

St. Ninian's Parish Church

Sunday 16th June 2019

Proverbs 8: 1 – 4; Romans 5: 1 – 5; John 16: 12 – 15

'When he comes who is the Spirit of truth, he will guide you in to all truth,'¹ said Jesus in our Gospel reading this morning. 'When he comes who is the Spirit of truth, he will guide you in to all truth.'

We could do with some of that today, some of that guidance in all truth, for in the world today the truth sometimes feels that is up for grabs.

Where is it to be found? It used to be the Government was always believed; not so today. It used to be that the Church was always believed; not so today. Today, on-line, internet enabled social media is as much an authoritative voice as institutions. But, even then, if we scroll through social media, do we believe all those voices that claim they are telling the truth there?

Truth after all is power, so many people claim that they possess it. If you know what the truth is, then you hold power in the palm of your hand. But, the converse is true too. If you hold power, then you get to decide what is true. Perhaps, most famously in the Bible, it was Pontus Pilate who discovered most forcefully the relationship between the truth and power.

At one of the most decisive moments in Jesus' life, when he held Jesus' fate in the palm of his hand, but uncertain of what to do next, the question Pilate asked, the question he needed an answer to in order to decide what action he should take, was 'What is truth?'

For Pilate, the answer to that question depended on who held the most power at that moment. Once he knew who held the most power, then he would know who got to determine what was true, and once he knew that, then he would know how to act.

Did power lie, Pilate would have wondered, with his boss, the Emperor in Rome? Did he have to do the Emperor's bidding? Most definitely, yes. But, then the Emperor was a long way away. On the other hand, the reach of the Emperor's presence was not inconsiderable. The Emperor may not have been with Pilate in person, but he was there in spirit. The Emperor's power was a spirit of truth in Pontius Pilate's life. What did the Emperor want him to do?

Having said that, at that moment when Pilate was looking at Jesus wondering what truth was, the Emperor's power, for all its spiritual presence, may not have felt quite as forcefully present as the power of the baying mob at the door, shouting 'Crucify him!'. No matter who you are, the power of the crowd cannot be discounted. Just this week in Hong Kong, where tens-of-thousands of protesters fought running battles with police in the streets, China is discovering that when a crowd of people takes to the streets, everyone takes notice.

So, perhaps in Pontius Pilate's mind he should pay more heed to the power of the crowd banging at the door, than what the Emperor in Rome might or might not want him to do with this man who people claimed was the King of the Jews. After all, if the Emperor was a spiritually divine presence in Pilate's life, this crowd shouting crucify were being egged on by their religious leaders, those priests and scribes who believed in an abstract, unseen God. Was this abstract, unseen God, this idea in the minds of these people, more or less powerful than the Emperor's divine spiritual power.

¹ John 16:12

But then, who was this man standing right in front of him, this carpenter from Galilee? How much power did he have? Surely none? Although, somehow-or-other this man had managed to get himself a personal audience with the Roman governor, and had he not claimed to be divine? If so, then maybe power rested with this human being, Jesus of Nazareth, standing right in front of him rather than the crowd a little bit further away at the door, or the Emperor even further away in Rome?

Pilate needed to know where power lay in this situation, because once he knew that then he would know who controlled the truth, and once he knew who controlled the truth, then he would himself have the knowledge, the power, to make his decision. What is truth?

What is truth, today, in our lives? Where is it to be found? Is it to be found in your own experience of the world, as a human being? Yes, of course, your experience of this world helps you to decide what is true. Up to a point. After all, as an individual you don't know everything. And, also your capacity to wield the distorting influence of power over yourself is not inconsiderable. After all, don't we all interpret our experiences in ways that suit ourselves? Your experience of the world tells you something about what is true, but how much do you know really? And, how likely are you to use your power over yourself to distort the truth to suit yourself?

Perhaps, then, other people are also a source of truth? Perhaps the community you live in is a better source of truth. Perhaps all those faceless voices on social media, or floating around in the ether of the internet like a spiritual presence are a better source of the truth?

