TO TESTIFY TO THE TRUTH

John 18:1-19:16a

Key Verse: 18:37

“Jesus answered, ‘You are right in saying I am a king. In fact, for this reason I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me.’”

Thank God that we could study about the Last Supper, Jesus’ prayer at Gethsemane, his trial, death and resurrection depicted in Matthew’s and Luke’s gospel. We are thankful for the detailed and rich accounts of those events that happened from a Thursday night to a Sunday evening, nearly three days. Those three days would become the most significant days in human history including the day of his birth and the day of his returning to the earth. The four gospel accounts support one another and all together make the story of Jesus’ life complete. Jesus’ suffering during those days was more than one could say, but Jesus was all the more shining in his holiness, solemnity, majesty, righteousness, truthfulness and obedience as the Son of God. And his resurrection is truly powerful, victorious and glorious, giving true and everlasting hope to all mankind. In today’s passage in John’s gospel, we will think about Jesus’ arrest and trial with a short insertion of Peter’s denial. We will see more and more the beauty of his person and action amid sufferings.

In verses 1-11 we can think of Jesus’ arrest. Jesus and his disciples crossed the Kidron Valley and went into an olive grove on the other side. Judas came to the grave, guiding a detachment of (200) soldiers and officials (Ac 23:23) from the chief priests and Pharisees. A detachment consisted of 200 Roman soldiers (Ac 23:23). It is in other translations a “cohort”, which is a tenth of legion. So the Roman soldiers who came could have been as many as 600. And probably a few hundred of the officials of temple guard/temple police came (Lk 23:52) as well. What an army force to arrest one unarmed man! Undoubtedly, they had heard of Jesus calming the storm and walking on the water, and even raising the dead, and feared him greatly. They were carrying torches, lanterns and weapons.

Verse 4 says, “Jesus, knowing all that was going to happen to him, went out and asked them, ‘Who is it you want?’” From the beginning of this event of his arrest, Jesus took initiative, for he knew all that would happen to him. At this question, they replied, “Jesus of Nazareth.” Right away Jesus said, “I am he.” Verse 6 says, “When he said, ‘I am he,’ they drew back and fell to the ground.” If we think of the crowd who began to gather sensing the situation, the number of people who fell to the ground could have even been round 1,000. What a scene! What power of his word! In three words, “I am he”, the entire army force drew back and fell to the ground. He was the one through whom all things came into being when he spoke. When he said, “Let there be light,” there was light. When he said to the turbulent waves of the stormy sea, “Quiet! Be still!”, it was completely calm (Mk 4:39). He said to an invalid man with a 38 year-prolonged infirmity lying down, “Get up! Pick up your mat and walk,” and he picked up his mat and walked (Jn 5:8-9). He raised Lazarus, who had been in the tomb for four days by his command, “Lazarus, come out!” Isaiah 11:4 says, “…He will strike the earth with the rod of his mouth; with the breath of his lips he will slay the wicked.” Paul said in 2 Thessalonians that the Lord Jesus would overthrow the man of lawlessness, the lawless one, namely the final Antichrist, with the breath of his mouth and destroy him by the splendour of his coming (2:8). And it is written in Revelation 19:15 concerning the Armageddon battle, the final battle in human history, “Out of his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations.”

In verse 7, “Again he asked them, ‘Who is it you want?’ And they said, ‘Jesus of Nazareth.’” “I told you that I am he,” Jesus answered. Three time Jesus identified himself as “I AM”, being willing to be arrested. “I AM” is the tetragrammaton, the Hebrew name of God (YHWH/Jehovah). God said to Moses, “I AM WHO I AM” (Ex 3:14). Jesus said to the Jews, “before Abraham was born, I am!” (Jn 8:58). From the beginning of this gospel John says in 1:1, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” At the time of his arrest Jesus clearly revealed himself as God, “I AM.” Thank God for this majesty of Jesus. He was in the complete control.

Jesus says continually here, “If you are looking for me, then let these men go” (8). With his mighty power displayed before his enemies he protects his own. His protection is perfect in his divine love. The author John was there and he commented, “This happened so that the words he had spoken would be fulfilled: ‘I have not lost one of those you gave me.’” (9) Jesus had said in John 6:39, “This is the will of him who sent me, that I shall lose none of all that he has given me, but raise them up at the last day.”

Seeing this favourable situation, Simon Peter, who had a sword, drew it and struck the high priest’s servant, cutting off his right ear. (The servant’s name was Malchus.) Jesus commanded Peter, “Put your sword away! Shall I not drink the cup the Father has given me?” We thank God for the Lord Jesus’ majesty, his power and love, and his sheer obedience to God.

