



Sixth Sunday in Easter Sunday, May 17th, 2020

Truth Conceptual and Practical – but Practical First



This week and last, there is in the Gospel readings the insistence upon truth: last week Jesus spoke about being, “the way, the truth and the life” (John 14:6) and today, we hear about the “Spirit of truth”, referring to Jesus’ presence with his followers and friends, after his death and resurrection. For centuries, Christians have tended to read the idea of truth through the lens of doctrine: the received beliefs passed onto us about what Christians believe. In other words, we tend to understand truth as a proposition, a concept, an idea. In interpreting the Gospel of John’s statements about truth in this way, we are really reading our own views back into the Gospel statements about truth. We need to remember that John’s Gospel was written well before the doctrine of the Church – its body of stated belief – really got off the ground. So, what does John mean by truth and Jesus’ connection with truth. Equally importantly, what do we mean, when from the standpoint of our Christian identity, speak about truth? Let’s see!

OUR GATHERING

Announcements

Greeting

In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit
The Lord be with you
And also with you

Christ is risen!

He is risen indeed!

The same one who was born an outsider;

the very same one who was executed as an outsider.

The same one who died;

the very same one who lives.

The same one;

the very same one who brings us to life

We light the Paschal Candle

We light the candle knowing
that the Risen Christ overcomes death and despair
and shows us how to live.

Hymn: Thanks to God (TIS 431, Regent Square, R.T. Brooks)

A Prayer of Confession Concerning the Way We Misperceive and Misconstrue God

From an anthropological point of view, it is almost a given, that religious consciousness is grounded in fear, grounded in the felt need to placate, to appease, to assuage the gods. Certainly, religion of the ancient near east was forged in this way: the absolute necessity for nation states to keep the gods on-side, so as to ensure their survival against other states. Pastoral experience suggests to me that this is never far from the religious mind-set, including the Christian one. Countless times, it has been put to me by Christians that faith is about “keeping the rules”, and behind that, stands the intuition that one keeps the rules in order to ensure that God is pleased with you and will reward you, if not in this life, certainly the next. In other circumstances, when people have suffered, I have been asked “what did I do? Why is God angry with me”? I suspect that the roots in both cases of such behaviour, lie in a deep sense of human alienation from God, where human beings are always perceived as at the disadvantage. As someone once said to me: “God always wins”.

In this opening prayer, I try to register the point that Jesus overturns the almost universal obsession about the potential, if not actual violence of God. Jesus rejects this fear-driven perception of God, celebrating God’s love and graciousness: this is his beginning point and is in effect a summation of the Gospel. As we think further this morning, it is this divine love as an action and as active in Jesus, that shapes our understanding of truth

We thought you wore the skin of thunder,
spoke in verbs of storm and hurricane,
majestic and mighty as lightning,
unreachable
as the cold and silent fire
of distant stars;

hidden behind
a curtain in the temple,
an untouchable invisibility approachable
by the highest priest only,
hands freshly blooded
from an altar.

And then somehow the veil was parted:
we gained glimpses
of the nearness of your love
as the hurting were healed,
the outcast befriended,
the lost restored,
and everywhere death
had its power challenged,
by the son of a Jewish carpenter
from Galilee.

***If you have seen me,
said Jesus, you have seen the Father***

And we *do* see you there,
in the Gospels,
healing in synagogues and in houses,
feeding the hungry on hillsides,
embracing the lepers and the outsiders,
turning over the tables in the temple,
nailed to a cross of injustice
but risen,
greeting women at
the graveside,
sharing bread with your friends,
the power of death

overturned.
 Approachable, reachable,
 the accessible God,
 visible in the skin of Jesus.

***If you have seen me,
 said Jesus, you have seen the Father***

And you are not done,
 not content to wear
 such skin only in the pages
 of the Gospels.
 The many-coloured, multi-shaped
 body of Christ – the Church
 bears your image where it acts
 in your love:
 still feeding,
 still healing,
 still teaching mercy,
 making you visible in ordinary people like us,

Through us, God as love becomes known

Amen

The Peace

Christ is risen!

He is risen indeed!

God makes peace within us.
 God makes peace between us.
 Let us greet another as a sign of God's peace.

LET'S HEAR THE WORD

**A Way into the Readings concerning Truth as something to be
 Sought out, Searched for, Lived and Explained**

“Truth is so obscure in these times, and falsehood so established, that, unless we love the truth, we cannot know it.”

Blaise Pascal (1623-1662)

At times to be silent is to lie. You will win because you have enough brute force. But you will not convince. For to convince you need to persuade. And in order to persuade you would need what you lack: Reason and Right”

Miguel de Unamuno

“To see what is in front of one’s nose needs a constant struggle.”

