

Hear the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ according to John [14:15-21]

Glory to you, O Lord.

‘If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you for ever. This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you. ‘I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live. On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them.’

This is the gospel of the Lord.

Praise to you, O Christ.

A long time ago when I was thinking about Christianity and the claims of Christ, a phrase popped into my mind and I wrote it down thinking what a great thought I'd had. The phrase was *Know the truth and the truth will set you free*.

I was a bit disappointed when I realised it wasn't an original thought of mine: that the words came from the lips of Jesus, from John's gospel¹. I'd no idea how the phrase came into my mind: I must have heard the words or read them at some time or other - perhaps a vestige from my religious education at school and they'd lain buried in my subconscious. But there was something miraculous about the fact that they just popped into my mind when I was thinking seriously about the Christian faith. Was God, the God who I then readily admitted I didn't believe in, speaking to me? I spent two years battling with God, trying to get at the truth before I eventually rather reluctantly had to admit that I believed in Jesus Christ, that perhaps he was all he'd been cracked up to be. That happened a long time ago but my interest in getting at the truth of things hasn't waned. So it seems rather apt that in our series of Eastertide sermons on what it means to be Easter people, the topic for this Sunday is *Seeking the truth*.

But to recap briefly on what's gone before. Adela began by speaking on our having *confidence* in the resurrection. We've only to look at the effect the resurrection had on those early followers of Jesus to realise the truth.

Jonathan spoke about *proclaiming* the resurrection: the resurrection was God's endorsement of Jesus' life, his words and deeds. And Nick, speaking on *Listening to Jesus voice*, encouraged us to sit and quietly weigh our belief and unbelief. And then *tell the risen Christ the truth*. We can be open and honest with God even if we can't always be open and honest with others.

Then at last week's *Thanksgiving for Baptism* service, Jonathan spoke about bearing the wounds of Christ. At baptism we sign the candidate with the sign of the cross and, in so doing, remind ourselves of Christ's sacrifice on the cross but also his triumph over death.

¹ John 8:32

And now: *seeking the truth*.

What is truth? Is it simply relative, subjective or objective? Is it simply the absence of lies? Just as peace is more than the absence of war, truth is surely more than the absence of lies. Truth can be found in fiction. Jesus used fiction, make-belief, to *make* people *believe* the truth. He told stories, parables. Someone said: “A parable is a lie that makes us realise the truth”². Jesus used parables [lies] to make us realise the truth, the truth about God, the truth about ourselves, the truth about the world. Don’t get me wrong: Jesus isn’t a liar. He didn’t set out to deceive people. He set out to change or correct people’s idea of God and he used make-belief to do that. Jesus is the Truth and the revealer of the truth about God.

I always feel a bit sorry for poor old Pilate who asked Jesus the question: *What is truth?* I feel sorry for him because he didn’t wait for an answer from Jesus. Perhaps there was no answer Jesus could give that would convince him. If Jesus had said to Pilate what he’d said to his disciples that he is *the way, the truth and the life*³, that Pilate could know the truth and the truth would set him free, perhaps Pilate would have been none the wiser. If Jesus had told Pilate about the *Holy Spirit being the Spirit of truth whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him*. Pilate might have thought he was nuts, or extremely rude to insinuate that Pilate was perhaps too worldly to receive the truth.

The late playwright, Dennis Potter, speculated on how the conversation might have gone between Jesus and Pilate. Knowing that Jesus had told his disciples to love their enemies, Potter has Pilate ask Jesus the question: “*Do you love me?*”

To which Jesus answers: “*Yes, Pilate. I love you.*”

And in response Pilate slaps Jesus but then, feeling ashamed of what he’s done, he covers his face with his hands and says: “*I’m sorry that was uncalled for.*”

“*It’s all right, Pilate,*” Jesus tells him, “*don’t be afraid. You’ve nothing to fear.*”

This is too much for Pilate and he yells for the soldiers to “*take this idiot away.*”

Perhaps Pilate did think Jesus was an idiot. Jesus’ talk of a kingdom not of this world just didn’t make any sense to him. And it’s always unnerving when someone refuses

² Picasso see Parables of Peanuts, p 12

³ John 14:6 from last week’s gospel reading

to retaliate, to meet violence with violence or the unkind word with another unkind word. But Jesus knew and knows the truth of the matter: that violence begets violence, insult breeds insult. He refused to escalate that cycle of violence and abuse.

We, his followers, can find that attitude difficult to match. There can be long-running tensions between us that cause great bitterness and heartache. It can be hard sometimes to break that tension, to say sorry especially when we feel we're in the right.

We might hypothesise on how that conversion between Jesus and Pilate might have gone but whatever Jesus had said, the outcome would certainly have been the same. Jesus knew exactly what he was doing even though at first he caused distress to his followers. But the truth of the matter is that after an encounter with the risen Christ, his followers changed from being terrified, doubt-riddled men and women into confident, trust-filled people ready to proclaim the truth about Jesus no matter the cost.

For example, after Peter met the risen Christ on a beach, the former fisherman had a dramatic sea-change! He started his preaching career and after his first sermon 3,000 people became Christ's followers. He set the ball rolling - Christianity was on its way!

And then Paul, determined to stamp out Christianity before it took a hold, has an encounter with the risen Christ. And he preaches a powerful sermon to the people of Athens. In the reading from Acts⁴, we hear how he cleverly flatters their interest in God: *I see how extremely religious you are in every way, he tells them. But you worship an unknown God. Let me tell you about the God who can be known. This God isn't made of stone, silver or gold. He "doesn't live in shrines" this God "gives life and breath to all things" For what purpose? "So that people would search for him, perhaps grope for him and find him..."*

God wants us to grope for him and find him, wants us to know the truth that will set us free.

⁴ Acts 17:22-31

The Truth is a person - Jesus Christ. In seeking the truth, we are seeking Jesus. Jesus is the Truth, and the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of truth who comes alongside us just as Jesus came alongside his disciples. We don't seek a concept or an idea about truth, we seek a person. In seeking and following that person, we will be guided into all truth.⁵

If, at times, you feel like giving up, remember those early disciples. They continued to follow Jesus after his death because they'd had an encounter with the risen Christ; because the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of truth, had come to them. With the Holy Spirit as their guide they no longer let what they didn't know or understand disturb their confidence in what they did know and understand.

In seeking the truth, let me encourage you to do the same. Never let what you don't know disturb your confidence in what you do know. Follow the truth, the risen Christ, doubts and all, warts and all! There'll be times when we fail in living up to Christ's example but the Holy Spirit, our Advocate, will continually plead our case before God when we feel we've let him down badly and we haven't got a leg to stand on. The Holy Spirit will come alongside us and will reveal the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth about Jesus, about God, about ourselves, about our world.
Amen.

⁵ John 16:13