

The Truth of Christmas  
Saint Paul's Cathedral, San Diego  
Christmas Eve, 2009  
Scott Richardson +

Gracious God,  
Let these words be more than words and give us the spirit of Jesus.  
Amen.

I'm going to begin this festive homily in an odd place – the Jerusalem headquarters of Pontius Pilate, a site more commonly associated with Good Friday than Christmas Eve. In the very last moments of his earthly life, Jesus stands before Pilate and engages the Roman procurator in a conversation about his identity and mission. Are you, Pilate asks, a king? That's what you say, responds Jesus. I came into the world to bear witness to the truth. All on the side of truth hear my voice. Truth, asked Pilate – what is truth? With that the governor turns Jesus over to the soldiers.

What is truth? People have been asking that question for centuries. Some answers have been pretty good and some hopeless. Pilate would not have recognized truth if it bit him on the nose. The only truth that mattered to him had to do with dominance, subjugation, and control. Socrates, on the other hand, thought he could approach truth through relentless Q&A, through a process of endless interrogation. Scientists pursue truth similarly (though they'd probably shy away from using that word) through hypothesis and experimentation. The Buddha stressed deep meditation that pierced the veil of ignorance. Even the comedian and satirist, Steven Colbert, has chipped in, dispensing with truth in favor of the more pliable and convenient "truthiness."

Putting Pilate and Colbert aside (but not equating them in any way!), Christians affirm much of that and, finally, take another path – we're all for philosophical and scientific searching, we love contemplative epiphanies, but we don't believe the truth of God is best known through those vehicles, at least not for us. For Christians, the full truth of God comes to us in the revelation of a particular life, the life that we are here to honor tonight. In the incarnation of Jesus, the identity and mission of God are revealed most compellingly.

And what is revealed in that life? What, then, is God's best truth? Solitude and prayer. A community called together. Illness healed. Wisdom and paradox. The cast down made welcome. Fasting and feasting. Religious law held lightly. New families constituted. Storms calmed. Bread shared. Children welcomed. Charity embraced. The meek lead. Great leaders are humbled. The Living Word murdered by the state. The Crucified One rising. Trust, love, and service explode into the world.

That's the truth that stands above all truth for the baptized. It is preeminently (though not exclusively) revealed in the life of the babe from Bethlehem. He is the sacrament of God, the outward and visible sign of the cosmic and invisible deity. But here's the catch: it's not enough just to see that; those who really get it strive to be like him. We don't comprehend the truth of God by studying it but by incarnating it ourselves, by taking it up and by taking it on in our own lives.

Christian history is replete with stories and examples that show us the way. Saint Nicholas was here a couple of weeks ago to give gold coins to our kids (okay, it was actually chocolate wrapped in gold paper). Saint Nick, as you know, was not a jolly fellow with a red suit, a white beard, and a bit of extra padding. He was a fourth-century bishop renowned for his concern for his community and for his charity of spirit. In one well-known story, Bishop Nicholas is shocked to learn of a family so poor the father cannot provide dowries for his three daughters. In fact, their poverty is so extreme there's a very real possibility the girls might be forced into prostitution in order to survive. Nicholas cannot bear this so, secretly and on three separate occasions, he passes by the family's hovel and tosses bags of gold through the window, thus allowing each daughter to be wholesomely wed. Hence the custom of the gold coin candy for our kids every Advent – we don't, by the way, fear the same fate for them.

And, fortunately, we don't have to pore through the annals of history in order to be inspired – we have saints among us even now. Here's another, more current, story. She's a banker, traveling from San Diego to Los Angeles for work and to attend the office Christmas party. Christine clutches her briefcase and a box of fine chocolates – her contribution to the festivities. The Amtrak car is nearly full. Halfway to her destination she notices authorities moving from car to car, interrogating passengers. These are Border Patrol agents doing their job, a routine task. They systematically sequester and shackle riders who can't produce documents testifying to their right to be in the country.

The detained are held at the end of Christine's car. Without thinking, she stands and strides toward them. Their guard tries to look her off but, silently, she stares him down. She opens her box of Christmas candy and places a piece in each of their hands. We could debate the issue of immigration reform all night, no doubt, but, regardless of our opinions, we should all respect the humane gesture. No priest ever offered Holy Communion as solemnly or tenderly. These folks would not be going home that night but they knew they'd been blessed – someone, a stranger, saw them and cared about them in much the same way Jesus would have had he been on the train that day. Maybe he was.

All on the side of truth hear my voice, he said. I began this homily with a specifically Christian focus – we, the baptized, receive the truth of God through the baby born tonight. But all on the side of truth hear his voice. Anyone engaged in acts of caring, sharing, and daring love him, whether they know it or not, with the same ardor as the shepherds, the angels, the Magi, and his parents.

We are all here tonight because that's true in some fashion so let his festival continue; may his truth be proclaimed and (far more importantly) may his truth be lived for evermore. Amen.