

## Pentecost, 23 May 2021

What is truth? Pilate's question has haunted us through the centuries, and indeed has been something we have all wrestled with in every age. Before his encounter with Pilate, Jesus had tried to affirm something of the truth's resonance with his disciples in the upper room after his last supper: 'I am the way, the truth and the life.' Later on, Jesus amplifies this reference to the truth: 'When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth.' So, it seems, we will not be left comfortless. Our journey into the truth will have a guide who knows exactly where he is going.

And so it was, on a dry, dusty day in Jerusalem, fifty-three days after those words were uttered, that their hearers found themselves in a house when all heaven broke loose, rushing winds, dancing flames and spontaneous tongue-talking, where even people from the Cyrenian part of Libya could understand what they were saying. Here was the pay-off. After having just secured the election of Matthias to keep the status of the number twelve intact, from an electorate of about 120, Peter suddenly barnstorms his way through a rabble-rousing encounter with the men of Judaea and all who live in Jerusalem, concluding with a particular truth: 'therefore, let the entire house of Israel know with certainty that God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified.' And off he and his colleagues go, preaching the Gospel to all nations, and the truth behind that endeavour was summarised in that first sermon, of which this is the umpteen millionth manifestation. The truth is laid bare in a pithy statement which the Church has been expanding on ever since. And, guided by the Spirit of truth, what could possibly go wrong?

Plenty it seems. Far from being a mature adult, basking in the glow of the Holy Spirit, the Church has often appeared more like a petulant child, squabbling its way through history, staking claims in its extending territory of what it thinks truth looks like, burning anyone who gets in the way, and distorting the Gospel message with impunity. The signs were already there, in the first flush of ecclesiastical enthusiasm, when Peter, now confronting Paul in what passed as the very first PCC meeting, found himself debating the merits or otherwise of circumcision. Already, the Spirit's truth was being debated over, determined by whichever side of the fence you came down on. Faults, flaws, doctrinal debates and downright awfulness have dogged the institutional church ever since. Only last week the archbishop of Canterbury apologised, again, for the abuse young boys had suffered at the hands of the barrister, John Smyth, at Christian holiday camps in the 1980s. If this is what being led into all truth is all about, then we still have an awful long way to go.

But how could it be otherwise? For how can anyone claim to have a monopoly on the truth when there is so much unknown and unexplored? Remember, the man said, the Spirit will *guide* you into all truth, not that he would deliver it the same day outside your front door, guaranteed by the click of a button. We need to be guided, and guiding means sometimes going the wrong way, taking hesitant baby steps up a cul-de-sac as much as blazing a trail on the highway. And as for what 'all' truth looks like, well

goodness only knows. After 2,000 years we are still only at the edge, the first foothold within the undiscovered country.

And yet, and yet, this strange, mercurial, troublesome childhood we know as the Church still has the potential to stand, and indeed does stand, with those anxious people in that upper room with Jesus and respond to the promptings he gave them. The Spirit gives us so much beauty in word and music, fellowship and prayer; and for an example of this you need look no further than what we are doing today, where a special kind of truth is being celebrated. We rejoice in the Spirit's presence among us.

But we need to be honest about what we take the truth to mean. For we can only be sincere about our guidance towards truth if we stop peddling myths about our own infallibilities, our own version of the truth, are honest instead about our limitations and shortcomings, and allow ourselves to be guided into the infinite possibilities that God presents to us by listening to each other and relating to each other.

For it is all too easy to deceive ourselves into thinking that we have the Holy Spirit on a lead, taking him for a walk every time we set out to do God's work. Take me, for instance. I try not to be someone who lives with an illusion, a version of the truth that cocoons me from the outside world and which distances me from others who do not subscribe to that version. But I cannot deny that I have struggled at times between asserting an easy version of the truth and one that more represents my reality. I am often asked, for instance, why I became a priest, and a slightly gilded version of my response might be 'to serve the Church, to be an icon of Christ, to pronounce God's forgiveness,' all things I try to do and try to be. But if I am being honest with myself, I really ought to say, 'to help people, to keep the rumour of God alive,' and, perhaps, when I am being really honest with myself, 'to help people develop a relationship with God that I wished I sometimes had.'

This is not me wearing a hair shirt to show how inadequate I am, but me trying to be honest. Like every Christian pilgrim who has ever lived, I shouldn't wonder, I have succumbed to easy answers and asked unanswerable questions, I have pronounced certainty and experienced doubt, I judge others and am judged by them, I have balanced devotion with the occasional dark time of dereliction, I have loved, and I have lost. All of which combine to make my truth-seeking sometimes too difficult to undertake, so I keep the Spirit at arms' length, I rest easy in my churchy fastness. But when I surrender to my honesty, my curiosity gets the better of my caution, and I want to explore further the infinite array of God's glory in the world.

This is what being led into all truth means, not staking a claim on a version of the truth and nailing it to your front door, not turning away from the bits of God you don't know, which is quite a lot actually, but facing the mystery of God and diving straight in. We have no idea where this will take us, but that is precisely the point. This is what we face all the time, you and me. We begin each day with Jesus in that upper room, and we hear his words; the Spirit of truth will guide us into all truth. Where will that guidance take us today? That should be the guiding principle of our lives, not standing orders or

agendas, not balance sheets or leadership programmes. Instead, we should wonder and marvel at what lay before us.

