

St. Ninian's Parish Church
Sunday 25th November 2018
John 18: 33 - 37

Next year the author Hilary Mantel promises that she will publish the final volume in her 3-volume series of historical novels that began with *Wolf Hall* in 2009. Both of the first two novels, *Wolf Hall* and *Bring Up the Bodies* won the Booker Prize for fiction. I enjoyed them, and I've been waiting a long time for the final one in the series.

Wolf Hall is a thrilling, historical novel set in Tudor England. It tells the story of Henry VIII's chief minister, Thomas Cromwell. A large part of the story concerns Henry VIII's desire to divorce his first wife Catherine of Aragon so that he can marry Anne Boleyn.

The King is consistently thwarted in his desire by the Pope, and eventually gives the task of securing his divorce from Catherine and marriage to Anne, to Thomas Cromwell. Thomas skillfully manages the job, but at the last moment he comes across an unexpected hitch that could ruin everything. He hears a rumour that some years before, Anne had secretly married someone called Henry Percy.

Of course, Anne - desperate to marry the King - denies it. But, Thomas isn't sure that Percy won't spoil the show. So, he visits Percy to ask whether he did marry Anne secretly when they were both young and foolish. For good measure Thomas takes with him his thumbscrews, metaphorically speaking.

Percy, not the sharpest knife in the drawer, tells Thomas that yes, he and Anne were married in secret, and he still loves her. Thomas tells Percy that this can't possibly be true. Percy says that it is. Thomas takes out his thumbscrews. Percy's recollection of the past clears, and he says, 'Anne Boleyn? Never heard of the woman.' 'Good boy', says Thomas.

That all works out well until the King, now married to Anne, takes a fancy to Jane. The King, remembering what a good job Thomas did in getting rid of Catherine, now asks him to get rid of Anne, so that he can marry Jane.

Thomas remembers Percy and the marriage that was and then wasn't. Once again, he visits Percy with the intention of securing an annulment of the King's marriage on the grounds that Anne was already married when she married the King. For good measure, Thomas takes along his thumbscrews.

Thomas says to Percy, 'How well do you know Anne Boleyn, the King's wife?' Percy, an older man now, but not a wiser one, replies, 'Anne Boleyn? Never heard of the woman.' Thomas takes out his thumbscrews. Percy says, 'Oh that Anne Boleyn - I used to be married to her.' 'Good boy', says Thomas.

In the end Thomas doesn't have to use Percy's testimony, he eventually gets Anne on adultery. But, the point is, did you notice what happened there?

Did you notice what truth was in Tudor England? Truth, in Tudor England, was always, and only, whatever the powerful said that it was. If the powerful say that you are married, then you are married. If they say you are not, you are not.

What was true of the relationship between power and truth in Tudor England, that the truth is only ever what the powerful say it is, is often true everywhere, always. Take 1st century Judea. What is truth, asks Pontius Pilate in our Gospel reading this morning, just before he decides to execute Jesus of Nazareth who at that moment is standing powerless, friendless, naked before him.

Pilate is trying to decide what to do, and he needs to do the right thing in a tricky situation, so he asks, 'What is truth?' What he means is, of course, where does power lie in this situation? Because once Pilate knows where power lies, he'll know the truth.

Does power lie with the Emperor in Rome? Of course, it does, but Rome is two thousand miles away. Does power lie with the Sanhedrin, the Jewish religious court? It is powerful locally, not as powerful as the Emperor, but on the other hand it is only two miles away, not two thousand.

Or does power lie with the angry mob in the courtyard outside Pilate's window, crying out 'Crucify him!'. The crowd isn't as powerful as the Emperor or the Sanhedrin, but on the other hand they are right there, only 200 yards away.

Or does power lie with Jesus? This man has no friends, no clothes, nothing. He certainly isn't powerful, but on the other hand at that very moment he is standing in the palace eye-to-eye with Pilate himself.

Pilate needs to know the truth in order to know what to do. In order to know the truth he needs to know where power lies. How did this man get to stand before him? Does power lie with the mob at the door? Or is it held by the religious leaders of the mob? Does the Emperor's power diminish over a distance of two thousand miles?

What is truth? Where does power lie?

Today, on this Sunday, the last before the season of Advent, in the liturgical calendar churches across the world mark Christ the King Sunday. It is an opportunity for us to talk about the symbolism found throughout the New Testament that describe Christ as a king, including the passage we read this morning in which Pilate asks, 'Are you the king of the Jews?'

This opportunity to worship Christ as a king offers us the chance to reflect on the relationship between power, represented here by monarchy, and truth, which is represented in Jesus Christ. If you today want to know the truth about anything in this world, like Pilate wanted to know the truth all these years ago, then, like Pilate, you need to reflect on where power lies in our world.

As the example of Henry Percy showed, understanding the relationship between power and truth in Tudor England was essential for survival. Pontius Pilate knew that too about the 1st century world. The same is true today. The development, the morality, the equality, the fairness, some would say the very survival of our society depends on people understanding the relationship between truth and power.

Where does power lie today? In a world where no one knows who to trust, or worse where people trust who or what they shouldn't trust, how do you know where power lies? Does it lie with those who control social media, like Mark Zuckerberg, the creator of Facebook, for example? Does it lie with the traditionally media, like the BBC for example? Does it lie with politicians, like Donald Trump?

Does it lie with scientists who can empirically discover the truth, or does everyone's experience of the world represent their own truth? Who is telling the truth in our world, in our lives? Where does power lie today?

The truth is that because power and truth are so mixed up with each other, if you really want to know what is true, you have to get as far away from power as you can. You have to strip yourself naked of it; be humiliated by it; let it crucify you. Then, when you are utterly powerless, what is true of this world will be revealed to you.

The truth is you can't buy the truth with the power of money; you can invent the truth with money, but you can't buy it. The truth is you can't discover the truth using the power of force; you can find an approximation of the truth with force, but you can't discover it. The truth is you can't uncover the truth with the power of influence or persuasion; you can have a peak, see a little, increase your knowledge, but you can't uncover it.

If you want to know what the truth is, don't go and ask King Henry 8th. Instead, find out what the truth is by sitting down and talking to his six wives.

If you want to know what the truth is today, don't spend too much time listening to those who shout the loudest on social media or in Parliament or in the media.

Instead, you could learn more from an organisation like the Guild about the projects it is supporting over the next three years amongst the youngest and least powerful people in our society and our world: the children of the Boys Brigade for example; or Seema's Project that supports the abandoned children of trafficked sex workers.

Other projects that other Guilds throughout the Church of Scotland will be supporting over the next three years include Journeying Together, which helps the children of young mothers in Zambia; Malawi Fruits that supports young farmers in rural Malawi, and Join the Dots, a charity in this country that tackles loneliness and social isolation. These charities support those people in the world who have been metaphorically and sometimes literally stripped naked, humiliated, crucified.

The Guild's aim is to put faith in to action, but it is also there to enable men and women to express their faith through worship and prayer, in Jesus Christ, the King who stood friendless, naked, and powerless before the mighty Roman empire, with the mob crying out for his crucifixion.

After all, if you want to know what the truth is, don't go and ask Pontius Pilate or even, God-forbid, the Emperor in Rome. Instead, find the truth, by travelling to rural, remote, edge-of-the-empire Galilee, and there join the fishermen, the tax collectors, the sick and the sinful, and have breakfast with a carpenter.