxically comical figure standing before him – a bound, bloodied and beaten man accused of being a rival king.

Jesus claims that his kingdom – or better, his kingship or royal reign – is not from "this world," and declares that his mission is to testify to the truth. In the famous passage that is sadly omitted from today's reading, Pilate asks, "What is truth?" My friends, I leave it to you to decide what Pilate meant when he asked that question.

Was he sneering? "What is 'truth'?" Was it a cynical dismissal of the notion that such a thing as truth even exists?

- Was it a Roman response to a category of thought for which Romans had little use? Greeks do philosophy and Jews do religion. We Romans do politics – and look who rules the world!
- Was it the expression of a bitter heart? "I thought the truth was that if you worked hard, people would notice and you'd get ahead in this world. Well, I've worked hard and nobody's noticed, and instead of a plum assignment in Corsica or Capri, I'm stuck here in this desert hellhole."
- Could it have been the musing of a man who's attained a certain degree of power, privilege and prestige and who finds that none of it satisfies the deeper longings of the soul? A man who is groping for some *meaning*, something of *substance* before he shuffles off this mortal coil.

John's gospel gives us no clue, but tells us that Pilate seeks simply to forge a compromise in order to avoid yet another grotesque crucifixion. What Pilate didn't know – what Pilate *couldn't* know – is that Jesus had already answered that question in another setting when he told his disciples plainly, "I am the way *and the truth*, and the life."

Like Pilate, you and I often tend to think of the Truth as some lofty concept, some complicated theological system or sophisticated philosophical construct or complex scientific principle that adequately explains the meaning of existence. When we do that, we forget or ignore the Christian insight that Truth is not a principle – it is a Person: the very person who stood before Pontius Pilate that dark Friday 2,000 years ago. He is the truth because he alone – true God and true man – accurately reveals the way it really is with us and with God. And the key to comprehending that truth is – ironically – the cross.

There was an inscription over that cross, and it stated the crime of which Jesus was accused and found guilty. The inscription read, you remember, “King of the Jews.” King of God’s People. Christians have always understood that inscription as paradoxically true. He is indeed a king – and not just of God’s people, but of all that is, seen and unseen; King of Creation, as today’s psalm powerfully proclaims.

His cross is his throne. And when he is enthroned upon it, the truth at last is plainly seen. The truth about us is this: we who are the king’s subjects are guilty of the terrible crime of regicide – the killing of the king. We are deserving of the most hideous of fates.

The truth about him is this: he is the King of Love who lays down his life in order to win our pardon and secure our freedom. The cross does not thereby become sublime and beautiful; it is and remains a hideous thing, an instrument of cruel death after dehumanizing degradation. And yet precisely this cross stands as an eternal witness to God’s way and God’s truth and God’s life.

In an ironic twist, Christ, the King on the Cross, could well say to us what Colonel Jessup said to Lt. Kaffee: “You can’t handle the truth. My existence, though grotesque and incomprehensible to you, saves lives. I have neither the time nor the inclination to explain myself to (those) who rise and sleep under the blanket of the very freedom that I provide and then question the manner in which I provide it. I would rather you just said ‘thank you’ and went on your way.” The truth about our lives is this: the cross provides a blanket of freedom to live our lives unconcerned about such monumentally significant matters as getting right with God, earning God’s favor, and getting to heaven. That is the work of Christ the King, and he would rather that we just said ‘thank you,’ let him do his work, and get on with our own – which is to love and serve God by loving and serving our neighbors.

The Greek term for giving thanks is “eucharistia” from which we get the word eucharist or holy communion. We say “thank you” in our celebration of the meal, by which the King feeds his subjects.

Christ the King whose throne is a cross bids us be his loyal subjects – ever eager and ready to serve the King by serving the truth – bearing vivid witness to the ironic and paradoxical reality that St. Francis discovered as he followed the King: it is in giving that we receive, it is in pardoning that we are pardoned, and it is in dying that we come to eternal life.

When we live by this, the King’s truth, we also become subversives, a threat to the existing order which denies the truth and belches out multiple lies repeated daily, and in which a high-ranking official actually utters the words, “Truth isn’t truth.”

When we live by the King’s truth, we reject the lie that we receive by hoarding, that we live by clutching life with a death grip, that pardoning is for sissies, and I don’t need to be pardoned anyway, because none of it is my fault.

Living by the King’s truth, we demonstrate our allegiance to a different apprehension of reality – of the way it really is with God and with us. The world will find such loyalty discomfiting and upsetting, for what was true in Pilate’s day remains true in ours as well: **the degree to which we pledge our allegiance to Christ the King is precisely the degree to which he is dangerous.**