

3. He Came to Bear Witness to the Truth

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[0 : 00] As we sit, let's bow our heads together for a moment of prayer. Our gracious God, we pray that as we read the words of Scripture now and think about them, so you will have mercy upon us and open our eyes and hearts afresh to see the truth of your word and what it truly means for men and women to be believers in Christ.

And we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen. Now friends, you might like to turn with me to John's Gospel, chapter 18, to the passage that Willie read a moment ago, and you'll find it on page 904 and 905 in our Visitor's Bibles.

904, 905. And we shall be homing in on verse 37. In a moment.

Now there are several moments in the four Gospels where Jesus tells us exactly why he came into the world. And I'm very glad about that, because we could easily be clueless about why he came. For example, did he come to be cooed and clucked over in the stable by a cow and a donkey and some doves and some shepherds? Did he come to start up some kind of international peace process?

[1 : 32] Did peace on earth mean that all the nations would immediately become the best of friends and never think again about conquering each other or dominating each other? Well, if that was his purpose in coming, clearly it was a rotten failure.

So it's a good thing that he gives us, the Lord gives us, a number of reasons in the four Gospels why he came. So for example, and we looked at this a couple of weeks ago, he came to seek and to save the lost.

He came not to be served, but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many. He came to bring life, abundant life, to his people. Now here in this John chapter 18, we're going to hear again from the Lord Jesus' own mouth, another reason why he came.

So let's look together at verse 37. For this purpose I was born, and for this purpose I have come into the world, to bear witness to the truth.

Now the situation here, as is obvious, is that Jesus is having a brief interview or discussion with Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor of Judea.

[2 : 42] This interview took place early on a Friday morning, good Friday morning of course. I guess it was not scheduled in the governor's diary. He wouldn't have been up for very long, he might not even have had his breakfast, but he found himself suddenly confronted by a delegation of senior Jewish leaders who say to him, in effect, we've got to speak to you, because we have a problem.

What's the problem? Well this man is our problem. It's Jesus, and here he is. Now you'll see from verse 29 that Pilate, quite rightly, asks them what charge they're bringing against the prisoner.

What accusation, he says, do you bring against this man? To which they don't give a satisfactory answer at all. They don't name any alleged crime.

All they can say is, if this man were not doing evil, we would not have delivered him over to you. Which is a ridiculous thing to say, isn't it? So Pilate tries to dismiss them.

In verse 31, he doesn't want to grapple with some unpleasant in-house Jewish argument. Certainly not before breakfast. So look at verse 31. He says to them, take him yourselves, sort this out by yourselves, and judge him by your own law.

[3 : 55] But then the Jews strongly hint, in verse 31, that Jesus, in their opinion, ought to be put to death. So they say to Pilate, it is not lawful for us to put anyone to death.

So Pilate really is forced to look further into this case. If they're asking him to have this prisoner executed, then Pilate realises he's got a real problem on his hands and one that he must take seriously.

And so there follows a discussion between Jesus and Pontius Pilate, recorded in verses 33 to 38. And it all turns on the question as to whether or not Jesus is the king of the Jews.

In fact, you'll see that's the first question that Pilate puts to him in verse 33. Are you the king of the Jews? Somebody's mentioned to him that that may be the case. So he asks the question, are you the king of the Jews?

And you'll see, after a little bit more conversation, in verse 36, Jesus says, my kingdom is not of this world. So he's not denying that he's a king.

[5 : 00] He's not denying that he has a kingdom. But he says, it's not an ordinary kingdom. In fact, it's not a kingdom of this world at all. Now Pilate, not satisfied by this, presses his question again in verse 37.

So you are a king, he says. And in the Greek, the pronoun is emphasized. So you are a king. You, that's what he's saying.

As if to say, you don't look much of a king to me. Nothing very royal about you. And then Jesus answers, you say that I'm a king. For this purpose I was born and for this purpose I've come into the world to bear witness to the truth.

So do you see, he moves very quickly from the question of whether he's a king or not to give the reason for his coming into the world. And he is very emphatic. Do you see how he uses two phrases where you might have thought that one was quite sufficient?

For this purpose I was born, he says. Now, Sir Pontius Pilate, are you listening? Are your ears open? For this purpose I've come into the world. Two phrases to emphasize why he came as a baby to Bethlehem all those years before.

[6 : 15] My purpose in coming was this, to bear witness to the truth. Now there we have it, you see, from his own lips. That is why he came, to bear witness to the truth.

Now don't you think that is a very remarkable phrase, to bear witness to the truth? It's such unexpected language. Why bear witness to the truth?

I think the reason is this. We only need to speak of bearing witness to something if that something is not obvious. The language of bearing witness only needs to be used if people need to be persuaded about something which is not obvious.