If you want to know the truth, do you trust what everyone else is saying is true? Does what the crowd of your friends, acquaintances, followers, say contain the spirit of truth? If you were one of many witnesses at an accident, and everyone else remembers seeing it one way, but you remember seeing something different, what do you do? Do you conform to what everyone else says, and the power of like-mindedness that the majority hold, or would you be brave enough, and certain enough about what you saw, to stand up against the power of the majority? Does the truth reside in the collective?

So, if we can't trust ourselves to know what the truth is, because of our ignorance or of the power we have over ourselves to distort the truth for our own convenience. And we can't trust what everyone else is saying the truth is, because of the power of collective-thinking, then should we trust a higher authority to tell us what the truth is, some God-like authority?

Does the BBC tell you the truth when you watch the News? Should Russians trust Russia Today, their state broadcaster to tell them the truth? Should the Chinese trust the Chinese Communist Party to tell them the truth? Might the power they hold - these abstract, disembodied organisations, these voices from above - ever distort the truth in some way?

What is the truth? '...when he comes who is the Spirit of truth, he will guide you into all truth,' said Jesus.

But, not just that, in the reading from John, which we read this morning, Jesus went on to say that, '...he will not speak on his own authority (this Spirit of truth) ... He will glorify me ... All that the Father has is mine...' It seems that this Spirit of truth is not to be let loose on its own, it is in a relationship with Jesus and Jesus' Father.

I think, that it was a very good idea of God's to disseminate himself, his truth, and his power in three very distinct ways. Of course, the God of creation, the maker of heaven and earth is a God of truth. But, a disembodied, remote, omnipotent - all-powerful - divinity residing beyond

the heavens or in a temple-bound and exclusive holy-of-holies is difficult to relate to, to get to know, to trust completely with blind faith. And whoever holds access to this divine reality, whoever can manipulate the power of this locked-away God gets to manipulate what this God has to say about what is true.

If you want to be a God of truth, you can't just be an abstract and all-powerful divinity remote from the emotional and vulnerable joys and sufferings of human life. You have to be present in the world to relate to those who worship you, and to experience life as it is lived by them. For their experience of life has an element of truth about it, which can't be denied, even if they do tend to distort it. What does a god know about truth, who knows nothing of what it means to be human?

But, even then, the God of power who bends down to live in the world alongside and amidst creation, has to know that abstract, remote, beyond-the-heavens-power, and immediate, personal experience are not enough to know the truth. It is when we gather together to share our experiences of the world, of life, of God, that we also discover something of the truth, even if it's a truth that can fall prey to the power of collective thought. The Spirit moves powerfully when we gather together, it forms its church, it sends us out in to the world.

God is truth, and exists beyond our world, beyond our lives, beyond our comprehension. But, when this truth falls in to your lap from above, you might want to take the precaution of asking who might have thrown it there, and why.

God is truth, and in Jesus Christ God lived on earth to experience the life we live. God is all-powerful, but God is all-suffering as well. That is how God knows what it is to be all-loving, for you can't love if you are not prepared to suffer. But, when the truth is presented through just one person's experience of life, we might want to take the precaution of wondering whether we can ever grasp the whole truth from just one perspective.

God is truth, and when we gather together to worship, this collective experience tests and refines our individual experiences, and the Holy Spirit forms us in to a church, Christ's body on earth, and sends us out in to the world to be together, in unity; Christ resurrected in the world. But, when the truth is presented as collective knowledge, we should always ask, to what extent are we just conforming; to what extent is the truth being repressed because of the power of the majority?

God is truth, and the truth always comes to us in three ways because if it didn't, we could never be sure that the truth we have discovered isn't just the voice of whoever or whatever holds power.

The truth is a higher authority that knows better than we do. But, it is not just that. It also our very real and very personal living experience of life and what we know to be true in this world. But, it is not just that either. It is also what others know to be true. The truth is trinity, it is three things held together as one. When it comes to you in one form, always ask it what it is saying in its other forms.