NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://www.ncronline.org)

'You say that I am': Pilate, Christ and truth in Lent

Chase Nordengren | Feb. 28, 2013 Young Voices

A year ago, I began my Lenten column [1] with Pilate's expansive, existential question to the sentenced Christ: "What is truth?" Back in the church season in which we grapple with the paradoxical salvific agony of Christ's suffering, it seems impossible not to return to the question on which John's Gospel hinges, the question that in my mind marks the most profound departure from the style of everything in the Gospel narrative before it.

Do our supposed opposites, our supposed ideas about how the world works -- harm or help, God or man, life or death -- hold up in the face of the paradoxical Christ? If, as Christ tells Pilate, to belong to the truth is to listen to God's voice, what does belonging to truth mean?

As a social scientist, I struggle to belong to the truth every day. Education, the research field in which I work, has been trapped for decades in the "paradigm wars," a series of arguments about which kind or kinds of study "count" as scientific research, and thus implicitly as truth. As the story is told, quantitative researchers (the statisticians and number-smiths) argue truth is only what can be measured, evaluated "objectively," while qualitative researchers (those who do interview-based case studies and observations) believe truth can never be really understood outside the subjective, personal and cultural contexts in which we enact our lives.

This, at least, is how the story of the struggle is told, depicted through a handful of colorful and adamant critics on either side. For most of us in the education research community, I'd venture, the debate has become a caricature, an unnecessary false dilemma. We see value in the work of our quantitative and qualitative colleagues in understanding a world as complex in schools, in which brain science interacts with identity, student performance with organizational change. The social world is neither qualitative nor quantitative. It is both.

As social science mounts its search for truth, it is trapped between the worlds that inspired it: It is not quite a science, in which the world can be measured with numbers and made into rules, and not quite part of the humanities, in which the richness of individual human experiences described play a central role. Such is the complex, paradoxical and challenging world of studying human beings and human relationships, which make blurry the distinctions between nature and culture, between the work of God in the world and the work of man.

However analogously, perhaps such an intellectual journey has informed my understanding of my own relationship with Christ. Similar theological debates about Christ -- whether we are better guided, for example, by the context of Christ's life 2,000 years ago as a Palestinian Jew or knowing of the Godhead's participation in an eternal arc of history -- have always left me a bit cold. As we learn quickly in Sunday school, Christ is both: man and God, Palestinian Jew and being without time, measured by his humanity and by his power, dead and yet now eternally alive.

It's hard for me, then, not to empathize with Pilate as he asks his vital question. His world was upended, in that moment, with Jesus. Here, a man used to the traditional interplay between sentenced and executioner -- the assessment of guilt and innocence, the politics, the drama -- made no sense. Should this quiet man be judged by the needs of the Romans, to whom he posed no apparent threat, or by the judgment of Caiaphas and the high

priests, to whom Jesus represented a rebel and a usurper?

Making matters worse for Pilate, the man at the center of all this stood silent. Pilate searches for the meaning of this Jesus in his interrogation. Do I know you, Pilate asks Christ, by what I see or what the Jewish elders say you are? Do I understand you through one way I know or through another? Christ's only answer: I am what you say that I am.

This answer, of course, recognizes the false dilemma. At his sentencing, Jesus was both: a threat to the high priests and a weak tortured human being, savior and man. To understand him is to understand him both ways and, yet still, a different one: the new understanding that comes through the grappling, through the uncertainty, through a relationship.

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