In verses 12-28, Jesus’ trial before Annas and Peter’s denial before the servants of the high priest are juxtaposed against each other. The writer John goes back-and-forth from the trial to the denial – back to the trial, back to the denial. Let’s see the juxtaposition. Jesus was arrested and bound and brought to Annas. Yet he was consistent as “I AM.” When Annas questioned Jesus about his disciples and his teaching, which was illegal, Jesus replied, “I have spoken openly to the world. I always taught in synagogues or at the temple, where all the Jews come together. I said nothing in secret. Why question me? As those who heard me. Surely they know what I said.” What Jesus says here is “Bring the witness. Do this legally.” Jesus is not being uncooperative. He is simply asking for legal treatment, exposing the illegality of this trial.

In verse 22, “When Jesus said this, one of the officials nearby struck him in the face. ‘Is this the way you answer the high priest?’ he demanded.” The officials, the temple police, carried clubs. It is likely that one of them struck him in the face with a club. Interestingly, this is a fulfillment of Micah 5:1, “They will strike the judge of Israel with a rod on the face, on the cheek.” He is in a court and there is a judge, but He is the true judge of Israel, though hit in the face with a rod. What a fulfillment of Scripture!

Jesus responded in verse 23, “‘If I said something wrong, testify as to what is wrong. But if I spoke the truth, why did you strike me?’” Jesus could have ignored him, since God was fulfilling his prophecy. Yet he was mindful of even the man to know the truth. Then Annas sent Jesus, still bound, to Caiaphas the high priest. Though Jesus was physically bound, his Spirit and heart were glorious.

On the contrary, Peter could not identify himself as a disciple of Jesus. He denied it again and again, saying, “I am not.” And he denied that he was with Jesus. Peter’s denials are terrible on every level. They are acts of disloyalty, cowardice, pride, and fear. We see Peter in iniquity, while we see Jesus in glory. But Jesus is tried and will go to the cross to pay the price himself for Peter’s iniquity. Later, Peter said in 1 Peter 2:24, “He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds we have been healed.” We know that Judas’ betraying Jesus was horrendous was terrible and so was Peter’s denial. Yet, there was a difference. Peter loved Jesus, but Judas did not. When Peter remembered Jesus’ words, he repented and his wounded soul could be healed. And he lived for righteousness throughout his life because of the grace of Jesus. According to tradition he was crucified upside down. This is as Jesus predicted for his life in John 21:18, “I tell you the truth, when you were younger you dressed yourself and went where you wanted; but when you are old you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go.” And John commented in 21:19, “Jesus said this to indicate the kind of death by which Peter would glorify God.” When John wrote his gospel, Peter was already martyred in such a way and John could see the fulfillment of Jesus’ prophecy for Peter.

John did not write about Jesus’ trial before Caiaphas and the Sanhedrin. The trial went through two phases, the dark night court which was illegal and in which they decided to put Jesus to death, and the daybreak court to make their verdict legal. Now they led Jesus to the palace of the Roman governor, the Roman judgment hall, the Praetorium (Mt 27:27; Mk 15:16). It comes from word “praetor”, which is a Latin term meaning “governor” or “procurator”. When they led Jesus to this place, they wanted to make use of the Roman law and legal system to execute Jesus without any riot among the crowd, since Jesus’ popularity was sky high. As the Jews brought Jesus to the palace of the Roman governor, John shows their hypocrisy: though Jesus condemned Jesus to death with evidence of a death penalty, which was really the uncleanness of their conscience, they wanted to avoid ceremonial uncleanness. So they did not enter the place so as to be able to eat the Passover. Actually this kind of ceremonial uncleanness was not in the Old Testament ceremonial laws, but Mishnah, the codification of the Jewish laws: “The places of the Gentiles are unclean.” Anyway, what hypocrisy! But later in the afternoon, they had to enter the palace to ask Pilate to have Jesus’ body be taken down before the Sabbath, the next day (Jn 19:31). Then they went to Pilate on the Sabbath to ask Pilate to make the tomb secure so as to prevent the possible event of Jesus’ disciples stealing the dead body and telling the people of his being raised from the dead.

Since they did come in, Pilate went out to them and said, “What charges are you bringing against this man?” At this they replied, “If he were not a criminal, we would not have handed him over to you.” They just regarded Jesus as a criminal without any indictment in handing Jesus over to Pilate. So Pilate said, “Take him yourselves and judge him by your own law.” We see that Pilate was reluctant to deal with this case. For also he had already sent a detachment of soldiers surely in their request and must have heard of how Jesus was arrested. Pilate also knew that it was out of envy that they brought Jesus to him (Mt 27:18; Mk 15:10).

