

# God's Truth ...

*... will set us free*

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*A sermon given on First Sunday After Trinity 6<sup>th</sup> June 2021, by the Vicar, the Revd Canon Jonathan Baker, in the Online Attended Communion Service*

*Mark 3:20-end*

For the last three weeks in Belgium, the government's chief scientific adviser on coronavirus, a kind of Belgian Chris Whitty, has been in hiding at a secret location. The reason is because an extreme right wing member of the army equipped with an assault rifle and a bazooka is on the run and has made clear his intention of killing this senior scientist. Why? Because this extremist doesn't like the science: the science leads to lock down and lockdowns place a limit on the freedom of the individual. So this guy's response to the lockdown in Belgium is to try and kill the scientist. It's an extreme example of someone hating the truth because the truth is inconvenient. Unfortunately, more and more people seem to have a problem with the truth when it doesn't suit them. In the United States, tens of millions of people apparently believe that last November's presidential election was rigged, even though there is no evidence at all, and even though the person best placed to rig it was the sitting president who, of course, lost. The truth was so unwelcome that some people turned violent and attacked the seat of government on the Capitol. Millions of other people around the world deny the truth of climate change, despite the scientific data that has been piling up for decades, and each successive scientific report appears to be more scary than the last. It seems the truth does not speak for itself. Human beings do not accept something simply because it's true. So truth has to be constantly defended, protected and fought for. Truth needs, vigilant and powerful advocates, otherwise it is simply overwhelmed by those who shout loudest.

And nowhere is this more clear than in today's gospel reading. Here in Mark's Gospel, at a relatively early point in Jesus's ministry: he has been healing the sick; teaching in the synagogues; casting out unclean spirits; and eating with tax collectors and sinners; some of this he has been doing on the Sabbath, the day of rest and worship. And as a result of all this activity, responding to people's needs, Jesus's own family try to restrain him. The gossips are saying that he's gone out of

his mind; the scribes from Jerusalem declare that he is possessed by Beelzebul, the ruler of the demons; and others are also saying he has an unclean spirit.

I wonder, can you see just how extraordinary all of this is: the son of God incarnate, the Lord of Life becomes one of us and walks this earth doing good, healing and forgiving people, bringing wholeness and reconciliation, demonstrating the breaking-in of God's kingdom of peace and justice. And some of the most influential people in the land are saying this is the servant of Satan - this is the prince of darkness at work. And they are so powerful and influential that Jesus's own family starts to believe it.

It seems that when it suits us, human beings have an extraordinary ability to declare that black is white and that right is wrong, even in the face of overwhelming evidence to the contrary. It's no accident that in John's gospel, Jesus calls Satan the father of lies: God's greatest enemy is not unbelief or scepticism, which are often based on having an honest regard for the truth; God's greatest enemy is the deliberate lie, the refusal to accept the truth, because it's inconvenient. And that is why Jesus is the light of the world, because the light helps us to see clearly and heals our blindness.

And this difficult relationship with truth comes very close to home. It isn't just wacky flat-earthers who deny the truth. As I say, people tend to deny the truth because it's inconvenient, and that means at times all of us find it difficult to see the truth about ourselves. As I get older, I find myself increasingly confronted with things about myself that I've tried to deny, and sometimes it's very uncomfortable having to come to terms with recognising you're not always the person you would like to be.

Sometimes we deny the truth about ourselves because we're so concerned to protect ourselves that we cannot see our need of a saviour. Or maybe we do it because we are so fragile and down on ourselves that we cannot believe the truth that God loves us with a deep and everlasting love that can never be shaken.

And so at the heart of the gospel, at the heart of Jesus, is work as the saviour of the world, is his role in leading us into the light and showing us the truth about ourselves and about the world and about God's love for you and me. Again, in John's Gospel, he says, "If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples and you will know the truth. And the truth will make you free." And that's very like the last verse in our reading from Mark this morning, "Whoever does the will of God" says Jesus, "is my brother and sister and mother." Both sayings are making the point that truth isn't just

something detached and impersonal, like the truth that two plus two equals four. The bigger sense of truth is that it is something personal; something that we respond to; something that changes us; that makes reconciliation and relationship possible; something that draws us closer to Jesus and makes us more like him, bearing the family likeness of brothers and sisters.

There is, of course, something else quite uncomfortable in the middle of this passage, and you may be wondering whether I am going to dodge it or not. And that's Jesus's puzzling statement about blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. "Truly, I tell you," he says, "People will be forgiven for their sins and whatever blasphemies they utter. But whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit can never have forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin." And many people have tortured themselves with this verse and wondered whether they have unwittingly committed the unforgivable sin. And I have to confess to you that I really don't know what blasphemy against the Holy Spirit means. I really can't answer that question for you. Presumably it meant something to Mark and to his first readers, but it puzzles us. But I do note that it comes immediately after Jesus's assurance that people will be forgiven for their sins and whatever blasphemies they utter. It's interesting that we tend to latch on to this problem of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit and we tend to forget the promise of people being forgiven their sins and whatever blasphemies they utter.

So what I take from that is that forgiveness is always on the table for anyone who wants it. The truth about ourselves and God's love for you and me is always there for those who want to receive it. So if anyone is worried about having committed the sin against the Holy Spirit, the one thing you can be sure of is you have not committed it, otherwise you wouldn't be worried. Whoever this sin applies to will be so hardened, so resistant to the truth, that even knowing with complete clarity the reality of God's love, they still turn their back on it. I'm not even sure that's possible. And it may be that this is just one of those texts in the scriptures that crop up now and again to remind us that God is not like you and me; that we don't understand God's ways; that there is an element of mystery in all of this; and that we can never take God's truth or God's love for granted, but we can only marvel that he gives us his son to give us light that we might see. And that he gives us truth that will set us free, and he offers himself as the way, the truth and the life. And although the world rejected that truth

and crucified him, God said "Yes", and raised the Lord Jesus from the dead, so that you and I might also receive that truth - and live by it.

## Reading Texts

Mark 3:20-end

<sup>20</sup> and the crowd came together again, so that they could not even eat. <sup>21</sup> When his family heard it, they went out to restrain him, for people were saying, "He has gone out of his mind." <sup>22</sup> And the scribes who came down from Jerusalem said, "He has Beelzebul, and by the ruler of the demons he casts out demons." <sup>23</sup> And he called them to him, and spoke to them in parables, "How can Satan cast out Satan? <sup>24</sup> If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. <sup>25</sup> And if a house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand. <sup>26</sup> And if Satan has risen up against himself and is divided, he cannot stand, but his end has come. <sup>27</sup> But no one can enter a strong man's house and plunder his property without first tying up the strong man; then indeed the house can be plundered. <sup>28</sup> "Truly I tell you, people will be forgiven for their sins and whatever blasphemies they utter; <sup>29</sup> but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit can never have forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin"— <sup>30</sup> for they had said, "He has an unclean spirit." <sup>31</sup> Then his mother and his brothers came; and standing outside, they sent to him and called him. <sup>32</sup> A crowd was sitting around him; and they said to him, "Your mother and your brothers and sisters are outside, asking for you." <sup>33</sup> And he replied, "Who are my mother and my brothers?" <sup>34</sup> And looking at those who sat around him, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers! <sup>35</sup> Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother."