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Every Friday

Price Sixpence

MARCH 22, 1957

Editorial and Business Offices: Hope Gibbons Building, Inglewood Place, Wellington, C.1.
P.O. Box 6098. Telegraphic Address: "Listener," Wellington. Telephone 54-106.

Jesting Pilate's Question

A NEW series of talks, *In Search of Truth*, to be heard presently from YC stations (details on page 8), may have an intimidating title; but in the hands of good speakers it becomes of interest to all people who now and then examine their perplexities. The subject cannot be treated here on one level of thought. Philosophers may make their definitions; historians and scientists may speak of method and purpose; and poets may remind us of the truth that is expressed in metaphor. But listeners will relate what is heard to their own experience; and the search, for them, is constantly changing its ground. They, too, may be scientific at least part of the time; but in every life, no matter how narrow it may seem, there is room for poetry as well as practical affairs; and all thinking comes in the end to ancient mysteries.

The use of scientific method has allowed men to reach great precision in forms of thought and action which have increased their wealth and comfort, though not necessarily their safety. But the search for truth, as most of us see it, is an enterprise which concerns the whole man; and there are parts of his nature that wealth and comfort cannot satisfy. Philosophers are able to show that it is fallacious, and indeed unnecessary, to look for the complete truth. It would be impossible for human affairs to be conducted in an orderly way if no decision could be made until all the facts of a situation were known. In a murder trial, the law is served if enough facts can be brought forward to support a verdict. Other facts may be used in mitigation, if the accused person is found to be guilty, and may influence a jury to recommend mercy; but at the end of the trial it cannot be said that the truth is completely known. Even if motives have been revealed, they could not be understood without knowledge of irrational and accidental factors that have helped to shape them. A search of that sort would be endless. For all mundane purposes, truth can be found

within limits fixed by law, or simply by practical requirements. But minds are not concerned exclusively with mundane things.

People are not satisfied with facts: they want to know *why* things have happened, and without this curiosity there would be no history. "The main task of the historian," says Dr Francis West, a speaker in the series, "is, having got the facts right, to explain them: to account for their inter-relationship." And explanation, since it must be influenced by the whole set and bias of a man's mind, is the beginning of error. Even harder, for the truth-seeker, is the problem of religion. Some facts about religious experience can be stated precisely; but theological argument is fundamentally an expression or denial of belief. Religion has suffered much from the attacks of those who believe that truth does not exist outside statements which can be verified, and that verification must be a rational process. There is, however, a part of experience which reason cannot reach. It is revealed to us by poets, and indeed by all artists, though people who do not read verse may discover it for themselves in a moment of vision when they briefly possess the truth about a person or an event.

We sometimes forget, in our busy scientific world, how much of what we do and think is determined by feeling. Truth is under the surface, where all the energy of living remains primordial; and sometimes it breaks through in words and music and intuitions. But conscious life is on the surface, and after many years in the market place it is possible to believe that what happens there is reality, and that all else is illusion, or an animal murmur. A day may be reached when truth is put aside with a jest, and Pilate asks his question once again. A little truth can be enough, if men want to live close to the ground; but there is more in the world than words can support, or science explain; and the greatest poets will fall into silence when they try to tell us all that they see and know.

—M.H.H.

N.Z. LISTENER, MARCH 22, 1957.