

Revelation 1:4b-8
Psalm 93
John 18:33-19:5

On true human being

In a sentence:

*The true human life is lived not in seeking to escape the limitations of life but to find life
– and God – within them*

“Here is the man”, Pilate proclaims to the masses who cry out for Jesus’ blood.

Whatever Pilate means, for the gospel writer these words mean more than “Look at this fellow!” John wants to say – “Look, here is the human being. Gaze upon this one, and see what it means truly to be human.” But how is this beaten wreck of a man really what the true human being looks like? What is true humanity?

Perhaps some of you have seen the movie *The Truman Show* (1998). On the surface, the film is an entertaining comedy with the usual happy beginning, sudden descent and final rise again to life. Symbolically, however, the film is a clever anti-religious statement about true humanity or, at least, about what constrains us as human beings and what we need to do to be free. The name of the central protagonist is essential: Truman, or “True Man” or “True Human Being.” (Truman’s surname – Burbank – is the name of the district in which such film studios as Disney and Warner Bros. are found).

In the story, the young Truman gradually becomes aware that he’s living in a contrived world. We, the viewers, know that everyone else in Truman’s life is an actor, and that his whole life is being viewed on television by the outside world. When Truman finally realises that something is horribly wrong, he makes a run for it – not knowing where he is running to – only to bump into the edge of the enormous dome which encapsulates his world. There he is addressed from on high by the director of “The Truman Show”. The director’s name “just happens to be” Christo, and his voice booms god-like from the sky via the weather sound system. Christo invites Truman to stay and live out the lie for the pleasure of the millions of viewers who’ve watched his progress since he was born.

But Truman – the True Human Being – decides instead to see what life is like without Christo – without God, we are to understand. And in the story, of course, he can; there’s another, bigger world out there. Truman exits the false world and leaves behind the Christo who has been his limitation, stepping forward into what might be a brave, new world.

The film is a parable of how our society has thought that it has found the measure of God, and that it ought to cut itself loose from God. Truman sees and leaves the untrue people and the false director-God behind. But more importantly, we are invited to do the same. We cheer for Truman as he throws off the tyrannical meddling in his life. We see that it is the right thing to do, for he has been subject to a lie, and he will only find his full humanity by shrugging off what has been holding him back.

But there is a storyteller's trick at play here. While Christ is God in the story, it is we who have the God's-eye view of everything in Truman's life. We stand above Truman and Christ. We see everything and judge that Truman only becomes True-Man – genuinely human – when he turns his back on the god-figure who has been in control of his life. We cannot but judge in this way because we are made to think we see everything. Truman – the true human being – must break free from Christ, the god who keeps his world small.

All this, however, is rather a cheap shot. In the film, Christ is God and Truman is us. As Truman breaks free, so do we. In the gospel, however, Christ is Pilate and the religious authorities and us, and Truman is Jesus. The power is not with a god but with the authorities, and Jesus is constrained by them. The difference is now that there is nowhere Jesus can go. There is no other world in which there are no constraining powers. The film would have us believe that after Truman steps out of his little world, it is into the real world – a place free from Christ-like constraints and powers and crucifixions.

The true human being – Jesus or any of us – can't escape the world as Truman does. The lie in the film is that Truman escapes not from the limiting god in the sky but from the realities of historical living. Problems on the ground are blamed on the heavens: "Imagine there's no heaven...above us only sky," a gentle, wistful song invites us. The implication is that if heaven were imagined away, the earth would be healed.

Of course, heaven has today largely been imagined away, at least as a public thought; there remain only the little heavens in the minds of individuals.

And nothing has changed. With a heaven "out there" no longer capturing the public imagination, heaven has been bought crashing down to earth. It is no longer above us in a religious space but ahead of us in political time. And so the crucifixions continue because heaven and its gods were never really the problem. It is not the gods who place Jesus in the power of Pilate and ultimately on the cross. Jesus simply doesn't fit and so is squeezed out, pressed towards oblivion.

Yet Pilate's "here is the man" is made by the gospel writer to be the ironic opposite of what Pilate seems to intend. Perhaps Pilate mocks Jesus, but the evangelist mocks Pilate's inability to see what is in front of him – that Jesus is more human than we are.

Jesus' humanity is in his reconciliation to having no heaven to escape to Truman-style, as we wish to escape. It is in his refusal to deny what he holds true for the convenience of an easier ride – Christ-style – as we do. Jesus' humanity is in that, whether his life is joy or suffering, it is as one who knows himself the child of God: I am God's, and God is mine.

On this day each year, we take Pilate's mocking in this morning's reading and contradict him to declare in faith that Jesus is "king". But, in this, we don't make him a Christ in the sky, pulling the strings in our lives, doling out pain and suffering on us like on rats in a laboratory, watching to see what we will do next.

To say that Jesus is king is to say that he lives the life of the true human being – the woman, the man who has but one life, in this world and no other: a life lived for better, for worse; for richer, for poorer; in sickness and in health; in youth or advanced old age; gay or straight; under democracy or dictatorship; as citizen or alien.

Jesus is Lord and King when our lives are lived as his was: looking not for a heaven to escape to, but living the prayer that God's kingdom come, here and now, in the midst of what we have to deal with. It is only here and now that we can become children of God.

Let us, then, seek the coming of this kingdom in all things so that, in all things, we might with Jesus *become* God's kingdom.
