



SAINT THOMAS CHURCH FIFTH AVENUE
in the City of New York
The Reverend Canon Carl F. Turner, Rector
www.SaintThomasChurch.org

Sunday, November 21, 2021
Christ the King

Festal Eucharist
11am

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A Sermon by
The Reverend Canon Carl F. Turner, *Rector*
on
Daniel 7:9-10, 13-14 and John 18:33-37
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The Truth will set you Free

My mother was brought up with a very simple faith. Now, there is nothing wrong with that, except that she had been taught a very particular way of looking at death, heaven and hell, and judgement. It owed a great deal to what she had also been taught about right and wrong and reflected the way that the courts of justice worked – how evidence was collected and would lead to a conviction that could never be overturned. I remember one particular dinner time as a child when I was being particularly obnoxious and she said, “*God is going to write that down in a great book, and you wait until the Day of Judgement!*” I know where she got that from, and our reading from the Book of Daniel always makes me shudder a little “*The court sat in judgment, and the books were opened.*”

The problem, of course, is that my mother, like so many Christians before her, believed that God would sit in judgement like a *human* judge sits in court, weighing up the evidence, and consulting his sentencing manual, and handing down a punishment to fit the crime. Perhaps she was fearful of hearing the judge say the words ‘take her down’ as in, to the cells, never to be seen again.

While judgment does, indeed, mean facing up to our sins, for the Christian it is also means something very different, for it always allows for repentance – a word that means ‘turning around’ – a coming to terms with the what we have done wrong and the chance not only to make amends, but to make something better of one’s life.

On All Souls’ Day, I told you a story that the late Cardinal Basil Hume loved to tell about a priest preaching at a funeral, who told the assembled congregation that he was going to talk to them about judgement. You can imagine the groan from the family and friends of the deceased. But the priest went on, “*Judgement,*” he said, “*is whispering into the ear of a merciful and compassionate God the story of my life which I had never been able to tell.*”

Judgement is whispering into the ear of a merciful and compassionate God the story of my life which I had never been able to tell.

St. Thérèse of Lisieux speaks movingly in a similar way about repentance, contrition, and what Christians should believe about judgement. She says, “*Lord, even if my conscience were burdened with every sin it is possible to commit, I would still throw myself into your arms, my heart broken with contrition. And I know how tenderly you’re welcome any prodigal child of yours who comes back to you.*”¹

Certainly, another title for Jesus' parable of the Prodigal Son might well be 'The forgiving Father.' However, the prodigal son could only be forgiven because he first discovered the truth of what he had done.

Telling the truth. How many times was I told as a child to tell the truth; at home and at school. I have only once had to give sworn testimony in a Crown Court in England as a witness to a crime. If you have given sworn testimony, then it is likely that you were asked a question: "*Do you solemnly swear that you will tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help you God?*" And they may have even added, '*under pains and penalties of perjury?*' **Telling the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.**

But, just as judgement for the Christian is different from human justice, so is the Christian understanding of truth not simply about the accurate recalling of facts.

In the 8th Chapter of John's Gospel, Jesus said to those who believed in him, "*If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.*" (John 8:31b-32)

Living in truth means knowing oneself, and knowing the relationship that we have with God our creator, our ultimate judge. Jesus came among us to reveal God's glory and presence; knowing Jesus means knowing the one who embodies that truth. As we read in the opening verses of John's Gospel, "*The Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.*" (John 1:14)

Coming to terms with my relationship with God means being truthful, not because it is a good and honest thing to do but, rather, being true to oneself allows us to discover our identity as a beloved child of God, and how often we fall short in that relationship. When we live our lives only for this world and what it has to offer, we cheapen the relationship that we have with God our loving Father. When we judge others by the standards of the world, even when that judgement may seem justified, we cheapen the relationship that God has with the world.

If you want an example of this, look at today's Gospel reading. Pilate stands as judge – a human judge – and a judge represented the abuse of power by Imperial Rome. In the encounter between Jesus and Pilate, we discover the opposites between human power and God's ultimate power expressed in a paradox by human reckoning. Pilate meets Jesus, the Word made Flesh, "*He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people.*"

God humbled himself - made himself subject to a human justice that fell far short of God's justice. God's creative Word was silenced in Pilate's chambers.

Preaching at the beginning of the Gulf War at a time when people were questioning what they should believe, Rowan Williams said this, "*The Christian gospel offers truth, it calls to truthful living, it binds us in unbreakable relation, both confrontation and kinship, with the embodied word of God, and asks, before all else, for repentance, without which there is no truth.*" ²

The Gospel calls for repentance, without which there is no truth. Or, as we hear at the beginning of the baptismal covenant:

- Do you turn to Jesus Christ and accept him as your Savior?
- Do you put your whole trust in his grace and love?
- Do you promise to follow and obey him as your Lord?

Living in the truth that will set us free.

Pilate could not understand this. He questioned Jesus about being a king, but the reality was that he had no idea about true kingship. *“My kingdom is not from this world,”* said Jesus to Pilate. Pilate can only think in terms of human power, brute force, rules and orders, and sentences and handing down judgements. Jesus came to bring liberation, justice, and peace, by revealing the truth. *“For this I was born,”* said Jesus, *“and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.”* (John 18:37)

Our Gospel passage ends with those words today, but what happens next in the narrative is of huge importance and we will hear it next on Good Friday before we venerate the cross: *‘Pilate asked Jesus, “What is truth?”’* (John 18:38). And then, Pilate simply turns and walks away. After that moment, he never questioned Jesus again; thus, he lost his own chance to repent – to turn around, to discover the truth, and to be made free.

The juxtaposition of roles here is remarkable. Jesus, the Word made Flesh, the glory of the Father, full of grace and truth, and Pilate, the soldiers, the priests, the pharisees, and a baying crowd. No justice, a lynch-mob made respectable with the veneration of Roman culture. The irony is deep – Pilate sits on the judgement seat and the Son of God is dressed as human king with a crown of thorns and a purple robe.

You know the rest of the story. Pilate, as judge, does indeed say ‘Take him down.’ He went down to the cells, to the cross, to hades, but he did not remain there. His story did not have an ending but, rather, a new beginning filled with hope. And hopeful living is another way of living in the truth of Jesus Christ. My friends, we do not have to be afraid of the truth because Jesus is the embodiment of all truth. And when we seek the truth of our deepest selves and turn to him, he will never, ever turn us away.

Words of Phineas Fletcher, which the choir sings during Lent:

Drop, drop, slow tears, and bathe those beautiful feet,
which brought from heaven the news and Prince of Peace.

Cease not, wet eyes, his mercies to entreat;
to cry for vengeance sin doth never cease.

In your deep floods drown all my faults and fears;
nor let his eye see sin, but through my tears.

¹ · The Story of a Soul: The Autobiography of the Little Flower (with Supplemental Reading: Classics Made Simple) TAN Books (2015) p.154

² Rowan Williams – A University Sermon preached at the outbreak of the Gulf War, 1991, when he was Bishop of Monmouth (from ‘Open to Judgement’ DLT, London, 1994. Page 131