George Orwell

“The truth may be puzzling. It may take some work to grapple with. It may be counterintuitive. It may contradict deeply held prejudices. It may not be consonant with what we desperately want to be true. But our preferences do not determine what’s true.”

Carl Sagan

Either you repeat the same conventional doctrines everybody is saying, or else you say something true, and it will sound like it's from Neptune.”

Noam Chomsky

You shall know the truth and the truth shall make you odd.”

Flannery O'Connor, Collected Works

Acts 17:22-31 (The Message)

Here, the apostle Paul attempts to reason with the cultured Athenians of his day, pointing out, some might say, opportunistically, that the shrine to the “unknown God” is in fact God, the Father of Jesus. In this way, Paul tries to get ‘wriggle room’ into the think-tanks of the most sophisticated culture of the time. What is not said, but perhaps needs to be said in today’s context, is the extent to which Athenian state religion was renowned for its violence, precisely in the name of the Gods. Here, Paul calls for a response to the Hebrew God, who is more than just a projection of Athenian political, economic and social self-interest.

²²⁻²³ So Paul took his stand in the open space at the Areopagus and laid it out for them. “It is plain to see that you Athenians take your religion seriously. When I arrived here the other day, I was fascinated

with all the shrines I came across. And then I found one inscribed, TO THE GOD NOBODY KNOWS. I'm here to introduce you to this God so you can worship intelligently, know who you're dealing with.

²⁴⁻²⁹ “The God who made the world and everything in it, this Master of sky and land, doesn't live in custom-made shrines or need the human race to run errands for him, as if he couldn't take care of himself. He makes the creatures; the creatures don't make him. Starting from scratch, he made the entire human race and made the earth hospitable, with plenty of time and space for living so we could seek after God, and not just grope around in the dark but actually *find* him. He doesn't play hide-and-seek with us. He's not remote; he's *near*. We live and move in him, can't get away from him! One of your poets said it well: 'We're the God-created.' Well, if we are the God-created, it doesn't make a lot of sense to think we could hire a sculptor to chisel a god out of stone for *us*, does it?

³⁰⁻³¹ “God overlooks it as long as you don't know any better—but that time is past. The unknown is now known, and he's calling for a radical life-change. He has set a day when the entire human race will be judged and everything set right. And he has already appointed the judge, confirming him before everyone by raising him from the dead.”

The word of the Lord

Thanks be to God

Psalm 66: 8-20 (Good News Translation)

Psalm 66 is a psalm of thanksgiving. Its association with the Easter season is presumably because of v. 9, where the Lord God is praised as one 'who has kept us among the living'. The psalm is divided into three sections: an introductory invocation (vv. 1-7); a national thanksgiving (vv. 8-12); and, finally, a personal thanksgiving (vv. 13-20). The last two sections are included in today's reading but to do the psalm justice it should really be read in its entirety. Verses 1-7 also can be useful for prayers in worship. In this introduction there is an invocation to the congregation that itself falls into two parts. In vv. 1-4 the liturgist or choir calls on the people to praise God in different ways: shouting, speaking, acknowledging and worshipping, and in general making a 'joyful noise'. Such praise is exuberant, and extravagant. It is meant to match the nature of the one who is praised.

⁸ Praise our God, all nations;
let your praise be heard.

⁹ He has kept us alive
and has not allowed us to fall.

- ¹⁰ You have put us to the test, God;
***as silver is purified by fire,
 so you have tested us.***
- ¹¹ You let us fall into a trap
and placed heavy burdens on our backs.
- ¹² You let our enemies trample us;
 we went through fire and flood,
but now you have brought us to a place of safety.
- ¹³ I will bring burnt offerings to your house;
I will offer you what I promised.
- ¹⁴ I will give you what I said I would
when I was in trouble.
- ¹⁵ I will offer sheep to be burned on the altar;
 I will sacrifice bulls and goats,
and the smoke will go up to the sky.
- ¹⁶ Come and listen, all who honour God,
and I will tell you what he has done for me.
- ¹⁷ I cried to him for help;
I praised him with songs.
- ¹⁸ If I had ignored my sins,
the Lord would not have listened to me.
- ¹⁹ But God has indeed heard me;
he has listened to my prayer.
- ²⁰ I praise God,
 because he did not reject my prayer
or keep back his constant love from me.

