

Lenten Homily
March 23, 2010

One of the most painful examples of a word of scripture being taken out of context is found here in Washington, where the words of Jesus in today's passage from the Gospel of John "You shall know the truth and the truth will make you free" are inscribed over a portal in the headquarters of the CIA. Of course those who had this bright idea did not choose to include the words, "if you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples." The freedom the CIA is referring to is of course American democracy, and in order to defend it covert operations, deceptive propaganda and disinformation campaigns are seen as entirely justified. Painful irony indeed. But the freedom that Jesus is pointing to cannot be identified with the so-called American way. And the truth that Jesus represents when he says, "I am the way, the truth and the life" is something that men in the seats of power cannot really grasp. With rather savage irony John the Evangelist tells that Pilate found it baffling had to ask, "What is truth?"

The Greek word in the new testament that we translate as truth, *aletheia*, combines *a* meaning not and *lethe* which means what is hidden or out of range of consciousness. Remember in Greek mythology the dead pass over the river Lethe, the river that wipes away memory. For scripture truth is an event, truth is something that happens, when reality comes out of its hiddenness and meets us. Truth happens when we have direct contact with what is genuine and authentically real. But the human condition involves being afraid of encountering what is real, and we are all adept at fending off the encounter with what is real, especially the encounter with Absolute Reality, God. Our brains are wired with filters that continually shut out a lot of the evidence coming at us, our attention is selective. We have prejudices and biases that blank out a lot of information that it would be troubling to deal with. We are great at forgetting, compartmentalizing and all those tricks summed up in the word 'denial.' We repress reality that conflicts with our image of how things should be, we fabricate justifications for our version of history...and so it goes on.

All the teaching of Jesus implies that it is extraordinarily hard to unlearn all these tricks of the trade. We are so invested in our powers of fabrication, selectivity and denial that to give them up is a veritable dying to self, which is why Jesus was quite unafraid to talk in those terms. But he persists in inviting us to desire a state of freedom in which we actually acquire a taste for reality. He promises us that in time we discover that living in the light of reality is marvelously better than to forever fidget with the tangled web we weave when we unconsciously practice to deceive ourselves and others.

Unlearning the ways in which we protect ourselves from direct contact with what is real takes time, which is why Jesus is so completely honest with us. "If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples." Acquiring the taste for truth is something that we experience gradually by abiding, by sticking around, staying the course, practicing, persevering, repeating, absorbing over time, revisiting, the words of Jesus in meditation. And it's not something we do on our own. Jesus teaches us that God is patient, God knows when we are ready to drop our defences and takes part in the process through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. "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...The Advocate will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you." (John 15:26, 14:25)

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