

The Truth – Sermon 22nd January

Reading: John 14:1- 18

'Do not let your hearts be troubled. You believe in God; believe also in me. ² My Father's house has many rooms; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you?³ And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am. ⁴ You know the way to the place where I am going.'

⁵ Thomas said to him, 'Lord, we don't know where you are going, so how can we know the way?'

⁶ Jesus answered, 'I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. ⁷ If you really know me, you will know my Father as well. From now on, you do know him and have seen him.'

⁸ Philip said, 'Lord, show us the Father and that will be enough for us.'

⁹ Jesus answered: 'Don't you know me, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time? Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, "Show us the Father"? ¹⁰ Don't you believe that I am in the Father, and that the Father is in me? The words I say to you I do not speak on my own authority. Rather, it is the Father, living in me, who is doing his work. ¹¹ Believe me when I say that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; or at least believe on the evidence of the works themselves. ¹² Very truly I tell you, whoever believes in me will do the works I have been doing, and they will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father. ¹³ And I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. ¹⁴ You may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it.

¹⁵ 'If you love me, keep my commands. ¹⁶ And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another advocate to help you and be with you for ever – ¹⁷ the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be^[c] in you. ¹⁸ I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you.

Song: The Gnu Song by Flanders and Swann

Introduction

This morning I wanted to think about truth

- It seemed appropriate following on from my sermon on the motto text a couple of weeks ago,
- Because, if faith is to be real it has to be based on truth.
- It also seems to me that there is much uncertainty about what truth is
- And even how important it is

There has been a gradual erosion of truth in our society.

- Instead of being a fixed constant.
- It has become the equivalent of an opinion.
- It can be whatever you want it to be

People will say things like

- “That’s true for you”
- In other words, truth has become a personal thing
- An individual choice
- You may have heard the ‘Happy’ song on the radio
- By Pharrel Williams
- The chorus goes like this
 - Because I'm happy, Clap along if you feel like a room without a roof*
 - Because I'm happy, Clap along if you feel like happiness is the truth*
 - Because I'm happy, Clap along if you know what happiness is to you*
 - Because I'm happy, Clap along if you feel like that's what you wanna do*

Unfortunately, it doesn’t make me happy

- It irritates me immensely
- Because happiness is not a truth
- This view comes from a saying from the book the life of Pi
- “Whatever makes you happy – that’s the truth”
- But it isn’t true! It’s nonsense
- For truth to be truth it cannot be affected by our response to it.

If we think about it, life would cease to make sense if we really believed that

- Nobody would ever fail an exam because that wouldn’t make them happy
- Your football team would never lose a match
- You would always have enough money to buy whatever you wanted.
- It’s clearly rubbish
- In reality, what makes us happy, does not always happen.
- And anyway, happiness is more due to our attitude than our circumstances
- But that is another sermon

Let’s get back to truth

- Because we only have to look at the news to see how the idea of truth has been eroded.
- The other week Donald trump was lambasting ‘Fake News’ about the report of his links with Russia.
- Which seemed a bit ironic as so much of his campaign was based on ‘Fake News’

I remember seeing an interview with one of his supporters during the campaign

- The interviewer asked if it mattered that Mr Trump’s claim was untrue
- And the supporter said “Not really, because he is expressing how we feel”
- And we are not immune in this country
- In the Brexit debate, a politician questioned about the truth of his claim
- Was quoted as saying “We don’t believe in experts anymore”
- Suggesting he was not interested in a reasoned discussion of the evidence
- Because it was not about searching for the truth
- But about his view and opinion.

That may be an unfair summary of that individual's opinion

- As with all sound bites there is often much more said
- But it is distressing that this view is accepted.
- I heard the other day about a Philosophical article
- On how our language has changed over the past 50 years

It was noted that when people were asked philosophical questions 50 years ago

- They would answer "I believe"
- Nowadays the answer is "I feel"
- This is a significant difference.
- Because beliefs are allowed to be challenged, debated honed
- But feelings are individual, they are mine, and no one can question them.