In verse 31b, “‘But we have no right to execute anyone,’ the Jews objected.” John commented in verse 32, “This happened so that the words Jesus had spoken indicating the kind of death he was going to die would be fulfilled.” Three times Jesus himself said that his death would be by being lifted up, meaning death on a cross: “…so the Son of Man must be lifted…” in 3:14, “When you have lifted up the Son of Man…” in 8:27, “when I am lifted up from the earth…” in 12:32. What fulfillment even in their expedient words with a deceptively innocent connotation, “we have no right to execute anyone.” Jesus’ trial before Pilate was apparently their plot to get rid of Jesus, but it was God’s plan for the salvation of mankind through the cross.

Now in verses 33-38a, we see the conversation between Jesus and Pilate, which was very significant, personally for Pilate and historically. Pilate went back inside the palace, summoned Jesus and asked him, “Are you the king of the Jews?” The background of this question is well written in Luke 23:2, “We have found this man subverting our nation. He opposes payment of taxes to Caesar and claims to be Christ, a king.” In the synoptic gospels Jesus said, “Yes, it is as you say” at the Pilate’s question, “Are you the king of the Jews?” But here, John wrote the details. Jesus responded, “Is that your own idea,” Jesus asked, “or did others talk to you about me?” Jesus probably hoped that Pilate might think of the meaning of the king of the Jews even a little. At this question Pilate replied, “It was your people and your chief priests who handed you over to me. What is it you have done?” Certainly, Pilate knew what Jesus had done and wanted to confirm it from Jesus’ own mouth, his innocence. But Jesus speaks of fundamental things to help this one soul out of his love for Pilate and to reveal the truth about his kingdom and his kingship at this historical moment of his trial before the Roman governor.

In verse 36, Jesus said, “My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jews. But my kingdom is from another place.” In this one verse Jesus mentioned, “my kingdom” three times. Pilate only saw the visible kingdoms of this world, the kingdom of Egypt, of Assyria, of Babylon, of Medo-Persia, of Greece, and now of Rome, the Roman Empire, the kingdom of the world of that time. Pilate might have thought that the kingdom of Rome would last forever. Jesus hoped that Pilate would be able to see beyond the kingdoms of this world, introducing his invisible kingdom, coming from another place, heaven. There is such a kingdom. While the baby Jesus was in Mary’s womb, the angel Gabriel said to her concerning the baby, “…The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end” (Lk 1:32-33). At the outset of his early messianic ministry Jesus preached, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near” (Mt 4:17). Jesus once taught his disciples to pray, “Father…your kingdom come” (Lk 11:2). Jesus’ kingdom is the kingdom of heaven and the kingdom of God. Paul said in Colossians 1:12-13, “giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the kingdom of light. For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves.” The king of the Son Jesus is also the kingdom of light. Jesus would be tried to die on the cross and to rise again for this kingdom. In Revelation 11:15, we hear, “The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ.” Now Jesus’ kingdom is invisible to the eyes of the people of the world but real in the hearts and lives of his people manifested through the church (Eph 3:10). And this invisible kingdom of Christ Jesus will be visible on earth, as the kingdom of this world becomes the kingdom of the Christ of God at his second coming. Amen!

Then in verse 37, “‘You are a king, then!’ said Pilate. Jesus answered, ‘You are right in saying I am a king. In fact, for this reason I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of the truth listens to me.’” After talking about his kingdom, now Jesus confirms that he is the king of the kingdom. He was the prince of the heavenly kingdom in the infinite power and glory and honour. But he came into this world and born as a human. When Jesus said, “For this reason I was born, and for this I came into the world” he revealed his humanity and his deity, the truth of Incarnation. He is God-man. He came from the kingdom of light into the kingdom of darkness, from the kingdom of the truth to the kingdom of deception and lies. He came to testify to the truth, the truth about God and man and the world, the truth about sin and death, the truth about salvation and judgment, the truth about the way of life and the way of destruction. According to Revelation 1:5, he is the faithful witness, and Revelation 3:14, “He is the faithful and true witness.” And according to John 3:11, he testifies to what he has seen. He was hated and persecuted simply because he testified to the truth (Jn 15:25), not to the point of being tried before Pilate. Paul says in 1 Timothy 6:13, “while testifying before Pontius Pilate, Jesus made the good confession.” Despite all the persecutions and hatred of the world, he has been consistently the man of truth and the king of truth. Jesus said in John 14:6, “I am the way and the truth and the life.” He is the truth. And the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of truth (14:17; 15:26; 16:13) and God is the God of truth (Isa 65:16).

