

Philippians 3:4b-14  
John 12:1-8

Crush

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Over the last week or so, when I probably should have been doing holier things, I've enjoyed revisiting the first season of the British TV series "Cobra" on SBS – a story in the "political thriller" genre.

The precipitating crisis in the story is the impact of solar flares on electricity infrastructure, but the real crises are in the human drama which unfolds around the natural disaster. To begin with, there are not enough replacement transformers to fix the network in one go, so the government must decide who stays in the dark. This, of course, becomes a politically charged decision and so subject to judgment and eventually leads to violent civil uprisings. In the meantime, an immigrant detention centre is compromised, spilling dangerous detainees into the countryside, raising the xenophobia setting to "Shrill". Then comes the otherwise unconnected death by drug overdose of the friend of the Prime Minister's daughter, his daughter having provided the drugs. The dynamics of reputation and privilege now enter the mix, the daughter being a "privileged white woman" whom (it's presumed) the establishment will seek to protect. In another thread in the story, the PM's formidable Chief of Staff is wrong-footed by the unexpected return of a long-lost lover, for whom she falls again, only to discover that he is now an underworld hitman – not a good look for the Prime Minister's most trusted confidante. And, of course, being set in the UK, the Prime Minister is constantly under threat of being undermined by enemies in his own party.

Though obviously not quite our own story, all this is "a day in the life" of any one of us. If not solar radiation, it's failing health; if not a drug overdose, it's rising interest rates (or falling rates – it doesn't really matter); if not falling in love with a hitman, it's the surreal world of the promises of candidates in election season.

In more theological or faith terms, the political thriller and our own stories are instances of what the Bible calls "flesh" – the world in its antagonised orientation away from God and its disorientation within itself – a kind of *crush*. Within this tense space, we grasp after a sure hold, or test the ground for something solid which won't fall out from under us as soon as we transfer our weight. In this, and again in more explicitly faith terms, we each seek a kind of *transcendence*: a foundation, a coherence, a lodestar. We draw from our personal reference points what we must now do. We leverage what we hold to be true, to be reliable.

And this brings us, finally, to our Gospel reading this morning, another political thriller. In the thick of it, Pilate asks Jesus a question about transcendence: "What is truth?" – What is it (if there is any such thing) above us or below, before or after, which gives sense, meaning and security to what we do and say and are?

It's not clear how seriously Pilate asks the question; it has the feel of sneering, cynical disappointment – Truth? What is *that*?! – as if he imagines the transcendence of the Roman Empire to be the only truth that matters. But so far as the gospel-writer is concerned, the exchange is deeply ironic. The reader sees what Pilate does not: that Jesus himself is the answer to the question: Jesus himself is "the truth".

By itself, this might be amusing if not very illuminating. But the Gospel-writer John has more to say to fill this out.

The cross is less of a catastrophe in John than in the other Gospels. In Matthew and Mark, we hear Jesus' Gethsemane prayer against the price of the faithfulness, and then the cry of dereliction from the cross. There is nothing glorious about the crucifixion there. But in John, we hear instead that Jesus will *not* try to pray the cross away because being "lifted up" onto the cross is also a *coronation*, a *glorification* of Jesus. The truth is not merely rejected or even crucified by mistake; the crucifixion *is* truth's moment. It is here, on the cross, that the character of truth is revealed. To state it a little wrongly but in helpfully stark terms: for John, Jesus *must* be crucified if Pilate is going to have an answer to his question. It is the crucifixion which presses the revelation of the truth to its utmost.

This is not easy to get our heads around. But we can put it another way, almost as strange: John presents the cross as the *one, transcendent* thing – as that which is over, or under, or before, or at the end of all things. As abstractly theoretical as that sounds, it means that the worst Pilate can do to Jesus – and indeed, it is a terrible thing – does not affect the truth of Jesus; rather, Pilate's violence *reveals* the truth Jesus is.

We reach for transcendence out of the desire to overwhelm what opposes or threatens us. We look for a lever which will move the seemingly unmovable; we grasp after More in the face of what seems to be Too Much: power, cunning, strategy. And so finally Pilate, finding himself firmly stuck in the middle of his own political thriller, reaches for that transcendence which is the state's monopoly on violence, and overwhelms, and Jesus is sentenced to death and dies. Jesus dies as he does because Pilate is overwhelmed by the threat he is to Pilate's own world.

But to say another strange thing, the "real" death of Jesus is not the crucifixion. It is that he has already died to the threats arrayed against him. Jesus died as he does because – unlike Pilate and the rest of us – he is *not* overwhelmed by the threat of death. Jesus' own crisis is not that he might be crushed but that he might choose something *less than faithfulness to what is true* – that he might choose something less than free humanity in the God who does not threaten to overwhelm but sets free from all fear.

This is to say - again, very strangely - that Jesus' death on the cross is not merely something he *suffers*. It is something he *achieves*. The cross is Jesus' own transcendence of the fears and untruths arrayed against him. In this way, the crucified Jesus is the truth itself.

The bad news in all of this is that ours is and remains a crushed world. We are overwhelmed, and overwhelming. We live our lives as if they were political thrillers with their unpredictable twists and turns, and as if we don't know how the story is going to end.

But friends, spoiler alert: We. All. Die. In. The. End.

But this is only bad news if we are not reconciled to it. If we *do* believe it, then the question about truth is not what transcendence we can leverage against the threat of death, but how are we to *live the life we have?*

What is truth?, Pilate asks.

Jesus answers,

Death.

Has.

No.

Dominion.

Pilate, you have nothing to fear.

*Mine is the Way,  
the Truth,  
the life.*

I live,  
die and  
live again  
that you might know the truth  
and that the truth might set you free.

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