I believe truth is under attack in our modern society

- This is why I wanted to preach on it this morning
- Because we are people who believe truth matters
- Jesus said, *"I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."* (John 14:6)

I think the crucial point of all I say this morning is that it is okay to be different

- We don't have to accept what we are told by society
- It is good to question and challenge
- It is good to seek and search for truth.
- Real truth, absolute truth constant truth
- Truth that does not change depending on our feelings or culture

What is truth?

In Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone Albus Dumbledore tells Harry *"The truth is a beautiful and terrible thing, and should therefore be treated with great caution."* (J.K. Rowling)

At this point we are not thinking just about telling the truth

- Which, of course, we are expected to do.
- As instructed in the 10 Commandments
- You shall not bear false witness" (Exodus 20:16)
- Here we are looking at the nature of truth itself

This is the question Pilate rhetorically asks Jesus at his trial

Jesus answered, 'You say that I am a king. In fact, the reason I was born and came into the world is to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me.'
'What is truth?' retorted Pilate. *With this he went out again to the Jews gathered there and said, 'I find no basis for a charge against him'.* (John 18:37-38)

We need to begin by establishing three things

1. That truth is external to us, it is based in reality
 - Truth is not defined by our beliefs.
 - What we believe does not change the truth in anyway at all.

2. We are seekers of truth,
 - We do not own truth, we can only discover what is already true.
 - Neither do we completely understand all the truth
 - Paul reminds Timothy to pray for all those in authority, Saying
“This is good, and pleases God our Saviour, who wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth. For there is one God and one mediator between God and mankind, the man Christ Jesus” (1 Timothy 2:3-5)

3. Truth is important
 - It matters whether we believe the truth or not
 - We will suffer and our communities will suffer if we neglect truth
 - The messianic Psalm 45 reminds all rulers
*Gird your sword on your side, you mighty one;
 clothe yourself with splendour and majesty.
 In your majesty ride forth victoriously in the cause of truth, humility and justice;
 let your right hand achieve awesome deeds.* (Psalm 45:3-4)

That is why we need a bit of humility.

- A bit of caution
- And pray that God, the author of all truth, will guide us as we seek.
“Show me your ways, Lord, teach me your paths. ⁵ Guide me in your truth and teach me, for you are God my Saviour, and my hope is in you all day long”. (Psalm 25:4-5)

Where to find Truth

I think there are four ways in which we can seek for truth

- This is probably a gross simplification of years of philosophical debate
- But nevertheless, it seems to capture it all

1. Reality, empirical or observable truth
 - This is where the sciences come in
 - Things we can observe and test
 - Things that are repeatable and be demonstrated

I would suggest a little caution here

- This does not mean that the physical world is more true than the spiritual
- It may be easier for us to observe but that doesn't make it more real

2. Reason, logic

- We can establish things are true because they make sense
- They follow a logical sequence.
- Mathematics is a good example of this.
- Obviously, we again need caution, we can come to wrong conclusions
- Especially if we do not have all the evidence.

3. Revelation

- This is where we receive truth from someone else
- The truth is told or given to us
- The reliability of this obviously entirely depends on the source of the revelation
- This is where faith and trust come in

4. Experience

Finally, we have experience.

- We can know truth because of our experience
- Again, caution is required because experiences can be subjective.

But most truth is discovered from a combination of these.

- A couple of weeks ago, we were talking about faith
- And mentioned the false definition of faith as *'Belief without, or despite of evidence'*
- In this case the argument is that physical observable science and human reason are the only forms of evidence accepted.
- This is therefore a circular argument

If we begin with the premise that the spiritual does not exist

- And therefore, any evidence of God must be false
- It is not surprising we come to the conclusion there is no evidence for God

Much of our knowledge of God comes from revelation

- Not the book of the bible but God revealing himself to men and women
- But most importantly through scripture
- It is through the words of the Bible we discover truth
- That is our main source of knowledge and truth

Knowledge of something is not the same as experience of someone

- The scriptures can give us the former
- But they are intended to provide the latter as well.
- We may have to search for it
- Study the bible and prayerfully meditate on it
- But we can meet with God in its pages

And meeting with God changes us

- Our experience of God
- And the effect knowing him has on us is thus also evidence of the truth

And that is what we mean by witnessing

Paul tells Timothy

“Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth” (2 Timothy 2:15)

There is another question I would like to tackle at this point

- We accept we should seek for truth
- And Discover God
- But how do we know our faith, or our God is the correct one

What about other faiths?