And do not doubt, the Spirit is still here, working his magic, if you see what I mean. We are not left comfortless: amidst the certainties and the judgements, the derelictions and the losses, there will be occasional, and often odd, moments of revelation, epiphany moments when the norm is suspended, and the sun breaks through. The looking into a loved one's eyes, the touch of a hand, the unfurling of a leaf, the echoes of a Strauss song, reciting the psalms overlooking a bleak landscape, which all, for me, deflect me from an endless procession of busyness and plunge me further into the mystery of what the truth of God is all about. There is more to life than I can define and plan. These haunting, ghostly moments take me outside myself, revealing to me something of the Other. They can't be contrived, but they are my fragile instances of flame-dancing which, amid the occasional mundane moments of my working life, reassure me that, although my journey has some way to go, all *will* be well. And I am sure you have those moments, too. Truth is not easily won. It is not always recognised. But it is out there, and it is accessed by being honest and leaping into the mystery, about seeking God in the absences and in the shadows, not just in the tried and the familiar, and seeing the Spirit dancing in the distance.

It is a long way from dry, dusty Jerusalem to the wild, windswept landscape of west Wales, but that is where this umpteenth millionth sermon will end, if only to show that the Spirit's wanderings have no boundary. For here the poet R S Thomas, as crotchety and curmudgeonly as any Old Testament prophet, whose own relationship with God could be as wistful and as windswept as the landscape he so adored, could still have moments of epiphany that reassured him that not only would all things be well, but that the God who might have appeared to him distant and remote on many occasions, was closer than he thought.

What is truth? We will never know for sure, but we will get closer to it by being guided into the mystery of God, and occasionally looking sideways to see the sweep of his hand, the glow and afterglow of the Spirit. Then, we can join our voices with R S Thomas's particular experience of the Spirit's epiphany.

## **The Bright Field**

I have seen the sun break through  
to illuminate a small field  
for a while, and gone my way  
and forgotten it. But that was the  
pearl of great price, the one field that had  
treasure in it. I realise now  
that I must give all that I have  
to possess it. Life is not hurrying  
on to a receding future, nor hankering after  
an imagined past. It is the turning  
aside like Moses to the miracle  
of the lit bush, to a brightness  
that seemed as transitory as your youth  
once, but is the eternity that awaits you.

## Introduction

A very welcome to you from Truro Cathedral as we gather on this great feast of Pentecost, and can I say at the outset how wonderful it is to have a full congregation alongside our cathedral choir, a marked development of our ease from lockdown. Although we still have to contend with the crass rulings on amateur choirs, so we probably will not have St Mary's Singers singing for us in a fortnight, at least this is a great step in the right direction. And wherever you are watching this, you are very welcome indeed.

Pentecost, the great feast of the Holy Spirit. We rejoice in his glory. However, we begin our time together acknowledging a great sadness amongst us as we mourn the loss of two dear friends from our cathedral community. Christine Whiteman, who had been suffering from cancer for nigh on three years, died in the early hours of Thursday morning. Summarising people often does not do credit to someone, and when I say that she was the wife of our former archdeacon Rodney, Rodney himself would be the first to say that she was far more than this. She was as much there for the clergy of the archdeaconries as he was, (Rodney was archdeacon of both in this diocese), both in offering hospitality and a listening, caring ear, and she was underpinned by a faith that was joyous and curious, which was never more seen than in her final months, where a deep courage shone forth as she continued to give to those were closest to her.

And twenty-four hours later news came that our beloved Eric Dare had died. He had been at the Eucharist here two weeks ago, doggedly determined to attend worship and receive the sacrament as he had done for most of his 93 years. He was soaked in cathedral worship – he had been a boy chorister at Exeter – and his breadth of knowledge, sensitivity and quiet but profound Christianity, which he found expressed in both words and music, all characterised Eric as being a truly gentle man of faith. It was a privilege to take him the sacrament in hospital last Monday, when it became clear that he was entering the final phase of his life on this earth.

Details of both Christine's and Eric's funerals have yet to be determined, but in the meantime, we pray for the families of both these wonderful people in their bereavement, and we rejoice that they have been brought into God's nearer presence through the gift of the Holy Spirit. We will keep a minute's silence as we commend them to almighty God.

Rest eternal grant unto them, O Lord, **and let light perpetual shine upon them.**  
May they rest in peace, **and rise in glory.**

## **Intercessions**

Let us now unite in prayer, as the disciples did on the first Pentecost, and open ourselves to receive the very same Holy Spirit.

That the Church, in the power of the Spirit, may make the Gospel understandable to people of every race, language, and culture, we pray to the Lord...

That the Holy Spirit of Peace may unite and reconcile the peoples and nations of the earth, bringing an end to war, hatred, and discrimination, we pray to the Lord...

That the Holy Spirit, Lord and Giver of Life, may renew the face of the earth and make it a place where the poor are fed, the strangers are welcomed, and the unborn are brought safely to birth, we pray to the Lord...

That each baptized Christian may develop more fully his or her response to all the gifts which the Spirit bestows for the service of the Body of Christ, we pray to the Lord...

That the Holy Spirit, who purifies us of sin and raises the dead, may bring all our departed loved ones into the fullness of God's presence, we pray to the Lord...

Christine Whiteman, Eric Dare, Michael Archer and Michael Winterton

Father, we rejoice in your Spirit. Send him again into our hearts, into our lives, and into our world. Hear our prayers, and save us in your love. We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen.