

Maundy Thursday – 28 March 2024

Message – Truth and Love

Creator, Redeemer and Giver of Life, revealed to us through the lifting up of the Eternal Word, open our hearts and minds, ears and eyes, to your love. **Amen.**

Three hundred years ago, writing on the topic of truth and lies, the author Johnathan Swift said, '*Falsehood flies, and the Truth comes limping after it.*' More recently, Terry Pratchett expressed the same sentiment in his book *Truth*, '*a lie can run around the world before the truth has got its boots on.*'

It is easy to think that the issue of telling the truth is new, a consequence of the world wide web making it so easy for news, regardless of whether it is true or false to reach a wide audience. Yet, the issue was raised at the advent of the printing press when there was horror that anyone could publish anything and you would have no idea if it was true!

My suspicion would be that the issue of Truth has been around for as long as humans have been telling one another stories. How do we judge what is true?

In our three year cycle of readings, focusing on Mark this year, because his gospel is so short we also hear more from the gospel of John and the differences between the synoptics (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) and John become more apparent.

In tonight's readings a blatant difference cries out to us.

The synoptics have the last supper on the night of the Passover while John has it the night before. If you have a

literal view of the Bible this is a problem. There are ways of resolving it. Ultimately, all of these involve changing our reading the texts, which destroys some of their meaning.

The Passover is the most significant Jewish festival, it is fundamental to God's covenant with the Jewish people, it is the story of their salvation. The synoptics, with the last supper on the night of the Passover, are offering a new story of salvation, captured in the eucharist: bread and wine become for us the body and blood of Christ. Every time we meet to share bread and wine we are reminded of Christ's life, death, and new life, and that we are a part of that new life, we are now the body of Christ in the world.

The gospel according to John does not tell us of the institution of communion at all. Instead, we have a meal on the day of preparation at which Jesus provides a symbolic act of servanthood. Jesus undertakes a task so menial that a Jewish master would not even ask their Jewish slave to do it. Jesus, clearly worthy of honour, deeply loved by his disciples, washes their stinking feet that were covered in who knows what.

According to John, the next day, the continuation of the day of preparation, Jesus is crucified, as the lambs are being sacrificed for the Passover. John's image is that Jesus Christ is our perpetual Passover lamb. The sacrifice that ensured the angel of death passed over the houses of the Hebrews has been made once for all for all of us and for all creation.

Which of these narratives is true?

We Christians believe that both are true. Both tell of an essential aspect of our redemptive narrative. We are the

body of Christ AND Christ has made the ultimate sacrifice for us. Some of us may feel a bit sketchy as to exactly how Christ's death paid the price of for our sin but we recognise that his sacrifice of his life has transformed our lives.

Recently Anna, my wife, was reading about the nature of Truth in the writing of Marjory Kempe, the fourteenth century English mystic. The author noted that in Marjory's autobiography, Marjory chose dates for their symbolism. She started writing on the twenty third of July, the feast of St Bridget, and the day after the feast day of Mary Magdelene because Marjory was more beloved by Jesus than both of them! It is hard to know whether readers at the time were as concerned about historicity in the way we are. What we do know, is that they would have immediately understood the symbolism of the dates.

This view of literary truth rather than literal truth has long been a part of the notion of truth even though we appear to have lost it in favour of the narrower literal truth, to which we still in fact give literary meaning. We interpret events.

It is literary truth that really matter. As we approach the gospel it is our understanding of the literary truth that shapes our lives and our response. And, even this, as one might note in a light-hearted way, can be twisted to portray things that are not entirely true. Marjory Kempe was certainly a remarkable woman but one might consider claiming to be greater than others to be less than saintly. Julian of Norwich cautioned her to, *'measure these experiences according to the worship they accrue to God and the profit to her fellow Christians.'*

So how can we tell truth. If we look at the life of Christ, it is in the integrity and authenticity of his life when compared to his words and when viewed as a whole. Christ's life and words are part of an indivisible whole. Christ lived as he spoke. Christ embodied the kingdom of God wherever he went. In the act of washing the disciples' feet he showed what he meant when he said, *'whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant'* and that he meant it.

In a world where the Truth seems to be scarce, as perhaps it has always been, the only way we convey the Truth to others is through our actions. This is necessarily a slow business. Contrary to Johnathan Swift, the truth is not limping along. It is moving thoughtfully, slowly, and steadily. The Truth has a sure foundation, for Christians the foundation is in the love of God. We then reveal that Truth in the world by our love for others and all creation.

The Truth by which we live is seen in our actions. We must search ourselves to see that the image of Christ is found in us; that we are, as Christ, prepared to be servants of all. At times that means great sacrifice, at other times it means standing up for the rights of others and ensuring that they are protected and they too know God's good gifts.

We see both dimensions in the life of Christ. If we are truly the body of Christ both must be visible in us, seen in our love for one another, flowing out to love for those in need, a love that cares and protects, that serves and challenges.

May God give us loving hearts and the willingness and strength to love and to protect all who most need it.
Amen. Amen.