If truth is what we want it to be then this of course doesn't matter

- Whichever religion makes you happy – that can be true for you
- But as we have already said
- This is not good enough
- Truth cannot be changed to suit us
- If it is then it is not really truth at all

Our aim is to discover truth and follow it

- No matter where it may lead us
- So, what about other faiths
- Do they also have truth?

There is an illustration of this from a philosopher called David A. Horner

- He suggested the different religions are like four blind men feeling an elephant
- One feels the legs and says “This is a large round column with a knarled surface. I have found a tree
- The next feels the trunk and says “Its long thin and muscular, I've found a snake”
- The third feels the tail and says it is a rope and the fourth the tusks and thinks it is inanimate hard material.

His point is that for God to be God he must be beyond our ability to understand

- Therefore, religions are like these blind men
- We all have an aspect of the truth
- But none of us have the complete story

However, he is not quite right

- Obviously of our own devices we could not hope to comprehend God
- But Jesus is different
- Last week Brian spent a long time sharing how Jesus is different
- And I'm not going to repeat it all this morning

But Jesus is a bit like the Gnu in the song

- When told, *“it was an (H)Elk, I might of gone on thinking it was true If the animal in question hadn't put that man to shame And answered I aint an Elk, I'm a Gnu”*

If we return to our Elephant analogy

- Jesus is like the Elephant saying
- I'm not a tree, a snake or a rope, neither am I inanimate, I'm an Elephant
- Then the blind men really have no excuse for not knowing what they are feeling

Paul expresses this beautifully in his letter to Colossians that we read earlier

- Saying *"The Son is the image of the invisible God"*

Conclusion

So, what is our conclusion?

- What does this mean for us?
- I think the point I want to bring is 'Dare to be different'
- Be willing to stand out from the crowd
- We do not have to accept that truth is not changeable according to what we want.

It was George Orwell who said

- *"In a time of deceit telling the truth is a revolutionary act."*
- We are called to be revolutionaries
- Witnessing to the truth in a culture that does not accept the concept

But really, we have no choice

- Jesus does not give us one
- Time and again he insists we accept the truth
- To the Samaritan woman in John 4:23-24
"Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshippers will worship the Father in the Spirit and in truth, for they are the kind of worshippers the Father seeks.²⁴ God is spirit, and his worshippers must worship in the Spirit and in truth."

Again, in John 8:31-32

"To the Jews who had believed him, Jesus said, 'If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. ³² Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.'"

That is what the passage from John 14 was all about

- Jesus tells the disciples
- *"I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."* (John 14:6)
- He explains he is the final revelation of the truth of who God is
"If you really know me, you will know my Father as well. From now on, you do know him and have seen him." (John 14:7)
- And
¹¹ *Believe me when I say that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; or at least believe on the evidence of the works themselves* (John 14:11)

And finally, Jesus promises the Holy Spirit

- Who will continue to do Jesus work
- Revealing God to us
- And teaching us the truth

But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all the truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come. ¹⁴ He will glorify me because it is from me that he will receive what he will make known to you. (John 16:13 -14)

The truth is important

- Knowing the truth is powerful and life changing
- We read in Hebrews

For the word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. (Hebrews 4:12)

- Jesus prays for us that we will be made holy by the truth

“Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth. As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world”. (John 17:17-18)

The truth is like a belt

- We wear it to hold everything together
- Something to enable us to stand firm in the storms of life
- In spiritual attack

Ephesians 6:10-18

Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. ¹¹ Put on the full armour of God, so that you can take your stand against the devil’s schemes. ¹² For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. ¹³ Therefore put on the full armour of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand. ¹⁴ Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled round your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place, ¹⁵ and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace. ¹⁶ In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. ¹⁷ Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.

¹⁸ And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the Lord’s people.

Amen