

Pentecost

St. Brandon's Acts 2:1-21; Psalm 104:26-36, 37b; John 15:26-27, 16:4b-15 23 May 2021

True or false? Durham County Cricket Club is currently third in the first division of the LV Insurance County Championship.

True or false? It is extremely likely that human influence has been the dominant cause of the observed warming [of the planet] since the mid-20th century.

True or false? The intrinsic nature of marriage is the union of a man and woman, as enshrined in human institutions throughout history.

Answers later!

Pentecost! The coming of the Holy Spirit! And the Spirit arrives in spectacular fashion, a roaring sound like a violent wind, tongues of fire, the filling of all those who were in the house (not just the Apostles), and the gift of other languages extending well beyond the few words of French they could still recall from school days! Sorry for the joke, but you'll note that Peter, in his very first sermon, begins with a joke – "these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o'clock in the morning". "Come back at 9 o'clock tonight and see what state we're in then – ha ha!" is the implication.

But then, having got his audience on his side, he gets serious, indicating that, if they are intoxicated with anything, it is the Holy Spirit, and he quotes at length from the prophet Joel to make his point. And what's worth noticing from this is the definitive nature of the prophet's statement. "In those days *it will be*, God declares". And 'will' or 'shall' come up ten times in this short passage, as the key verb, indicating the determination and the inevitability of the activity of God. "I *will* pour out my Spirit upon all flesh. Your sons and your daughters *shall* prophesy. Your young men *shall* see visions and [even] your old men *shall* dream dreams. And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord *shall* be saved".

The Spirit's coming was, then, inevitable, and in Acts we see the Spirit being poured out on those first believers and then, of course, on many others, including Gentiles, throughout the rest of the book of Acts.

Now I don't know about you, but my experience of the Holy Spirit is not as dramatic or charismatic as that. If yours is then good for you – that's clearly in line with the experience of many recorded in the NT. But I need to be reminded again and again, on Pentecost and at other times, of the inevitability and even the matter-of-factness of the Holy Spirit's presence in my / our lives, and in the life of the world.

One of the ways I do that is by using a doxology that I came across years ago which instead of 'Glory to the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, as it was in the beginning ...', runs like this: 'Glory to you Father Almighty, to you Lord Jesus Christ the Son, to you Holy Spirit who dwell in our hearts, both now and for ever. Amen'. It reminds me on a nearly daily basis of the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit, however little it feels like that to me at that moment, or indeed throughout the day, or when I occasionally review my life more generally. The presence of the Holy Spirit is not dependent on me

but is a gift of God, given at baptism but too wild and free to be constrained only by that sacramental act. And that is as true for you as it is for me.

But then, in what ways does the Spirit reveal Himself, in my / our lives and in the life of the world? And to get at least part of the answer to that – we'll pick up a lot more about the characteristics of the Spirit in the prayers this morning – we need to go to our gospel reading. There, Jesus refers to the Holy Spirit as the Advocate or helper, and while advocate may have legal connotations it's probably more helpful to consider this in a more general sense. Here is God alongside and within me and you, helping us in all the particular circumstances of our lives. This is God walking alongside us and being within us, encouraging us, strengthening us, challenging us, surprising us, delighting us, transforming us. And our job is to be open to that, trying not to doubt the Spirit's presence, but trusting in the matter-of-factness of the Spirit in our lives. It was prophesied in the OT that He would come. Jesus promised He would send Him from the Father. He arrived in great power on the day of Pentecost. We have every reason to believe and open ourselves up to His presence in our lives.

But then the Spirit's presence in our lives has another aspect to it. Jesus refers to Him as the Spirit of truth who will guide us into all the truth, speaking the truth from God into our lives and into the life of the world. One translation that I use frequently¹ refers to Him as the Spirit of Truth, capital T who will guide us into all the Truth, capital T again. And that is emphasising something very fundamental, because it is making the claim that there is Truth as such, that there is Truth which is true, true in God and true in itself. And that, as you'll appreciate, is a very bold claim in a world in which the very idea of truth has taken a battering recently.