Finally, here Jesus said, “Everyone on the side of truth listens to me.” There is no way to know the truth rejecting Christ Jesus. Jesus said in John 3:21, “whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what he has done has been done through God.” Jesus once said to the believing Jews, “If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth and the truth will set you free” (Jn 8:31-32). Jesus repeatedly said, “Whoever has ears to hear, let him hear” (Mt 11:15, 13:9, 13:43; Mk 4:9, 23; Lk 8:3, 14:35). God says in Isaiah 66:2, “This is the one I esteem/look on with favour: he who is humble and contrite in spirit, and trembles at my word.” May we not regard God’s word as one of ideas, but really the truth, the ultimate truth and learn trembling attitude before his word. Jesus said in John 10:27, “My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me.” What a terrible thing it would be if we turn out not being his sheep! We may be proved that we are his sheep by listening to his voice and following him, especially at crucial times. And he said in John 10:16, “I have other sheep that are not of this sheep me. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd.” May we also believe that there are those who will hear the voice of Jesus through our preaching and teaching the word of God as we testify to the truth.

After having a truly significant conversation with Jesus, the king of truth, Pilate said, “What is truth?” He was only cynical. We also hear such a question often in this postmodern generation. The question is right if there is no Jesus. There is no truth in this world if Jesus had not come into this world. Since Jesus came into this word and testified to the truth, there is no excuse of making such a question. May God have mercy on us to fight a battle for the truth, learning God’s broken heart for our children and young people of this generation.

Though he raised such a question, Pilate spoke what is right. He went out again to the Jews and said, “I find no basis for a charge against him.” According to Luke’s gospel Pilate sent him to Herod. But Herod sent Jesus back to Pilate, for he could not find any guilt in Jesus.

Now there is a long description of Pilate’s compromise that really led him to the way of destruction. According to the Jewish custom Pilate wanted to release Jesus. But when they shouted back, “No, not him! Give us Barabbas,” he could not go forward. Another attempt to release Jesus was to present tortured Jesus, saying, “Here is the man,” who was flogged and wearing a crown of thorns and a purple robe after mocked and stricken in his face. This presentation of the tortured Jesus is uniquely written in John’s gospel. It was to show his total helplessness with no hint of rebellion and so to soothe the agitated crowed manipulated by the religious leaders. It didn’t work either.

There is further long description of tug of war between Pilate and the Jews. The chief priests and their officials shouted, “Crucify him! Crucify him!” But Pilate answered, “You take him and crucify him. As for me, I find no basis for a charge again him” But when they said, “We have a law, and according to that law he must die, because he claimed to be the Son of God.” Hearing this, he was even more afraid. Fundamentally he was afraid because he did not hear what Jesus said. He went back inside the palace and asked Jesus, “Where do you come from?” Jesus had already told him. But when he did not accept Jesus’ word, he seemed to be falling into the pit of confusion. Jesus gave him no answer at this time. Then Pilate said, “Do you refuse to speak to me? Don’t you realize I have power either to free you or to crucify you?” Graciously, he had one more chance to listen to Jesus. Jesus answered, “You would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above. Therefore the one who handed me over to you is guilty of a great sin.” From then on, Pilate tried to set Jesus free. But the Jews kept shouting, “If you let this man go, you are no friend of Caesar. Anyone who claims to be a king opposes Caesar.” At this Pilate’s heart must have sunk, for being friend of Caesar meant his life security in this world as a Roman governor being taken away. When Pilate heard this, he brought Jesus out and sat down on the judge’s seat at a place known as the Stone Pavement (which in Aramaic is Gabbatha). It was the day of Preparation of Passover Week, about the sixth hour.” It was 6am in the morning. This was the time of the end of Jesus’ trial before Pilate to be crucified. At the same time, it was the time of Pilate being condemned in history as the one who crucified the Son of God and, more dreadfully, eternally condemned. Interestingly, still the tug of war was going on. “Here is your king,” Pilate said to the Jews. But they shouted back, “Take him away! Take him away! Crucify him!” “Shall I crucify your king?” Pilate asked. “We have no king but Caesar,” the chief priests answered. Finally, Pilate handed him over to them to be crucified. We see the outcome of the life of compromise. The point of John’s long description is that this battle is really applicable to any believer, to choose Jesus or the world, to hear Jesus’ voice or the voice of the world. The truth demands commitment, not compromise. May we be able to make a personal commitment to the truth overcoming our own tug of war.

We thank and praise Jesus who is in a total control at the time of his arrest and trial. Jesus is “I AM” and the king of truth with his true and eternal kingdom. He is the worthy of our commitment. May we renew our decision not to step on the way of compromise but on the path of the truth with commitment and live by the truth and fight for the truth. Amen!