

Easter, 6A, Sunday, May 17th, 2020

Readings: Acts 17:22-31, Psalm 66:8-20, 1 Peter 3:13-22, John 14:15-21

Truth: Rubbing Up Against Reality

Introduction

The story of the exposure of paedophilia, the abuse of children, in the Boston Diocese in 2002 is harrowing. At the time, I was a PhD student at several places: primarily Boston University, but also Boston College, the main Catholic university in Massachusetts. Cardinal Law, the Archbishop of Boston, lived just over the road from the university, in the Diocesan residence – a castle befitting a prince of the church. On one level, the story of the exposure of paedophilia by the Boston Globe, was a story about human courage *against* resistant institutions – among them, the Catholic church, church charities, local and state government and the Boston police. On another level, it was a story about the struggle of journalists – many practicing Catholics – to come to terms with the situation they had at times unwillingly and always uncomfortably uncovered: a situation, not of isolated priests who were just “bad apples”, but the very system, in which the faithful, the trusting lay people, were made complicit in a sort of innocent but perverse loyalty. In our film clip, that is what stands out, as many lay people fell into silence: torn between their commitment to the church and their pain at experiencing first or second hand the abuse of clergy. But there is a third level in this story as well: the fatal contradiction, the screaming incongruity between two truths: on the one hand, religious truth in the sense of the Christian tradition, what we believe; and on the other, the ethical, the practical truth, what is done. The story of the uncovering of the tragedy of paedophilia in Boston, was about the yawning gap, the discord between the faith claims that the church makes – our doctrinal, our dogmatic truth – and its practical, systemic failure in its duty of love and care to children and to families: The issue was then and remains today, (even as the Australian Royal Commission into Sexual Abuse is set to deliver its conclusions), one of truth when it rubs up against reality, truth not just claimed, but truth actually put into practice.

The Acts and John

Let’s look at the readings for today through the lens of truth. Historically speaking, it has overwhelmingly been the poor of history who have accepted, assimilated the Christian Gospel. While in Islam, mission was usually expressed through the merchant classes, Christianity appealed to marginal communities. Here however, Paul, an intellectual in his own right, attempts to engage in another way: conceptually, with the ‘pointy heads’ of the ancient world’s intellectual capital, Athens. His approach is clear. To a world, confident in its own knowledge, where the gods were above all guarantors, violent guarantors of the political and economic system, Paul daringly points to the statue of the *Unknown God* in the Areopagus, the centre of the temple life, the heart of high culture, the hub of Greek mythology. As he points to the statue, he suggests this God, until now unknown to them, is in fact the God of the Hebrews: the Creator God, the God of life. For Paul, this idea of the God of life, packs a punch which he does not immediately reveal, one suspects, because he does not want to be thrown out of the Areopagus: for in Hebrew thought, the God of Life is the God who is known for his defence of truth in the sense of the innocent, of the victim: those who are seldom if ever heard or seen. The God of life is the Author of the ethical, the One who implicitly challenges the deathly violence of the Greek deities.

The Gospel reading is even more compelling. Pivotal to it is the idea of the Spirit of Truth. Last Sunday you heard the reading which precedes this one, about Jesus as “the Way, the Truth and the Life”. Two weeks running then we hear the idea of truth. But what does truth mean in John’s Gospel, what is John’s take on truth as he writes to his small community, itself the victim of pressure from the powers of the day?

When we think of Jesus as the Truth, we often think in terms of the doctrinal claims that we make about him: among them, *Son of God, Saviour*. But that is not in the first instance, John’s point, when he suggests that Jesus is the Truth. Rather John is saying to us that Jesus as the Truth *makes claims upon us, not we upon him*; The emphasis is not upon correct religious or doctrinal thought, *what we think about him*, as much as upon correct living, *what he asks of us*. Today’s reading about living according to the Spirit of Truth confirms this. For John, the Spirit of Truth, the Holy Spirit (his special term is *Paracletos*, meaning defender of the victim) enables Christians to not just live as Jesus did, but to actually complete Jesus’ work, to live creatively, not destructively, to be vehicles of life and love.

Drawing It Together

And so back to the film *Spotlight*! The insight of this tale, the discernment of this story is this: that claims of truth, any claims to ultimate truth, made by Christians, are credible, only through verification, verification through practice, through what we do. Claims to truth are empty without truthful lives. The test of truth, even the most lofty truth, is its rubbing up against reality. This is the Easter Faith we are asked to live: practical, earthy love.

Where truth rubs up against reality: *Spotlight*

Screened in 2016, this movie is the account of the fight of the newspaper, the Boston Globe, to uncover the long history of paedophilia within the Boston Catholic Archdiocese. The film is really a study about truth and the way in which we deceive ourselves. It is a statement about how secrecy invariably conspires against truth and the ever delicate, even elusive relationship between the claims Christians make about the truth of Christian faith and what they do in practice.