Let me give a homely parallel. Imagine me on Christmas Day, on Friday, picking up the carving knife. Just think of that moment when dinner is about to start. There I am, about to carve the turkey on the table.

The family are all seated hungrily around the table. Grandparents, in-laws, out-laws, everybody's there. Now, I don't have to say to the gathered company, I don't have to say, I bear you witness that this is a turkey.

[7 : 28] I haven't got to say, and I bear you witness that these are parsnips and these are Brussels sprouts and this is cranberry sauce and that, on the floor, is the family dog. I haven't got to speak like that because it's obvious.

Everybody knows. Nobody needs to be persuaded that this bird is a turkey and not a dodo. But if some matter is not clear, if there's some doubt about it, and if a great deal depends upon this matter, that's when people speak about bearing witness.

They're wanting to persuade people of the truth about something and that something is not obvious to everybody. Now, it particularly applies in a law court. The truth about something needs to be established.

It isn't clear. So people bear witness. Their witness is backed up by an oath that what they're saying is true and then they bring in evidence to support their claims. So they're making a case.

Now, think of this in terms of the whole of John's Gospel. John the Evangelist, throughout his Gospel, is bearing witness to the truth about Jesus. He's seeking to persuade people on the basis of evidence.

[8 : 40] Just turn with me over a page or two to the very last chapter of the book, chapter 21 and verse 24, the very end, second to last verse.

Here is John the Evangelist signing off, if you like, and he's reminding his readers of what he's been doing throughout the book. So chapter 21, verse 24, this is the disciple, he's saying this is me, who is bearing witness about these things and who has written these things and we know that his testimony is true.

So it's not only Jesus who is bearing witness to the truth, John the Evangelist is bearing witness to what he knows is true. And in that verse, you see, he brings in his circle of friends to endorse what he's saying.

We know, we who are John's companions and fellow witnesses of the life of Jesus, we add our stamp of approval to John's words because we know that he is telling the truth about Jesus. So to go back to chapter 18, verse 37, Jesus is saying to Pontius Pilate, Pilate, there is a great truth in the universe. It is the greatest and most important truth but it's not obvious to everybody.

[9 : 55] So I have come to persuade people of it. I'm here like a witness in a law court. If people will simply open their ears and listen to what I have to say, they will come to know the truth for themselves.

They will be persuaded about it. Well, we're going to pause now and we're going to sing another carol and then after we've sung together, I want us to look at two things.

First, what is this great truth to which Jesus bears witness and then secondly, what kind of response is it appropriate for us to make to it?

Jesus says this strange thing, I have come into the world to bear witness to the truth. Now friends, as soon as you hear that word truth, you know that something big, something really very important is being talked about.

But who anywhere has the authority to tell people what the truth is? Is there some great, unchanging, eternal truth? Or is truth as slippery to get hold of as an eel?

[11 : 06] My two daughters go to school at Hutchison's Grammar School on the south side of the city. Some of you will know the school and perhaps have been to it. And when our girls first arrived at Hutchison's, I was intrigued to discover that the school motto is one word, veritas, which is the Latin word for truth.

And I've sometimes wondered to myself what the present day school authorities, you know, the governors and the head teacher and all the teaching staff, might make of their motto. Might they be just a little bit embarrassed about it?

I imagine that whoever chose that motto many years ago knew exactly what he or she meant by veritas. But if one were to ask the school governors today what they understood by that motto, I imagine that they wouldn't all agree with each other.

Some of them, I know, would quickly say veritas refers to Jesus Christ, he is the truth. But others would say, well, it's difficult, you know, we live in a world today where nobody can be sure about anything.

What seems true today to one person might look false tomorrow to the same person. So, truth, it's a noble ideal, but really, it's beyond anybody's grasp. So, when Jesus says, I came to bear witness to the truth, what does he mean by the truth?

[12 : 25] Well, first and foremost, he means that he is himself the truth. In fact, he said just that back in John's Gospel, chapter 14, verse 6, I am the way, the truth, and the life.

The way to God the Father, the only way, the truth, in that his own person and words and deeds exactly express what is true about God and the life, because all life originates in him and is sustained by him.

So, Jesus is himself the truth. To know him, to understand him, or at least to understand as much as we can from the scriptures, to have him as our closest friend, that is to know what is most important in the universe.

But in these few moments of conversation with Pontius Pilate, Jesus has a specific aspect of truth in mind. He's not just speaking of truth as if it was some intellectual concept for philosophers to discuss.

he's speaking here of the truth that he is indeed a king and that his kingdom is not a kingdom of this world. You see, Pilate has twice asked him whether he's a king and on each occasion, just have a look at the verses.

[13 : 42] First in verse 33, are you the king of the Jews? And then verse 37, so you are a king. But on each occasion, Jesus has not given him a direct answer because if Jesus had said yes, he would have conveyed to Pilate the false impression that he was a military king and therefore a threat to Pilate's little corner of the Roman Empire.

