

Thoughts on Truth

All Saints: 10.30 on 26th August 2018

Reading: The Armour of God Ephesians 6:10-20

Kenyan Prayer

Good Lord, deliver us.

From the arrogance that thinks it knows all truth

From the laziness that is content with half truth

From the cowardice that shrinks from new truth

Good Lord, deliver us.

- Most of you are aware that Mark and I have just got back from Uganda. I could stand here and say we had a wonderful fortnight. That would be half the truth. There were indeed good days - examples of hospitality and friendship that amazed and humbled us, but there were also days when I was ill and felt the vulnerability of being in a remote place where it might not be easy to get quick treatment. At those moments I had to depend on God. God brought people alongside me to look after me and keep me safe.
- Today we heard about the armour of God, based on the pieces of equipment worn by Roman legionary. When getting ready for today I felt drawn to a particular part of that armour. The belt of truth. The themes of honesty and transparency.
- Paul writes to the Ephesians while under house arrest (or even from prison). He shows vulnerability by admitting to the dishonour of his situation. Sharing our weakness is an example of telling the whole truth. The truth should elicit compassion rather than criticism.
- Two weeks back the gospel reading told the story of the man who prayed 'God have mercy on me, a sinner' . Jesus praised his honesty and he warned against the arrogance of the Pharisee who thought he was doing all right.
- One of the most liberating comments I have read recently in any Christian book is Eugene Peterson's encouragement to own the title 'sinner' in a really positive light. He observes that it is

when we expect and treat people as paragons of virtue that we become less and less accepting of their mistakes. One of the most striking things I've noticed about Lizzie is her readiness to make allowances for people's weaknesses and failings and to admit her own. And it's challenged me to be the same.

- By contrast, our media are full of moral outrage at the sins of different people - they express surprise when people's sins are brought to light. Alex Salmond was quoted in the papers saying 'I'm no saint'. Eugene Peterson says that it's when we accept each other as sinners that we begin to realise that forgiveness and grace are the only things that really matter.
- Forgiveness and grace, repentance and reconciliation are the beating heart of the church. They are our universal truth. This truth is not abstract it flows from a real person - Jesus Christ. The fruits of Jesus teaching and healing - his suffering, dying and rising are actions we can know and trust. Jesus demonstrates God's forgiveness and saving grace. That's why Jesus can declare, 'I am the way, the truth, and the life'. This truth we can all own equally. It's as valid for you as it is for me. There is nothing relative about it.
- I've described what I consider to be the whole truth for a Christian and it's led me to think about how our lives are often damaged by half truths. The story of the sort of person we are sometimes becomes unhelpfully set in stone - so, we might feel under the burden of a label associated with our health if we are disabled or have another named illness or condition. Again these are half truths which fail to take account of the strength of a weakness - those qualities in that person that have arisen as a result of or in spite of an illness.
- Compliments about strengths can sometimes be as harmful as the naming of problems. For example, someone find themselves labelled as a strong parent or highly efficient or patient or whatever. And so when ever he or she has a bad day and feels at her wit's end as a parent and shouts at her kids, or someone makes a small administrative error which turns out to have bigger consequences or despairs because they are at the

end of their tether as a full time carer, they will often feel they haven't lived up to their shiny label, Those compliments we once wore proudly can feel like a noose.

- The joy of being a sinner means it's OK to have an off day. So when we see people struggling in a way that seems out of character that should bring out our compassion. When we say here: Come as you are. what do we mean? If you were to go home and complete that thought: Come as you are because... so that... what would you write? For me I might write Come as you are because God loves and accepts you now. Come with your messy life which is a bit like your neglected garden. Come ready receive God's help to uproot the weeds and allow the flowers of grace to blossom in their full colours. This is why our weekly confession and absolution prayers mean so much and signal a fresh start for us.
- While I was in Uganda I was reading a book called the Power of Story to change a church. What stories do we tell each other about this community? The less generalised and more specific our stories are, the more truthful they are
- The reason I love Margaret Hawkins early history of All Saints entitled 'The Spirit of All Saints' is because she has painted a diverse picture of our story here and is not afraid to share some of the controversies along with the celebrations through the years. Do get hold of a copy if you can.
- So one thing that is healthy in this church is the way there is an openness to sharing constructive feedback. And the sharing of difficulties is balanced with sharing thanks for the good things that happen here through people supporting each other as a church family. The recent connect groups for pastoral care should really help people feel less isolated and give a space for being listened to.
- It is good when members feel able to share their feelings about changes and explain why something feels difficult. So for example, some of you prefer seating with the aisle down the middle. Others value the three sided arrangement as it can

make us feel more close knit. Visuals and order matter, togetherness matters. Those are our stories.

- We try to make allowances for each other to enable people to come as they are. And from that acceptance growth comes. We become less offendable and can learn to value the worship needs of different people.

So to summarise these thoughts on truth.

Jesus is the key to the truth that underpins our lives - his gift of forgiveness and grace.

The belt of truth is about integrity and transparency in our relationships with God and each other.

The shield is about trusting in the victory God has already won in Jesus.

The helmet of salvation reminds us of the joy of seeing ourselves as forgiven sinners.

As the hymn says:

Have we trials and temptations
Is there trouble anywhere
We should never be discouraged
Take it to the Lord in prayer
Can we find a friend so faithful,
who will all our sorrows share.
Jesus know our every weakness
take it to the Lord in prayer!

Prayer has the power to change us and guide us to act wisely and kindly in how we treat one another.

And to say when we see someone falter: 'There but for the grace of God go I'

Amen.