

'Sanctify them in the truth - your word is truth' – Sunday 16th May 2021

'What is truth?' said jesting Pilate and would not stay for an answer.

Truth in a time of electronic media is as complex and as subtle as the serpent in Eden. The truth we read on our screens and hear through our earbuds as claim and counterclaim, is continuously changing and hard to pin down. Where is truth, for instance, in the unfolding tragedy of the violence in Gaza?

There will be some of you in the congregation who believe that the justifiable uprising in Gaza is the predictable response to years of Israeli persecution of the Palestinians. For decades Jewish settlers have encroached on land set aside for Palestinians and the final straw came when young Israelis celebrated in the streets of Jerusalem to mark the takeover of the Eastern, Muslim quarter of Jerusalem by the Israeli state in 1967. For Palestinian Muslims the loss of the Muslim quarter was a disaster. And beside all that, behind the power of the Israeli government is the American government supporting and funding the state of Israel and its weapons

There may also be people here with a different viewpoint – for whom the problem in Gaza is the result of the longstanding refusal of many Arab states, particularly Iran, to accept the right of the state of Israel to exist. They see a cynical manipulation of the people of Gaza by their own Arab rulers who have deliberately downgraded hospitals, schools and housing stock to stir up unrest in Gaza and destabilise the area. They have encouraged the smuggling of weapons through tunnels from Egypt into Gaza to arm radicalised Palestinian young men. And in the background, is the shadowy presence of wealthy states providing the arms and ammunition which are currently bombarding the Israelis.

What is the truth?

You may be very sure of the answer and my over-simplifications of the two positions may well irritate you. I have to say I don't **know** where the truth is. But I will defend my right to be unsure, to insist that we don't have the whole truth however passionately we may feel what the truth **ought** to be. **Not all those whom we love and admire behave well.** Only by holding the middle ground between the two extremes can we be **just** to the genuine human beings whose lives and families and futures are caught up in violence.

No one on either side of the conflict will ever be grateful to us for holding the middle ground. But it is in that centre ground that peace has to grow if it is to grow at all. In 100 years' time the real reasons for the conflict will be lost, but the work of truth and peace and transparency which led the countries to pull back from the brink of mutual destruction, will be remembered and honoured.

The first casualty of war is truth and history is as elusive as truth. Recently academics have been discovering the history of the black population of this country which has been unrecognised until recently as academics focussed on the documented history of powerful, white men. Records of the history of women and people of colour have been harder to find. Some of us celebrated Mary Seacole on Friday, a Jamaican woman who set up a hospital close to the front line in the Crimean war – at the same time as Florence Nightingale was setting up her field hospital. Although Florence Nightingale has been the more widely known and celebrated of the two, we will never know the truth of how many lives each of them saved.

'So what is truth?' Pilate asked, and as Francis Bacon recognised, Pilate was not interested in the answer to his question. I think the writer of John's Gospel was fully aware of the irony that at Christ's trial the one 'full of grace and truth' was standing before Pilate as Pilate asked his question.

'Sanctify them in your truth' Christ says of his disciples, 'Your word is truth.' And Christ himself proclaims in John 6, 'I am the way, the truth and I am life.'

So what is it? Truth?

We have a partial answer in Jesus's words to the disciples in John 16. 'When the Spirit of truth comes, it will guide you into all the truth.' The Spirit is called 'the Spirit of God' in the Old Testament; 'the Spirit of Jesus' by the early Christians; 'the Advocate' by John in many of his Gospel references, but here the Holy Spirit is called 'the Spirit of Truth.'

The Holy Spirit is the source of truth. Even when God seems very far away. Even if the search for truth seems to take us away from organised religion into a different direction for a bit – or for long years – we are to follow our search for truth and hold onto the thread of truth. Because truth is a fundamental property of the Holy Spirit and sometimes truth is all we can see of God.

We are to hold fast though the unheroic messiness of truth when both sides feel betrayed. Truth will always forbid us to be partisan because truth can always see the other point of view. Truth will not accept our easy lies or our lazy compromises. But it will, in the end, bring us into the glory and light of God.