

## Church: a college for the study of Truth. Church 5. 25/11/12 Rev. Vincent Gardner

Over the past eleven months the preaching team have delivered four sets of sermons. We began the year with five sermons declaring Jesus as the centre of our faith and stated that everything we as individuals do would be better if we grounded our actions and our understanding in Him. The following two sets dealt with the other two persons of the trinity and how we experience them because of Jesus revelation/direction. Within this fourth set of sermons we have attempted to take a look at what shape Jesus' church should take. Ali reminded us that church is primarily a community of people; a people who model themselves on Jesus' servant hood.<sup>1</sup> Richard unwrapped for us the difficult concept that we are a 'chosen' people, the priesthood of God.<sup>2</sup> Jeremy reminded us last week that although Church refers primarily to the people who commune together nevertheless the buildings, our physical churches are important places, factors in how we define ourselves.<sup>3</sup> I preached earlier in the series about my belief that church is a place where we allow our ego, our identity to be moulded and shaped by another. That church in a way is a bit like a blacksmiths anvil.<sup>4</sup>

Today I want to declare firmly that Church is the place where 'truth is found'. It may at times need some hard work in the heat of the blacksmith's workshop but nevertheless it is here, in this place, that we can unearth together the truth behind (and in front) of all our life's. Now, I know, I can sense the concern. We quite rightly smell danger when someone declares they have discovered the source of truth. And so we have learnt a polite response, *'that may be the truth for you, and with a bit of negotiation I might come to share aspects of your truth, as long as you share some of mine.'* This leaves us all believing that 'truth in its fullness' cannot be shared together. Indeed that truth is unfathomable.

Pilate's famous response to Jesus in our gospel passage is even more in our day the defining question of our culture: *What is truth?* Friedrich Nietzsche once said *'Truth is but a lie, agreed upon by others.'* Oscar Wilde *'The pure and simple truth is rarely pure and simple.'* Grappling with truth is difficult.<sup>5</sup>

But I still declare that it is this one question which the church should be able to respond to with confidence. Leslie Newbigin, in his book *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, reminds us of the ancient fable from India of the blind men and the elephant<sup>6</sup>. The original fable is told from the point of view of a king who leads several blind men to an elephant and asks them to tell him what it is that they are feeling. The first blind man walked into the formidable side of the huge mammal and declared with certainty that what he found was a wall. The second took hold of the elephant's tusk and asserted that it was a spear. The third blind man felt the squirming trunk of the elephant and jumped back saying that it was, without a doubt, a great snake. A fourth bumped into one of the beast's large legs and declared it to be a tree. Another was led by the king to the elephant's flapping ear and proclaimed that he had definitely found a fan. The last blind man groped for what was before him, and grabbing the elephant's tail was convinced that the thing before him was a rope.

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<sup>1</sup> Sermon on October 21st by Rev. Ali Marshall: *Church as servant community*

<sup>2</sup> Sermon on November 28<sup>th</sup> Richard Croft: *The Church as the people of God.*

<sup>3</sup> Sermon on November 18<sup>th</sup> Jeremy Thake: *Church, stones and buildings.*

<sup>4</sup> Sermon on Rev. Vincent Gardner: *The Church as an anvil for the ego.*

<sup>5</sup> An example from last week: Synod's vote concerning Female bishops in the Church of England. Besides aspects of misogyny and political rather than theological thinking found on both sides, we nevertheless see sincere groups of believers striving to resolve an issue where they see the truth differently.

<sup>6</sup> Popularized by American poet John Godfrey Saxe (1816-1887) Saxe sees a religious significance in the fable and ends his poem saying,

So oft in theologic wars,  
The disputants, I [believe],  
Rail on in utter ignorance  
Of what each other mean,  
And prate about an Elephant  
Not one of them has seen!

The story is usually told to make the point that none of us have a grasp on the whole truth. One person sees things one way, and another sees truth in a different way. Each of us is holding a part of the truth, and everyone is right in their own way, given their individual experience. It is especially used by people trying to say that all religions are the same, and that we just have different ways of talking about God and experiencing him. "After all," they say, "we are all feeling the same elephant, but describing him according to our limited perceptions."

Those who use this story try to point out that all religions are merely an attempt to grope after truth, however, those trying to make that point seem to miss several important problems with the story. First of all, as Newbigin points out, "If the king were also blind there would be no story." There would be no one to lead the blind men to anything. We also have to ask why the king only led each man to one part of the elephant, instead of allowing them to experience as much as they could and were capable of understanding. The most obvious gloss in the fable is that even though there are some people who are born blind, most are born with the ability to see. Sight is a gift of God who wants us to see and perceive. Another important point is that rather than each of them having a portion of the truth, none of them had a part of the truth, they were all completely wrong. What they experienced was not a rope, a snake or a wall, it was an elephant. And the most important point is: the elephant was still an elephant in spite of what their perceptions were. The elephant was unchanged by their imperfect understanding of what they were experiencing. Their misunderstanding came from their blindness.

