

Sunday 1 September 2024 – Telling the Truth is a Revolutionary Act – Tim Ellis

The Right Reverend Tim Ellis, former bishop of Grantham, is no stranger to Saint Mark's Broomhill. We welcomed him once again to preside and preach this Sunday. His theme emerged from today's Gospel, and it speaks to the world we are living in.

Readings:

Deuteronomy 4: 1-2; 6-9. Mark, 7: 1-8; 14-15; 21-23.

Sermon: - Telling the Truth is a Revolutionary Act – Tim Ellis

It was George Orwell who said: 'in an atmosphere of universal deceit, telling the truth is a revolutionary act'.

These are particularly resonant words in this season of elections at home and abroad and when our papers, TVs and internet are filled with a dizzying amount of information in which truth- and truth's sister 'reality'-are the first casualties. When Christ came before Pontius Pilate just before his crucifixion, this supposed terrorist and threat to Roman power before him is asked: 'what is truth?' From the tone of the conversation recorded in St John's Gospel we might tell that Pilate has indeed sensed the truth-that this man has been brought before him, not because he blasphemed and claimed to be the Son of God, but because his obvious wisdom, so attractive to his many followers, was a threat to the shaky power of the Sanhedrin and the priests. Sensing that the real truth was that the man before him wielded, not a political power, but a moral, ethical and spiritual power, he takes the opportunity to pose the question that every human being asks at some point in their lifetime: *what is truth?* What is real? What can I rely on? What is dependable? With what values should I live my life? What is the solid anchor to which I can fix the boat of my life so that I can have some sense of where I am going and who I am?

In recent times, we have seen the cultural change that there is such a thing as 'alternative facts' and it seems that we only need to say something is true for it to be accepted, despite considerable evidence to the contrary. It appears there is no area of human life and activity that isn't open to this phenomenon-my truth is as good as your truth. Certainly, the cult of deliberate lying and twisting of the truth has infected the political sphere but it is also present when the 'truths' of religious texts or faith leaders are used to justify cruel acts, injustice and naked prejudice. Sometimes we can hardly recognise some faith groups as being authentic Christian, Islamic or any affiliations groups at all, such is their divergence from and misinterpretation of the truths of their faith.

In recent times, this spreading of lies and untruth, this offering of a false view of what is real and true, caused the riots and unrest in some of our major communities as the murder of three young girls was said on the internet to have been the violent work of a Muslim and recent immigrant to the country. The purpose of the deliberate lie was and is clear: to galvanise those who have been fed so many lies and untruths in their life that they have lost touch with reality and have descended into a fog of inchoate anger and fear. And this outrage is just one tip of a very large iceberg.

This is why it is important that we who claim the name 'Christian' should ourselves continually ask ourselves like Pilate 'what is truth?' because in an atmosphere of universal deceit, telling the truth is a revolutionary act. And it is what today's Gospel is about (Mark 7.1-8, 14-15,21-23). Jesus is dealing with the powerful of Jerusalem, the Pharisees and Scribes, and their power

is invested in keeping the people in thrall to their religious acts. A power which is, like so many other demonstrations of power, 'Emperors new clothes'. The paraphernalia of religion-the outward acts-have become of prime importance, and have replaced the deeper gifts they were meant to be vehicles of. He reminds them of this lie, this descent into fantasy and not truth and reality. 'You are not going to achieve or change anything by washing your hands, you will only achieve change by facing the truth and reality of your inner life. For it is here where the problem is-the hate, the prejudice, the fear, the lies and self-deception.

But then he says 'listen to me, and understand'. What do we hear? What are to understand? In Christ's teaching there is no political manifesto, there are no instructions to practice vain religious ritual, no promises that obeying rules or laws will bring salvation. The truth he lays before us are the lasting and divine truths. The only things that have lasting worth: those truths we have come to know as the gifts of the Spirit. And so, we have the story of the native American Cherokee elder teaching his young grandson about life-about the truths that can guide our lives and actions...

'A fight is going on inside me,' he said to the boy. 'It is a terrible fight and it is between two wolves. One is evil- he is anger, envy, sorrow, regret, greed, arrogance, self-pity, guilt, resentment, inferiority, lies, false pride, superiority, self-doubt and ego. The other is good. He is joy, peace, love, hope, serenity, humility, kindness, benevolence, empathy, generosity, truth, compassion and faith.his same fight is going on inside you — and inside every other person, too.' The boy thought about it for a minute and then asked his grandfather: 'Which wolf will win?'

The elder simply replied, 'The one you feed.'

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