1 Peter 3:13-22 (Good News Translation)

This passage comes after the author has instructed the hearers to live peaceful and submissive lives, generally behaving in a respectful manner toward others in the community. 3:13 begins by suggesting a good life is surely not going to get people into trouble, but then 3:14 faces the reality that this can still be the case. When persecution comes, the hearers should be ready to explain themselves (3:15). They are to centre their lives on Christ (3:15). Sometimes the most they can hope for is that their abusers will be ashamed when they recognise the goodness which characterises their victims' lives (3:16). On no account should they be suffering on any other ground (3:17). This letter assumes danger. The hearers seem forced into a passive kind of goodness; more than that, puts them at risk. Even then they face risk. What then can they hold onto? The author brings them back to Christ's story: that of Jesus' life and death. Then, there follows allusions to baptism, calling on the believers' identity: to stand by their identity in tough times. It is as though he cites a hymn or creedal statement, (3:18-22). Finally, the author returns in 3:22 – not included in our reading but nevertheless important – to the idea of Jesus' victorious resurrection by an allusion to Psalm 110:1 and Psalm 8:7. We find the same link in 1 Corinthians 15:22-28, Ephesians 1:20-22 and Hebrews 1:4, 13

and 2:5-8. The tradition sees Christ as enthroned like a heavenly royal Messiah, now to rule with God over all threatening powers. These may seem quaint embellishments, but in a world where powers threatened – political and otherwise, and where life was precarious – such a faith was defiant. It defied the god-claims of political rulers, embodied in Asia Minor in the imperial cult, including Rome. It asserted that ultimately Christ rules.

¹³ Who will harm you if you are eager to do what is good? ¹⁴ But even if you should suffer for doing what is right, how happy you are! Do not be afraid of anyone, and do not worry. ¹⁵ But have reverence for Christ in your hearts, and honour him as Lord. Be ready at all times to answer anyone who asks you to explain the hope you have in you, ¹⁶ but do it with gentleness and respect. Keep your conscience clear, so that when you are insulted, those who speak evil of your good conduct as followers of Christ will become ashamed of what they say. ¹⁷ For it is better to suffer for doing good, if this should be God's will, than for doing evil. ¹⁸ For Christ died^[a] for sins once and for all, a good man on behalf of sinners, in order to lead you to God. He was put to death physically, but made alive spiritually, ¹⁹ and in his spiritual existence he went and preached to the imprisoned spirits. ²⁰ These were the spirits of those who had not obeyed God when he waited patiently during the days that Noah was building his boat. The few people in the boat—eight in all—were saved by the water, ²¹ which was a symbol pointing to baptism, which now saves you. It is not the washing off of bodily dirt, but the promise made to God from a good conscience. It saves you through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, ²² who has gone to heaven and is at the right side of God, ruling over all angels and heavenly authorities and powers.

John 14:15-21 (The Message)

In this reading, the idea of truth carries on from last Sunday. Last week, we heard about Jesus as the Way the Truth and the Life. Here we discover that the Spirit of God, the Friend, with whom Jesus leaves us, leads us to live truthfully, which means to live according to the appeal to love. Here truth is understood as pertaining to relationships, to human community, to the way we live. For John there is such a thing as *living truthfully*.

¹⁵⁻¹⁷ “If you love me, show it by doing what I’ve told you. I will talk to the Father, and he’ll provide you another Friend so that you will always have someone with you. This Friend is the Spirit of Truth. The godless world can’t take him in because it doesn’t have eyes to see

him, doesn't know what to look for. But you know him already because he has been staying with you, and will even be *in* you!

¹⁸⁻²⁰ "I will not leave you orphaned. I'm coming back. In just a little while the world will no longer see me, but you're going to see me because I am alive and you're about to come alive. At that moment you will know absolutely that I'm in my Father, and you're in me, and I'm in you.

²¹ "The person who knows my commandments and keeps them, that's who loves me. And the person who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I will love him and make myself plain to him."

The Gospel of the Lord

Praise to you Lord Christ

Hymn: Lord the light of your love is shining (TIS 675, Shine Jesus Shine, Graham Kendrick)

The Film Spotlight: Where truth is understood to be not just about ideas but practice.

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 Diocese. The film can be interpreted from a range of angles, not least from that of truth: the connection between on the one hand relational and ethical truth and on the other, doctrinal truth.

Some thoughts

Let's Give: Our Offerings

Doxology

***Praise God, from whom all blessings flow,
praise him, all creatures here below,
praise him above, ye heavenly host,
praise Father, Son and Holy Ghost.***

Prayer of Dedication

Prayers of the People

We sing after each series of petitions the plea from Taizé (TIS 741)

*O Lord hear my pray'r O Lord hear my pray'r when I call answer me
O Lord hear my pray'r, O Lord hear my pray'r, come and listen to me*

Closing Hymn: Great God (TIS 416, Jerusalem, Alan Gaunt)

Blessing and Sending Out

Christ is risen!

We see reality through resurrection

We seek to live lovingly, truthfully.

Go in peace to love and serve the Lord

In the name of Christ