

## NF10

### Sermon for Worcester Cathedral

May 12<sup>th</sup> 2024

Easter 6 – the Sunday after Ascension

Our readings this morning take us into the world of Johannine theology, and its core themes of light and dark, truth and falsehood. **If we receive human testimony, the testimony of God is greater** the first epistle of John tells us. But how do we discern the divine from the merely human? **Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth**, says the Jesus of the Fourth Gospel. But what is truth? These questions are not easily answered. Scholars have debated the nature and teaching of the so-called Johannine community for decades, and I am not alone in finding parts that tradition troubling. There is a sectarian character to some Johannine teaching that draws too stark a distinction between *insiders* who know love and light and *outsiders* who are dismissed as being lost in the darkness. The Johannine Christians had to reconcile their Christian identity with their Jewish heritage and they did so in ways we might find uncomfortable. As one commentator observes, there is nothing in the First Letter of John about loving those outside the community of believers. Dale Martin writes, “the author repeatedly commands his readers to love others within the community, but never those outside the community”. We can’t explore these questions of interpretations here, but we need to do two things. One is to remind ourselves that scripture offers no easy answers. The other is to think again about those profound issues of light & truth for ourselves, remembering that when we approach the Bible the question is: what must the truth be now if people two thousand years ago expressed themselves in the way they did.

It has always seemed to me that these questions are best approach through poetry rather than prose. I have long cherished these words.

Tell all the truth but tell it slant-

Success in Circuit lies  
Too bright for our infirm Delight  
The Truth's superb surprise  
As Lightning to the Children eased  
With explanation kind

The Truth must dazzle gradually or every man be blind -

Emily Dickinson. Characteristically wise, succinct and challenging. She writes of Truth with an uppercase T but urges what Philosophers call "epistemic humility". Be careful when you claim to know. Be careful when you speak of truth that you do not dare too much on too narrow an evidential base. To quote another poet, John Keats, we need a "negative capability". In a letter to his brother Keats praised Shakespeare for possessing such a capability: we must be "capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason". That irritable reaching is the enemy of faith, for faith is essentially a matter of living in grace and trust: it is not primarily the knowledge of factual propositions. Faith, like Grace, is a gift but never a possession. The paradox of faith may be that you get what you need just when you stop grasping at what you think you want.

Three days ago we celebrated the Ascension of Christ. It's a difficult episode to interpret. At Sunday School at St. John's in Dudley I was shown Victorian pictures of a very European looking Jesus rising into a cloud, and I scarcely knew how to understand such images. I have long thought of it like this. Imagine you have been in a dark room, you've been there for a while and you are stumbling blindly. You reach out seeking the security of something solid and as hand explores the wall find a light switch. You switch on the light. For a few moments you are dazzled but then the blinding like soon becomes the light by which you can see everything before you. The Ascension, thus, marks the symbolic moment when the disciples learned to see everything in the light of the resurrected Christ, they found a new depth to life as they appropriated his rising from the tomb and were transformed in heart and mind.

We are called to see as they saw, in the light of Christ. That light is found when we trust God whilst living with uncertainty. We live in that light

when we walk lightly on the earth with compassion, generosity and trust. We live in that light when we grow beyond the shallowness of our egotism and anxious self-regard, learning to love others in their variety and difference. Above all, our seeking after God must be humble and we must resist that desire for the kind of certainty that too easily translates into a desire to dominate others.

Again, the poets. Always the poets. Like many priests of my generation I owe an immeasurable debt to the Welsh poet R. S. Thomas. This is "In Church"

Often I try  
To analyse the quality  
Of its silences. Is this where God hides  
From my searching? I have stopped to listen,  
After the few people have gone,  
To the air recomposing itself  
For vigil. It has waited like this  
Since the stones grouped themselves about it.  
These are the hard ribs  
Of a body that our prayers have failed  
To animate. Shadows advance  
From their corners to take possession  
Of places the light held  
For an hour. The bats resume  
Their business. The uneasiness of the pews  
Ceases. There is no other sound  
In the darkness but the sound of a man  
Breathing, testing his faith  
On emptiness, nailing his questions  
One by one to an untenanted cross.

I must resist the temptation to reduce these words to banal prose, but I think they speak with great power to where so many of us are. I have loved the hard ribs of these Worcester stones since I was a boy. I find in them not the location of certainty but the spiritual room where I may live with my questions. It is a space which is, in its very self, the compelling generosity of God. My searching is my faith.

R S Thomas again. This from the poem "Kneeling"

Moments of great calm,  
Kneeling before an altar  
Of wood in a stone church  
In summer, waiting for the God  
To speak; the air a staircase  
For silence ...

Prompt me, God;  
But not yet. When I speak,  
Though it be you who speak  
Through me, something is lost.  
The meaning is in the waiting.

I do understand that you may find this unsatisfactory. There will be those who think faith can be a kind of certain knowledge, as though some facts of history or doctrine could settle all the questions. Why not just read the words of Scripture and submit yourself to them? Well, every single translation you read is an interpretation. There is no account of faith which is innocent of theory and interpretation. The American theologian Merold Westphal recalls seeing an advertisement for a Bible translation which asserted that "No Interpretation Needed" was its unique selling point. There is no such thing. Interpretation is unavoidable and the life of faith is always a negotiation between scripture, tradition and the personal experience of reason and conscience. As Westphal argues we should avoid the No Interpretation view as it is unsustainable: "the theory is itself an interpretation of interpretation and ... it belongs to a longstanding philosophical tradition" There are no easy answers in either the Bible or the doctrines of any church.

After nearly thirty years of priestly ministry I have come to see doctrines as maps. I have also learned to see both the importance and limitation of maps. Soren Kierkegaard - one of the profoundest Christian thinkers - once wrote of a certain man who admired the beauty and proportions of a map. As the Philosopher D. Z. Phillips recounts the story:

“There was only one thing wrong with this man; he did not realise the map is meant to be used. So, when he was put down in the heart of the country, with its many miles of winding, unkempt roads, dismay overtook him. He wanted to foreshorten eternity, to possess it once and for all in a rapturous gaze on the map. He was not prepared to travel”

To live is to travel with all the inherent possibilities of hurt, delay and disappointment. Only the actual – and rather messy- experience of being a pilgrim people on those winding unkempt roads will bring life to even the most accurate of maps. We do not live on paper, even when that paper is declared sacred.

Let me conclude with a final reflection.

You wake up at two o’clock in the morning and you have no company but your own thoughts.

There is no one else in front of whom you need to pretend.

There is nobody to be offended. Just you.

What do you really believe? What brings you here? Why do you kneel in this place? Why?

It's possible that your answer is to recite the creed and tell yourself that it's all facts, truth or certain knowledge. You might do that. But then, maybe you can't do that. After all, Christ called his followers to embrace the cross and follow him. No promise of knowledge or certainty only the journey.

Perhaps then you find in the promise of the Gospel and the life of faith a reason to journey on whilst valuing “negative capability”. Perhaps you can, after all, live with uncertainty whilst committing yourself to finding God's grace amid the contingent brokenness of ourselves and our world.

The last word must go to a poet. George Meredith.

Ah, what a dusty answer gets the soul When hot for certainties in this our  
life!