Still the question remains: How do we know that what we are experiencing is reality and truth? Do we have a hold of only a part of God, and is he something/someone completely other than what we think or have experienced? I want to try and make a few points to help us arrive at some understanding of the nature of truth and how we find it.

The first point is: ***Truth is known through revelation.*** Truth exists and God wants us to know the truth. This is the starting point of faith. In the story of the blind men and the elephant, the king leads the men only to the part of the elephant he wants them to experience. He only allows them a partial revelation, and he never volunteers to correct their false perceptions. Neither does he offer any explanations.

Christians believe that we have a King who does not try to defraud and fool us. He does not toy with us. He does not deceive us, or lead us in a way that confuses us or distorts our perception. We do not have a king who hides truth from us, but reveals truth to us. He wants us to know and understand. When he walks us up to an elephant, even though we are blind, he shows us the entire mammal, he explains what it is and, best of all, he heals our blindness. He does not want us to live in the dark, but in the light. He has given us eyes so that we can see, and intelligence that we might understand. He has given us touch and smell and hearing and taste. We sing the hymn "For the Beauty of the Earth" which says:

*For the joy of ear and eye,  
For the heart and mind's delight,  
For the mystic harmony  
Linking sense to sound and sight.*

It is impossible for us to understand truth on our own, but God links sense to sound and sight. He uncovers truth for us and reveals its meaning. Our King leads us toward truth, not misunderstanding.

Neither does God leave us in a wilderness of conflicting truths to choose from. The Bible tells us that God has revealed himself to us in nature. We read in the book of Romans, "*What may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities — his eternal power and divine nature — have been clearly seen, being understood*

from what has been made, so that men are without excuse" (Romans 1:19-20). Isaiah wrote: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory" (Isaiah 6:3). Only those who are wilfully blind cannot see that glory. God shows us clearly that there is a supernatural Intelligence behind the universe. There is design and order everywhere we look, which says that there is a Designer. The Psalmist wrote, "The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands" (Psalm 19:1). More than that, there is beauty and pleasure. A fragrant spring day should plainly tell us that God cares for us and loves to bless us. A walk in the woods helps us to feel his presence. Lying on the beach and feeling the healing warmth of the sun should make us more than aware that he has made a good world for us to live in because we are important to him. The created order tells us many things about God; especially that he cares for us with a great love.<sup>7</sup>

But there is more than God's revelation in nature that helps us to know him, which enables us to be more than blind men groping at an elephant. God's ultimate revelation of truth was in Jesus Christ. John wrote: "That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched — this we proclaim concerning the Word of life. The life appeared; we have seen it and testify to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and has appeared to us" (1 John 1:1-2). God is mysterious, but a mystery is not an unsolvable problem. A mystery is a difficult truth which can be known only through revelation. A mystery is when there is an answer, and we are just not aware of it yet. We must be shown. God was known before Jesus arrived, but much of who he was had been shrouded in mystery. Jesus was the revelation that answered the mystery.<sup>8</sup>

There is also the special revelation of Scripture. This special revelation of God teaches us very specific truths about God and life as well.<sup>9</sup> They were not in a trance, but self-consciously aware that they were being moved by God to write about what he was saying to them. They were imperfect men, but God was moving them and inspiring them by the power of the Holy Spirit. The writers of Scripture were keenly aware that God was using them as his mouthpiece to a world that needed to know God's truth. Jeremiah said, "Then the Lord reached out his hand and touched my mouth and said to me, 'Now, I have put my words in your mouth'" (Jeremiah 1:7, 9). God used each of their unique personalities and allowed them certain freedoms of expression, but he reliably spoke through the prophets and other authors of Scripture. The point is that we are not left to our own devices to discover truth. Our King has led us to the truth. He has revealed truth and made himself known as the ultimate Truth. We cannot know everything, but we can know some things, some very important things, with certainty.<sup>10</sup>

The second point is: **Truth is knowable. Not only is there truth, but truth may be known.** I think that we have gotten caught up in a trap of trying to argue whether there is absolute truth or not. Perhaps we should stick to the biblical idea rather than using philosophical terms like "absolute." People misunderstand and think we are saying we are absolutely correct in everything we believe — which we are not. No one has it all right, but there are many things that we can know with confidence, because truth is knowable. In the book of John we have this interesting dialogue between Jesus and Philip: Jesus said, "If you really knew me, you would know my Father as well. From now on, you do know him and have seen him." Philip said, "Lord, show us the Father and that will be enough for us." Jesus answered: "Don't you know me, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time? Anyone who has seen

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<sup>7</sup> Paul explained this to the Greeks when he said, "Yet he has not left himself without testimony: He has shown kindness by giving you rain from heaven and crops in their seasons; he provides you with plenty of food and fills your hearts with joy" (Acts 14:17).

<sup>8</sup> The Bible puts it this way: "In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe. The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word" (Hebrews 1:1-3).

<sup>9</sup> The Bible speaks of this and says, "Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet's own interpretation. For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit" (2 Peter 1:20-21).

<sup>10</sup> The Bible says, "Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see" (Hebrews 11:1).

*me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'?*<sup>11</sup> Do you want to know what God is like? Look at Jesus. He is the embodiment of God. Truth is knowable because Truth is a person. Truth is not an idea or proposition, it is Jesus. He is the personification and source of all truth.

I was reading in 1 John recently where John makes several amazing statements about what we can know. He says that we can know we are in God (2:15, 4:13) and that he lives in us (3:24); we can know what love is (3:18); we know that we belong to the truth (3:19); we can recognize the Spirit of God (4:2); we can know the spirit of truth and the spirit of error (4:6). These are just a few of the things that John says that we can know with confidence.<sup>12</sup>

But why is this important? Glad you asked.

**The third point is: Truth creates passion.** A passion for life, or *pathos*, is what makes us come alive. You cannot be passionate about something without believing in it. Perhaps the reason that more Christians are not passionate about their faith is because they find belief itself difficult. To place full trust and reliance on something beyond our full understanding is scary. What does Scripture say? That it contains not the best news the world has ever known? Our bibles in front of us. It is good news because it is God's news, God's truth about the world, about life and about himself. If you are completely committed, and have given yourself over to God's truth as fully as you know how, then it will make a difference in your life. You cannot be apathetic. God's truth will help you escape the despair and negativity that dominates an unbelieving world.

However, it is one thing to believe the Bible with intellectual assent, and it is quite another to allow it to transform you. Truth must move from a flat construct of propositional truths to a radical discipleship that transforms our character and behaviour. Truth can be a mental ascent to abstract information, or it can be a personal knowledge of God that brings life to the believer. It gives us a new enthusiasm for life. There are a lot of people who get all knotted up about the world not believing in absolute truth, who do not live the simple truth of the Gospel themselves. If you are going to believe the truth, you have to live the truth. As Jack Nicholson<sup>13</sup> might say *But maybe you can't handle the truth*. Truth does not just affect our thinking, it transforms our passions and desires — it fuels them, purifies and redirects them. Truth is the door that allows us to come into the presence of God. Without it you are lost in the morass. The end result of knowing the truth about God is wanting to be like him. Jesus said, *"Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent"* (John 17:3).<sup>14</sup>

The truth of the Scripture is not contained in a list of rules to perform; the truth of Scripture presents a person whom we are invited to know.<sup>15</sup> God is not silent, but you have to believe to hear. It is only after you believe that you have assurance, not before. In our culture, we have come to think that truth is something which is negotiated and agreed on by the majority. But it does not matter how many people are feeling the elephant and coming up with ideas, even if they agree that some are more correct than others. The elephant is still an elephant, and he exists. The elephant does not change into a rope just

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<sup>11</sup> John 14:7-9.

<sup>12</sup> In fact, John states the purpose of writing, saying: "I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life" (1 John 5:13). He goes on to say, "We know also that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding, so that we may know him who is true. And we are in him who is true — even in his Son Jesus Christ. He is the true God and eternal life" (1 John 5:20). We know that we can know the truth, because Jesus said, "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free" (John 8:31-32). Not recognizing the truth, not knowing the truth, keeps us in bondage and spiritual darkness.

<sup>13</sup> A quote from the film *A Few Good Men*, where Jack famously, because of a murder of a young soldier, takes the stand in court. In answer to the question posed by the young US Army lawyer 'I demand to know the truth, what is the truth Sir?' Jack shouts back 'You want truth, you can't handle the truth.'

<sup>14</sup> The apostle Paul said, *"What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish that I may gain Christ and be found in him"* (Philippians 3:8-9).

<sup>15</sup> Truth is important, for Jesus said, *"Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God"* (Matthew 4:4).

because someone has him by the tail. He remains an elephant. His essence does not change just because a person, or a plurality of persons, sees him differently. Jesus said, "*The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent*" (John 6:29).<sup>16</sup>

Truth is important and it is knowable, because God has made it knowable. And when you not only know it but live it, and allow it to transform you, it will also create a passion in your heart that will make you glad you are alive.

*"If you look for truth, you may find comfort in the end; if you look for comfort you will not get either comfort or truth only soft soap and wishful thinking to begin, and in the end, despair."* C.S. Lewis

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<sup>16</sup> Erwin McManus says, "*Truth exists because God is trustworthy. The biblical understanding of truth is that all truth comes from God. Our experience of an objective reality is the result of the very character and nature of God. The integrity of the cosmos is an extension of the personhood of its creator.*"