Sermon – Easter 2 2021 Year B

John 20.19-end

Introduction

I wonder if you watched the series *The Crown* on television? It follows the story of the Royal Family from shortly before the abdication through to the early years of Princess Diana. It is a fictional account rooted in fact. It came to mind yesterday as I scanned the newspaper coverage of Prince Philip’s life and death on my phone. I began to wonder to what extent some of the coverage of Prince Philip’s death was also fiction, rooted in fact. What is truth, asked Pilate? Where is it to be found?

I never met Prince Philip, though I have met his daughter, when I took a service unveiling a new stained-glass window in memory of Michael Mann, a previous Bishop of Dudley of course. So, my thoughts, like yours, I’m sure, are very much with one particular grieving family this weekend. I wish them peace amidst all the fuss, that yet again, they cannot avoid.

The true Prince Philip is not to be found in *The Crown* or in the newspapers; the true Prince Philip is known only to God, only God can possibly know the full truth of an individual’s life.

This truth lies at the heart of our understanding about God. As we grieve with the Royal Family this weekend, we might also wish to grieve for the loss of truth that inevitably comes with high public office. Our insatiable curiosity creates fictions of its own, and ordinary people thrust into public life, as Prince Philip was, pay a high price in life and in death.

Our theme today is about how we come to believe. How do we come to faith? How do we come to know what is truly, true?

There is a limit to the knowledge we can acquire through personal experience. When the facts run out, we need something else to lead us into truth.

To explore that we will turn in a few minutes to that most intriguing of personalities in the gospel stories: Thomas.

Sermon

I wonder where Thomas was on that first evening when Jesus met with the other disciples behind locked doors?

We know the disciples fled after Jesus’ arrest, making many of them as much betrayers as Judas perhaps, but now they have gathered together again, except for Thomas, who is unaccountably absent.

Perhaps the Doubter had fled further than most or disappeared deeper into the backstreets of Jerusalem, keen like Peter, not to be associated with the crucified Jesus. Perhaps the message of the gathering disciples, secretly conveyed in these continuing days of tension and fear, simply had not reached him.

We will never know whether doubt or accident kept Thomas away but the result is one of the most human and endearing of the resurrection appearances of Jesus handed down to us. It also teaches us that evidence alone is not enough for faith to thrive.

Jesus appears in their midst, identifies himself through his wounds, greets them with words of Peace and immediately gives them a charge followed by the gift of the Holy Spirit. “As the Father has sent me, so I send you.”

But Thomas is not there and doubts the words of his fellow disciples. Is this some April Fools’ Joke he muses? And so, Thomas utters that most 21st century of statements: give me proof.

A week later and the scenario repeats itself. Again, Jesus offers them peace but this time goes straight to Thomas and gives him the proof he needs. But whereas the other disciples were simply shown Jesus’ wounds, Thomas is challenged to go further and touch the wounds of crucifixion for himself.

Thomas now believes but is chided by Jesus for requiring proof.

“Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.”

And this is the situation in which we find ourselves. We might wish to be in Thomas’ shoes but we cannot be. We might doubt, but the option of finding the kind of proof Thomas needed will always elude us. And so, the choice is presented to us quite simply: choose to believe or choose not to. The choice is ours. We either believe in the words of Jesus or we don’t.

This sounds harsh and bleak but one important phrase, repeated twice in our gospel reading this morning, might rescue us; the phrase is: ‘come to believe’.

Jesus says it of the other disciples who did not require Thomas’ level of belief, and the gospel’s author says it as a rationale for writing the gospel account itself. “These are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God….”

Growing in faith in God is a process. Few are privileged to experience a single overwhelming moment of conversion in which all truth is revealed. For most of us, faith is a slow process of acclimatisation to the truth.

Several considerations may encourage us. The first is the universal experience of faith itself. Everyone has faith in a multitude of people and things from their spouse to their phone, their accountant to our COVID vaccinations. Faith is simply something that we have to have to manage life successfully. Religious faith is simply another dimension of this very human attribute.

Secondly, it is reassuring to see so much doubt amongst the disciples throughout Jesus’ ministry but especially in the characters of Judas, Peter and Thomas. These are people with whom we can identify and whose flawed characters can save us from that great sin of considering ourselves unworthy of God’s love. As I’ve said several times before – there is nothing we can do to make God love us any more and nothing we can do to make God love us any less. Each of us might be at a very different place on our faith journey but meanwhile God’s love of us remains unconditional and infinite. Faith in Jesus requires nothing more of us than our acknowledgment that we are human, fragile and vulnerable.

Finally, faith in Jesus does not require faith in everything else connected with Christianity. We can retain our faith in Jesus as the Son of God without feeling required to accept on faith everything else about the institution of the church, the creeds, the history or tradition of our faith. It is self-evident that Jesus is not responsible for everything that has been done and said in His name since AD30 or thereabouts. This is important for the Christian faith is in danger of imploding because of innumerable sins since the resurrection, not least in our own day, that enormous sin of sexual abuse. This separation of Jesus from tradition and history is also important if we are to continue to rejoice in the continuing diversity and richness of the faith worldwide.

Ours is a living faith, driven by a living God, the Holy Spirit; we do not worship the teachings of a dead Jesus but the personal experience of a resurrected Christ.

Let us return to that house for a moment when Jesus greeted Thomas and challenged him to reach out his hand and put it in Jesus’ side.

Note how Thomas does not do as Jesus invites. He doesn’t touch Jesus’ wounds. In that moment, Thomas’ doubt turns into Trust. He has experienced Jesus and that is enough. At the last moment, he draws back from needing physical proof.

In this season of Easter as we journey with the disciples in the earliest formational days of the church, may our faith, however tentative, draw strength from the first witnesses who saw and doubted but who also came to believe; might our doubt be transformed into trust so that we too may we join them and the great multitude of witnesses ever since, and rejoice in declaring with Thomas,

“My Lord and My God!”

Amen.