



[Rev. Steven S. Billings](#)

Sermon for the Last Sunday of the Church Year

November 24, 2024

To Be or Not to Be

John 18:33–37

³³ So Pilate entered his headquarters again and called Jesus and said to him, “Are you the King of the Jews?” ³⁴ Jesus answered, “Do you say this of your own accord, or did others say it to you about me?” ³⁵ Pilate answered, “Am I a Jew? Your own nation and the chief priests have delivered you over to me. What have you done?” ³⁶ Jesus answered, “My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would have been fighting, that I might not be delivered over to the Jews. But my kingdom is not from the world.” ³⁷ Then Pilate said to him, “So you are a king?” Jesus answered, “You say that I am a king. For this purpose I was born and for this purpose I have come into the world—to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice.”

"To be or not to be, that is the question." At least that was the question for Hamlet in Shakespeare's play. But what kind of a question is it? No baby comes into the world asking whether to be or not to be. It's not a question that comes up in the course of everyday conversation. Why is that? Because life happens. "To be or not to be" is not really a question or choice at all. Like salvation, "to be" is a gift of God, not of works so that no one can boast (Eph. 2:9).

Yet, virtually every one of us, if we haven't already, will indeed ponder this question at some point in our life. Maybe you're considering it even now. When the pain and suffering, disillusionment and distress, disease and disability, or injustice and persecution that this sinful, cursed world inevitably brings to bear on us, becomes more than we feel we can or should endure, "to be or not to be," the great question of whether life is worth living, comes to each of us. Some confront it much earlier in life than others, but it's a rare or disingenuous soul who, at the end of their earthly travels and travails, could honestly say they've never thought that life was less desirable than death. Even the Apostle Paul, in writing to the Philippians, said, "I am hard pressed between the two. My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better. But to remain in the flesh is more necessary on your account" (Php. 1:23-24). Indeed, "to be or not to be?"

Like Hamlet and St. Paul, each of us may, from time to time, be tempted by the attractions of death over life – especially when all the troubles "to which our [sinful] flesh is heir" (Hamlet), become relentless and overwhelming.

What is the human answer to the question of life – "to be or not to be?" – the answer of philosophers and scientists, of spiritual gurus and politicians, of progressive minded "ethicists" and humanitarian "experts"? Is it not based on some kind of cost benefit ratio?



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When the suffering outweighs the joy; when the handicap no longer permits productivity; when the quality of life is deemed no longer worth the fight, death – "not to be" – seems the logical and loving choice for anyone with an ounce of compassion.

Sadly, as a result, suicide, euthanasia, and abortion are not only tolerated, but are seen as acceptable and even noble in the eyes of a faithless, Christ-less world. Sadder still, factions within Christendom have come to embrace such things, calling them "charitable."

But such so-called "logic" and "love" could not be further from the truth. The question whether "to be or not to be" has already been answered for you, me, and all the world, in the Son of the living God – the one who suffered, was crucified and died, and is resurrected and ascended to the right hand of His Father and yours.

"To be or not to be?" The Apostle Paul sums up his answer to the Philippians nicely, saying, "to live is Christ, and to die is gain" (Php. 1:21).

Never forget, dear baptized and beloved of God, that both life and death are in the hands of our gracious and merciful Lord – who, regarding death, exhorts us "not [to] fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. But rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell" (Mat. 10:28). In other words, even if someone decides in favor of, and even acts upon, the negative "not to be," the soul lives on and is still in the hands of the One who's created and redeemed us all – and therefore is subject to His judgment.

The truth of the matter is this: No one can ever *decide* not to be. "To be or not to be," is not the question at all. The question is: Where – and most importantly – with whom, you are "to be" for all eternity.

Thanks be to God, this question is "forever . . . settled in heaven" (Psalm 119:89), and has been from the very foundation of the world (Matthew 25:34; Ephesians 1:4) – for Jesus, the Christ, the Son of the living God, is "the way, the truth, and the life" (John 14:6). "To be" with Him is an eternity of life in heaven, and "not to be" with Him is an eternity of condemnation in hell.

In today's Gospel, Pilate is confronted with that truth. As the Roman governor of Judea, he occupied an office that was given and authorized by God to have the power over life and death. He bore the sword of the state so that there would be law and order, for the good of those needing protection against the wantonly lawless of this world. And, in our reading, he believed he had a rather typical life-and-death decision to make. Was this Jesus "to be or not to be?"

But that wasn't the question then, either. For the very name "Jesus" means, "to be is salvation." The irony in this encounter was that Pilate asked the real question that everyone needs answered – and in so doing, stumbled upon that answer.

For, immediately following today's pericope, Pilate asks Jesus, "What is truth?" And when he had said this, he went out again to the Jews, and said to them, "I find no fault in



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him" (John 18:38). The truth was right in front of his nose, and he didn't see it – didn't see *Him*. Yet he spoke the truth without even knowing it – "I find no fault in him." This is most certainly true. In Jesus there is no fault, for He is the sinless Son of God. Of course, that's not what Pilate meant. For him, the only truth that day was what he had determined in his own mind and heart – the truth that he, the mighty governor of Judea, got to decide who was "to be or not to be."

In this Pilate is the embodiment of what we in our day call post-modernism, which is the age of subjective truth. But, as there is nothing new under the sun, the post-modern notion that truth is a matter determined by the individual, and is not therefore subject to any kind of objective reality, is not actually a post-modern invention, but is the very essence of the sin of Adam and Eve in the Garden, which was a bold and audacious breaking of the First Commandment, for to presume that one's own personal evaluation determines truth is to claim godhood, that is, to make one's self God, having the power to create what is true for himself.

So Pilate is also every man, because he stands in the place of every sinner – every person born into this world since Adam and Eve, with the singular exception of the Son of Man, Jesus Christ. And every man, every sinner, thinks the same way.

Again, thanks be to God the Father, who for your sake and mine, placed upon His one and only Son every fault. For Jesus – the One in whom there is no fault – is also the Son of Man who bore the sin of every man and crucified it all in His own body on Calvary's cross, that it all may be buried with Him and left forever in the grave. Having been raised from the dead, the Son of God and Son of Man – the very "to be" of salvation – ascended to the right hand of His Father to live and reign forever. This, too, is most certainly true.

Dear Christian, the Truth is right in front of your noses today. It's in your ears by the preaching of the Word of God that forgives you all your sins. It's been poured over your head in the waters of Holy Baptism. It'll soon be upon your tongue in the bread and wine that is the very body and blood of our Lord at His Holy Supper.

The Truth is Jesus the Christ, who is here with you today, and even unto the end of the age (Matthew 28:20). And the truth is that if "to be or not to be" is the question for you today, the answer is right here for you as well – "to be is salvation." For that's the name of your Jesus, the one "name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12).

And most importantly for you today, beloved, it's the name given to you so that you may know with certainty the Way, by the Truth you've heard, for the Life that's yours forever. In the name of the Father, and of the + Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen