

St Mary Abbots

Trinity 15, Matins

Nehemiah 2, John 8:31-38; 48-end

Father Christopher

'Speaking your truth is the most powerful tool we have.'

Words of Oprah Winfrey at the Golden Globes awards. And of course a phrase also used in her interview with The Duchess of Sussex.

'What is truth?' though, in the words of Pontius Pilate in his discourse with Jesus before being handed over to be crucified.

In Pilate's mouth these words can sound to us like the ultimate cynical post-modern statement, as if he suddenly found himself in a Samuel Beckett play or a passage of Jean-Paul Sartre's philosophy.

That would clearly be anachronistic, but to Pilate, the question of what was true, and to whom, would no doubt only have been relevant to the extent to which it either helped him keep order in the bit of Roman territory of which he was governor, or, conversely caused him *problems* in keeping order.

The slippery nature of truth become proverbial in the twentieth century with the works of Kafka and George Orwell, and as we have seen develop in politicians of all stripes, but particularly those with authoritarian tendencies: say something often enough, and make it *tempting* enough to believe, and people will believe anything, whether you are Donald Trump, Vladimir Putin or Xi Jinping.

Suddenly having *'your truth'* feels rather less attractive. If we can all have our own truth, what is to stop others with more *power* also having theirs, and then forcing it on the rest of us? It is all very well advocating for a voice for all, but in advocating for freedom of speech we must be very careful in what we say about the nature of truth.

It is of course easier to verify certain kinds of statement than others: statements of fact, such as whether I am currently standing in the pulpit seem easy to verify, at least for the average person, if not perhaps for a philosopher.

We then have more abstract statements, questions of logic, such as: all forks have prongs.
Discuss!

But before I get too carried away, what is truth for us as Christians? Well, firstly, Christianity is not a philosophy. We do of course have a whole list of things that we together as the Church of God believe in, that have been argued over in the Councils of the Church and then agreed, and which we repeat every week in the creeds.

For example, Jesus is both fully divine and fully human. That is now accepted as a central belief of the faith. If you don't believe that, *you* may call yourself a Christian, but the Church will not view you as falling within what is generally understood as part of the definition of being one, at least not a doctrinally orthodox one. But for us, 'truth' is more than just what is factually or conceptually correct.

Jesus of course tells us elsewhere in John's gospel *'I am the Way, the Truth and the Life'*.

And in today's passage we hear that '*If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.*' Our truth is no less than the person of Jesus Christ; and that truth is the truth of who God is, as He has uniquely revealed Himself to us.

People often speak of the leap of faith, but it is not a leap to suddenly believing a whole list of beliefs that most people would find rather hard to believe.

Our belief, our truth, or the truth, is in fact a person. You cannot believe in, or get to know, a person with one flick of a switch in your brain; though you may have an epiphany which brings you into relationship with Him. But we find 'the truth' in our relationship with Him, and in our ever-deepening knowledge of Him in our very selves, as that grows throughout our life.

Some I know find it arrogant to think that we can claim to possess the truth. Our relationship with Jesus is not however one of *possession*, and nor is it about imposing our view of the world. Our relationship with Jesus, as the Way, the Truth and the Life is in fact one of *trust*, one of vulnerability, as we no longer seek our satisfaction and fulfilment in ourselves or in our own strength, but in Him.

And the danger of idolising 'your own truth' as Oprah puts it, love her as I might generally, is that we build our own Tower of Babel; that we take our own word as gospel; that we begin to depend upon ourselves; to make ourselves gods even. Yes, we are all made in the image of God, and are loved by Him, but that is very far from our always being right. It is also fine as long as things are going well, if perhaps less so for those who have to endure you, but when life stops being a bed of roses, there is suddenly nowhere to go

Paradoxically, our faith in Jesus as the Way, the Truth and the Life in fact sets us free from that constant measuring of ourselves and our worldly success – because our faithfulness in Him, our reposing of our *trust* in Him, not only gives us greater *perspective*, but, we believe, connects us with the very God who made us and who sustains us.

Nothing else is permanent, and all other truth derives from Him. The more we can grow in Him, who is the Way, the Truth and the Life, the more we will be truly free. Amen