

O Pilate, Pilate, can you not recognise the truth when you hear it?

O people of the Parish of Gisborne, can you not recognise the truth when you hear it?

Recognising the truth is one of the hardest but essential things we all have to discern in our lives. We can learn about rules, examine philosophy, explore the ethical and moral dimensions and then arrive at a considered opinion. When we do so, we may well feel satisfied that what we have is the truth, or at least not false, but what if the non-false position I arrive at is contradictory to your journey to the same point? Is my truth more real than your reality? Is my truth founded on an error, or is there a fundamental flaw in the argument that makes it impossible to know?

On this weekend, we come to the Reign of Christ, not in the great glory of halls of heaven as are detailed in the Revelation to St John the Divine, but rather, in the shadow of the cross on Good Friday. There, nailed and discarded, the Word of God, the incarnate presence of the Divine, gave up everything and descended to the dead. The veil was lifted on a reality that was hard to imagine: on that day, God died.

Thinking back on the readings leading to this very day, we see a pattern emerging. The death of Jesus was to be, as John saw it, the culmination of the incarnation. The Word had indeed become flesh and dwelt amongst us. There were the signs that pointed to the kingdom. They began innocently enough: a massive amount of Grange Hermitage was provided for a wedding feast in Cana, the blind began to see, the deaf heard, the dumb spoke, the marginalised restored and people were restored back to the fullness of life.

Yet, still, people disbelieved. Could they not see the truth about Jesus?

For a word to be the word, it must be uttered, heard, and comprehended. English author Bulwer-Lytton put these famous words into the mouth of Cardinal Richelieu:

True, This! —
 Beneath the rule of men entirely great
 The pen is mightier than the sword. Behold
 The arch-enchanters wand! — itself is nothing! —
 But taking sorcery from the master-hand
 To paralyse the Cæsars, and to strike
 The loud earth breathless! — Take away the sword —
 States can be saved without it!¹

¹ Bulwer-Lytton: Richelieu: or the Conspiracy 1839

Indeed, that for me would be a self-evident truth, and something that I did refer to on Remembrance Sunday: words get us into wars, let the politicians use their words to get us out of them. Enough is enough.

Seeing the truth is not necessarily what happens throughout the gospel. The signs are visible, but it is not in response to the signs and wonders that people genuinely respond. It was by attending to the word of God that the truth became more and more evident. It was the voice of Jesus that the blind encountered first, and then they saw. The first sounds the deaf heard were the words of Jesus. The centurion's slave, the Syrophenician woman's daughter, the sick child on the deathbed, Lazarus, and then at the Resurrection, Mary of Magdala, all respond to the word of God, and their lives change forever. The woman at the well, outcast by her community listens to the words of Jesus and engages. She, in turn, takes the word into the community to which she is restored, and others come to believe because they heard for themselves.

Then again, there is the old proverb, seeing is believing. Is it not enough to only see to believe? What Jesus said to Thomas who demanded to see for himself suggests that this is not the case. Thomas insisted on seeing the scars and evidence that this was the same Jesus, and indeed he did, but it was to those who were to hear of Jesus's resurrection and believed that received the divine sanction: blessed are those who believe and yet have not seen.²

Seeing is not necessarily believing. Other classical English scholars tell us

Seeing is believing, says the proverb. Though of all our senses, the eyes are the most easily deceived, we believe them in preference to any other evidence.³

Sometimes what we think we see is tempered only by the truth we perceive. The difference between a flower and a weed is judgement. It is our perception that gives shape to the truth. Cassius Clay, later in faith, Muhammad Ali, gave us this helpful insight into how he perceived life:

The man who views the world at fifty,
the same as he did at twenty,
has wasted thirty years of his life.⁴

Our perception changes as we get older, but does not truth stay eternal?

As we come to the end of the Church year, celebrating with 5 confirmations, several weddings, and this weekend beginning four baptisms, it is the story of the truth that is being proclaimed. It is the story of those moments that will add to our perceptions of the truth of

² see John 20

³ 1848, J. C. and A. W. Hare, *Guesses at Truth*, second edition, page 497:

⁴ Muhammad Ali, attributed to a press interview

what happened for years to come. It is in the telling of the story that Fletcher and Ava will hear of their baptism. It will be backed up with hard words on paper, photographs and the certificates, but it will be with the story of what happened that the truth will be known. Their perception will change as they hear for themselves about the presence of God with us. In time, they too, we pray, may know Emmanuel, in our lives, their lives, and in the world.

Pilate asked the question of Jesus "What is truth?" to respond to the very point that was made: every one of truth listens to my voice.⁵

For Pilate, his perception was most definitely being challenged. His nervousness and uncertainty were on show for all to see. He kept withdrawing, going back and forth from Jesus and the Jewish authorities. He sought to release Jesus and faced an insurrection. In the end, he decided to take no responsibility and symbolically adopted a Jewish custom of cleanliness: he washed his hands of the sin.

The truth will always be heard. The truth of God was tortured, nailed to a tree, and left to die. Truth cannot be bound – not even death itself could comprehend the reality of Jesus.

So we come to the end of the Church's year, baptising and celebrating the Reign of the Word of God. The printed word may well have given us licence to know more through our reading and reflection, but ultimately, it is the Word itself that provides the testimony to the faith we have to live, and eventually, through our own words, proclaim.

This is the story that John the Divine calls the Alpha and the Omega: the beginning and end point of everything. Our life is one of changing circumstances in which our perceptions may vary, but as alluded to by T.S. Eliot, all journeys tend to arrive back at the starting point having accumulated wisdom along the way and only then knowing fully where we began.⁶

On Christmas day we recalled the birth of Jesus, we read:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.
² He was in the beginning with God. ³ All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being ⁴ in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. ⁵ The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it...
... ¹⁴ And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.

⁵ John 18.37,38

⁶ We shall not cease from exploration and the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and to know the place for the first time. T. S. Elliot (1888-1965)

¹⁶ From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. ¹⁷ The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. ¹⁸ No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known.⁷

This is the truth of the Word made flesh. This is the truth of the Word that is continually spoken until the end of time. This is the truth in which we are baptised and gather. This is the truth that is established in our lives and continues to call us to respond. It is in the hearing of the truth we are known; it is in listening to the truth we are spurred into action. We hear the word of God and are called to be doers of the Word, not just listeners.⁸

As we hear the word of God, and attend to what is required, then we can know this: we are living not in the reign of ego and political expediency, but indeed, in the reign of the Word of God. May Christ that most precious word continue to reign in our hearts and minds forever.

⁷ John 1.1-5, 14, 17-18 NRSV *altered*

⁸ James 1.22