But if he had said, no, I'm not a king, he would have been denying something fundamentally true about himself. That's why he doesn't answer Pilate's question directly. But he does answer it

indirectly because he says in verse 36, my kingdom is not of this world.

In other words, I am indeed a king but not of any kind of kingdom that you, Pilate, would recognize. I'm not the king of Syria or the king of Egypt or Mesopotamia.

My kingdom is not of this worldly kingdom. The truth then to which Jesus is bearing witness is this. God's kingdom over which Jesus himself reigns is durable, eternal and all-conquering in the end. To know that God reigns eternally and that he has placed his son Jesus on the throne of his kingdom so as to execute justice against the unrepentant and to lavish blessings upon all who turn to him.

[15 : 09] To know that is to understand the greatest truth in the world. In fact, to understand this is to understand how the universe is really constituted.

Yes, the discoveries of astrophysics and geology and biology and chemistry are wonderful and astonishing and they teach us about how God has assembled and structured the cosmos but the greatest truth of all is that God is sovereign and he has placed Jesus on the throne of heaven and earth to rule it with justice and to fill it with incalculable blessings.

Now this is good news. This really is the gospel. If it were not true that God is the sovereign of the universe it would mean that the universe ultimately was without principle, without order.

It would have been nothing more than a random concurrence of atoms and molecules. And if it were not true that Jesus executes absolute justice we would have to suspect that evil would have the upper hand in the end.

But the truth is that Jesus will call everything to account. Every injustice will finally be punished.

There will be no miscarriages of justice in the end on the day of judgment.

[16 : 29] The news that God really rules that is the best news possible. The news that wickedness will be dealt with by a just judge that is deeply comforting.

and the news that Jesus will give eternal life to all who have found refuge in him that is simply the most glorious prospect. So that's the truth that Jesus came to bear witness to.

A glorious kingdom the great reality that lies behind the universe and if you are a Christian you belong to that everlasting kingdom. Now how do we respond to this?

We must notice the final moments of Jesus' conversation with Pilate. Look at the end of verse 37.

As soon as Jesus has spoken about the kingdom of which he is king and about the truth to which he bears witness he then says provocatively he says everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice.

That is a stupendous claim to make surely one of the most astonishing things that he ever said though it's not a saying which is often noticed. he simply means that those who belong to his kingdom his kingdom of truth that is those who are born again who are destined for eternal life recognize his voice as the voice of their true master and shepherd and they take what he says to heart and they live by it.

[17 : 55] To listen to him means to believe him to trust him to obey him. So this means that if you're a person I'm speaking to you as an individual if you're a person who is beginning now to listen to his voice if you're somebody who's beginning to recognize that what he says is true then you are of the truth.

It means that you belong to the one who is himself the truth. Now how does Pilate respond? He says in verse 37 what is truth?

And although that's a question he doesn't even wait for an answer. Now I'm glad that we have this glimpse into Pontius Pilate's heart because it stands as a warning to all of us.

Pilate is a fearful reminder of the way that many people will respond to the claims of Jesus. There are many people who just like Pontius Pilate have a brief brush with Jesus, a brief encounter as it were.

So for example a person might read some Christian literature about Jesus that he's picked up. Or a person might read a short part of the Bible, might come to church once or twice, might discuss the Christian gospel with a Christian friend and yet when they begin to realize that Jesus claims to be the truth, that Jesus insists that he's the king, the king who commands everybody's allegiance, they then say I don't want that.

[19 : 27] I want to be my own king. I want to work out my own version of truth. I don't want the son of God to be my ruler. And then like Pontius Pilate, they turn on their heel and leave.

They forfeit the joys of the Christian life. They forfeit heaven itself for the sake of a few short years of self-rule. people. So we must ask the question, how do we respond?

Do we respond with thankfulness and glad joy that Jesus came into the world to bear witness to the truth? Do we respond with joy that we can listen to his voice and as we listen to him, know the truth more?

That's what it means to be a Christian. Or do we, as it were, shuffle away from him like Pilate, muttering what is truth? Let me say this.

If you're somebody who has been like Pontius Pilate all your life up to now, why don't you make this Christmas the time when you begin to listen to the voice of Jesus and come to him who is the truth? [20 : 33] So here is why he came to the stable in Bethlehem all those years ago from his own mouth. For this purpose I was born and for this purpose I have come into the world to bear witness to the truth.

Everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice. Let's pray together for a moment. Lord Jesus, we gladly acknowledge that you are the very truth yourself to whom you have borne witness and that to know you, to listen to your voice is to belong to the truth.

We pray that you'll have mercy upon each of us here today and that you will enable us to listen to your voice and to know what it means to be a Christian, to be a follower of yours.

We ask it for your dear namesake. Amen.