

24th April 2022 – Second Sunday of Easter

'What makes people unsatisfied
is that they accept lies.

if people had courage, and refused lies
and found out what they really felt and really meant
and acted on it,

They would distil the essential oil out of every experience
and like hazel-nuts in autumn, at last
be sweet and sound.'

That's D. H. Lawrence – who I think would be rather startled to find himself quoted in a Sunday sermon. But he's got a point. His poem suggests that accepting lies gnaws away at our integrity. In another of his poems he suggests that if we could avoid lies we would grow old gently and sweetly like a good 'keeping' apple. I mention his poems because it seems to me Thomas who is often maligned as 'Doubting Thomas' is actually Thomas, 'Valiant for the Truth.' Like any rational twenty-first century thinker he wants to see for himself. That's not extraordinary to us, but it would have seemed strange in earlier ages when individual faith was less important than the faith of the community. In Acts we hear how, after Peter's and Paul's sermons whole households were baptised. Conversion to Christianity was a community activity so Thomas's refusal to accept his friends' testimony would have been surprising and painful for all of them.

But the resurrection is a matter of life and death and Thomas wasn't prepared to accept their testimony. For him, as for us, truth matters.

There is at present plenty of political noise – both idle chatter and deep concern – about honesty and truth. The question of whether the Prime Minister misled Parliament appears to have been turned into the question of whether he knowingly misled Parliament. Somehow the intention to tell truth has become more important than the reality of recognising and communicating truth. But isn't it the job of a leader to use wisdom and insight to recognise truth? And if they can't do that in their own lives why would we trust them with the nation's life? That's why some have questioned the Prime Minister's mandate to lead. Thomas, on the other hand, was instinctively preparing for a life of leadership and witness by testing out the foundations of his faith.

Meanwhile, there's another leader to think about. I wonder for how long Pilate remembered the Jewish dissident he had crucified. Pilate's career as governor of Judea under the Roman Emperor ended some time after the crucifixion when he brutally suppressed an uprising in Samaria and was recalled to Rome to explain himself. In his interrogation of Christ, Pilate completely failed to grasp the truth of Christ's claim. 'For this reason I have come into the world to bear witness to the truth,' said Christ, and Pilate scoffed 'What is truth?'

As we remembered Pilate's words on Good Friday, we looked at one of Malcolm Guite's sonnets. It describes the reality of Christ brought before Pilate to be judged in

an earthly court, and Pilate's failure to recognise that the one standing before him is creator of the universe and the one who will, at the end of time, judge Pilate. You will find a copy of the poem on a notice board beside the kitchen, and with it a rather good portrait of a shifty looking man, looking Jesus up and down and arrogantly dismissing the Godhead in him. Perhaps it's understandable that Pilate failed to recognise the incarnate God in a bruised criminal, someone from the wrong end of the country speaking with a thick Galilean accent. One could argue that.

But Peter the Fisherman - and his mother-in-law, a tax collector, blind beggars by the roadside, a Roman Centurion, a Samaritan woman, 5000 who were fed by him, his friends Martha and Mary and many, many women all recognised something of God in him. They knew from his teaching, his ministries of feeding and healing, his increasingly outrageous miracles including that last miracle, the raising of Lazarus from the dead that uniquely, he was sent from God. Pilate, more powerful, educated and successful than any of them, didn't get it. And it's worth giving some thought to the possibility that as a successful Roman soldier-turned-civil-servant, Pontius Pilate conscientiously disciplined himself to concentrate on the work in hand, avoiding sentimentality or being distracted by 'the wider picture.' That may resonate with some of us. There is a danger that our responsibilities lead us into the same mistake as Pilate - being so focussed on work and responsibility that we miss the truth in front of us

The Old Testament law, by which Jesus lived and died, took a different view. The law was rather good at keeping an eye on the wider picture – that is, the needs of others. If you take a poor man's coat as surety for a loan, the law stipulates you must return it to him each night in case he were to freeze to death without it.¹ If you raise an army, you may not conscript a man who is only recently married, he is to have a year at home with his wife.² The Jewish law reflects God's knowledge of our needs and foibles. God's love is present throughout it like a golden thread. But it is only a code of law. Christ's new covenant is wider and deeper – not a law, more of a call – 'Follow me.' 'Give to the poor.' 'Love God and love your neighbour.'

But, today, Pilate's failure to recognise truth is past and gone. Out of his fear and failure and loss of nerve God brings resurrection. The blue skies and new leaves of the past week have been reminding us of the light and hope in the resurrection garden. And today we hear about Thomas, dear friend of Jesus who as a rational human being knew that grief plays tricks and our brains are quite capable of conjuring up what we long for. His trenchant stance, 'I won't believe unless I can see and feel for myself,' isn't a failure of faith as it is sometimes judged. It's the rational response of an enlightened man. On a subject as important as this, Thomas doesn't want pious words and wish fulfilment. He has seen life and death, and knows death is irrevocable. He wants truth.

And so on the second Sunday of Easter when they gathered together – as we are gathered today on the second Sunday – the resurrected Christ came to them again and invited Thomas to see with his eyes and feel with his hands. This was no ghostly

¹ Exodus 22.26

² Deuteronomy 24.25

apparition but the living, breathing Christ. And Thomas' response, 'My Lord and my God,' was all the stronger for his initial hesitation.

I don't know what the Parliamentary committee will decide on the question of the Prime Minister's probity, but I do know it is important to hold the investigation. As individuals and as a society we need to learn to judge what is true and what is not true. If we were to be wrong about the resurrection then, as Paul of Tarsus and Richard Dawkins would agree making unlikely bedfellows, our faith is worthless.³

But Christ has been raised from the dead. He assures us he is the way, the truth and he is life. His resurrection foreshadows ours and from now on, as John Donne knew, 'Tap a human being and they ring with the sound of infinity.'⁴

³ 1 Corinthians 15:17 and Dawkins, R. *The God Delusion*

⁴ Katherine Rundell *Super Infinite - The Transformations of John Donne* (London Faber & Faber 2022) p 7