

To Whom Shall We Go?

The sermon given at the Parish Communion Service on 26 August 2018 by the Vicar, the Revd. Canon Jonathan Baker, in Beverley Minster

John 6: 56-69.

Peter said, 'Lord, to whom should we go? You have the words of eternal life.'

This Gospel reading has strong personal significance for me. I didn't grow up in a practising Christian family. Like a lot of people we were Church of England but didn't go to church much. Neither did I have a dramatic conversion experience in which the love of God broke into my heart in an undeniable way. What happened to me was that I gradually came to believe that if it was true that there was a God, then I couldn't ignore him. And that it didn't matter if it was inconvenient or made me a laughing stock in front of my friends: if it was true that there was a God and I was his creature, then my job in life was simply to try and respond to that simple truth and do my best to live in light of it.

So Peter's words resonated with me. 'Lord, to whom should we go? You have the words of eternal life.'

Jesus has been teaching that he is the bread from heaven and that whoever comes to him will never be hungry and whoever believes in him will never be thirsty, and that those who feed on him will have eternal life.

And people found this teaching difficult. It was difficult because it was too focussed on Jesus, and they didn't see what Jesus of Nazareth had to do with eternal life. And it was difficult because it threatened their independence. The language of faith was too intimate, too personal, this stuff about 'those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me and I in them'. Discovering that eternal life is not a possession you can own but a gift you have to receive and a surrender you have to make, was too challenging, and people started to turn away, including some from among the disciples.

So Jesus asks the twelve, his closest disciples, 'Do you also wish to go away?' Peter says, 'Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life.'

It's not a case of whether they wish to go away or not. Of course they wish to go away. They don't want to be ridiculed by their friends on one hand, or get into trouble with the authorities on the other. But this isn't anything to do with what they want. It has to do with the truth. 'To whom else can we go? You have the words of eternal life.' If this is where real life is found,

what's the point of looking anywhere else? Even if it's hard, even if it's unfashionable, even if it takes a lifetime of struggle to work out, to whom else can they go, if Jesus' words are true?

In confessing to you that I became a Christian because I felt it was important to discover whether it was true that there was a God, I feel like a complete dinosaur. Because this world we live in is no longer interested in truth. One of the characteristics of the western world in my adult life is that we have lost confidence in the idea of truth, we have lost interest in the content of truth and we have lost our grip on the very concept of truth itself. The only truth now is whatever works for me.

So you can have a president of the USA who contradicts himself on Twitter every 5 minutes and nobody seems to mind. His supporters have no interest at all in whether what he says is true or not.

And you can have people like Gwyneth paltrow peddling alternative therapies in open defiance of scientific knowledge. She fell out with Vogue (magazine) because they wanted her articles to be fact-checked. But she's made successful online business selling fake science.

Just as truth naturally flourishes alongside goodness and beauty, so falsehood flourishes alongside violence and ugliness. We live in uncertain times where one thing we can be certain about is that if falsehood becomes normalised in our public discourse, if we cease to be shocked by lies, if we lose our trust in the sacramental link between words and reality, then violence will follow closely behind.

That will happen because falsehood undermines trust, and when trust is gone, people demonise each other and project their fears onto each other.

But Peter says 'Lord, to whom should we go? You have the words of eternal life.'

You see, when the truth takes hold of you, it is hard to ignore. In the film *The Matrix*, it turns out that the normal, uncomplicated lives most people are leading is an illusion - that in effect they are dreaming, when in reality they are slaves of a monstrous computer. The hero is told this by the leader of the Resistance, and in a key scene, is asked to make a choice; if he swallows the blue pill, he stays asleep, comfortable in the illusion that all is well, even if it is a lie. If he swallows the red pill, he will stay awake to the reality and be able to respond to it. 'All I'm offering you,' says the leader, 'is the truth. Nothing more.' And that's enough to compel the hero to take the red pill and face the consequences of the truth. He was unable to ignore it.

This kind of truth, of course, is more than just facts. It was a way of looking at reality. Christian truth is not just about facts. It's about a person. Jesus says 'I am the way, the truth and the life. Pontius Pilate asks 'What is truth?' unaware of the irony that truth is the man standing in front of him.

The truth offered by Jesus is that we are made in God's image to be his children. That we are made in order to live in trusting, loving relationship with our Creator. That we have been redeemed and set free by his unconditional love. That we are beneficiaries of boundless, infinite grace, and that we are invited to live in the light of that. That we are called to live in communion with God and our neighbour, caring for one another and for the world in which we have been placed.

What other philosophy or programme offers that kind of love? What other ideology or politics speaks of generosity, forgiveness and hope? What other system urges us to welcome the stranger, befriend the enemy, and see God in the face of the poor?

This is the truth that had seized Peter and made him realise there was no alternative. This isn't a dry, narrow, two-dimensional kind of truth consisting only of superficial facts that we can take or leave as we choose. This is a living, speaking, creative truth which addresses us, invites us, compels us and seizes us.

That's why Peter says 'Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.' His heart has been captured by Christ. He's surrendered in fear and trembling, but also with joy and free consent, to a truth bigger and more overwhelming than he can imagine. And despite the cost and the sacrifice, there's really no question of looking anywhere else.

Isn't that the truth you and I need to be seeking today? The truth we long for, the truth that will set us free, the truth the world needs to hear?

The 17th century philosopher and mathematician Blaise Pascal once said that the task of Christians is to make the Christian faith attractive, to make good men wish it were true, and then show that it is.

When people hear the good news of God's love for the world in Christ, they do wish it were true. Even committed atheists sometimes wish it was true.

So suspend your disbelief. Live as if it is true, until the truth warms your heart and sets you free.

Renew your love for the truth, open yourself to the truth, and let Peter's words be your own:

'Lord, to whom should we go? You have the words of eternal life.'