We have become familiar with terms like 'fake news' and 'post-truth'. Post-truth, according to Wikipedia (which is, of course, the other source of all truth nowadays!), is a philosophical and political concept for "the disappearance of shared objective standards for truth" and the "circuitous slippage between facts or alternative facts, knowledge, opinion, belief, and truth". The term became popular in the form of post-truth politics, in the period around the 2016 US presidential election and during the Brexit referendum. Indeed, post-truth was named Word of the Year in 2016 by the Oxford Dictionary! Yuk!

But the Spirit of Truth (capital T) will guide us into all the Truth (capital T). One philosopher² referred to the relativism that we encounter today as a condition of our society, but not necessarily as a conclusion. In other words, we should expect, with the Spirit's guidance, eventually to be able to reach conclusions as to what the truth on any particular matter is. The same philosopher referred to truthfulness as the first virtue. Without that, without a concern for truth, without a searching for truth, we might as well give up.

But, of course, it's not always easy. Durham is currently second equal in the first division of the LV Insurance County Championship, so not actually third. So my statement at the beginning was technically false not true. Being second equal (currently) is a fact, a truth, that you probably ought to know(!), but one that can easily be checked, and about which there ought to be no argument. Truth is (reasonably) simple – sometimes.

¹ Nicholas King's study bible, Kevin Mayhew, 2013.

² Alasdair MacIntyre.

But yes, it is extremely likely that human influence has been the dominant cause of the observed warming [of the planet] since the mid-20th century. That's true, at least according to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change³ which draws together the scientific reports and emerging scientific consensus on the observed and likely future changes to the earth's climate. But, of course, not everyone either believes that as 'truth', or wants to believe that as 'truth'. And, of course, truth and facts matter here, because it is on the basis of these that we take action, or not. It's interesting that Al Gore, the former US Vice-President, called the 2006 film / documentary that he made about climate change, 'An Inconvenient Truth', emphasising the point about scientific *facts* and what they told us. It's also worth noting the Holy Spirit's role in this – He who moved over the face of the waters in creation (Gen. 1:2), and who, as we said in our Psalm this morning, renews the face of the earth. Even so, come Holy Spirit.

So, is the intrinsic nature of marriage the union of a man and woman, as enshrined in human institutions throughout history? True or false? That was a statement taken from the 2012 Church of England's response to the Government's consultation on 'Equal Civil Marriage'.⁴ And, of course, there are those who maintain that to be the truth as revealed in Scripture, in accordance with reason, and following the traditional view of marriage enshrined in Church and other institutions throughout history. And those are the common three ways in which 'truth' has been discerned in the Church – Scripture, Reason and Tradition. And on that basis those who understand this to be the truth cannot in all conscience depart from that position.

But, of course, there are others who disagree, who find in a different interpretation of Scripture either little that bears on the matter or evidence to the contrary. Who reason from different premises. Who find in the 'traditional' view an orthodoxy which has been used to reinforce oppressive norms of heterosexuality. Who would tend to believe that we are being led by the Spirit into a truth that has been there all along, but which is perhaps only now being revealed. Who would tend to see this as the Spirit working in the world, bringing a truth to the Church which it has long denied.

Now, clearly this is a fundamental issue of truth which the Church has been grappling with and will continue to grapple with for years to come. We are being invited to take part in that through the CofE's 'Living in Love and Faith' set of resources,⁵ which ask questions about how identity, sexuality, relationships and marriage fit within the bigger picture of the good news of Jesus Christ. What does it mean to live in love and faith together as a Church? Where is the Spirit of Truth leading us?

That's an important discussion for the (near) future. For now, in summary, I hope we may take away three things from this morning:

First, the inevitability and even the matter-of-factness of the Holy Spirit's presence in our lives, and in the life of the world.

³ Intergovernmental panel on Climate Change (IPCC) (2013), '5th Assessment Report, 'Climate Change 2013: the Physical Science Basis. Summary for Policymakers'.

⁴ Church of England, 'A response to the Government Equalities Office Consultation "Equal Civil Marriage", 2012.

⁵ [Living in Love and Faith | The Church of England](#)

Second, that the Holy Spirit is God alongside and within us, helping us in all the particular circumstances of our lives, and so constantly inviting us to open ourselves up to His presence in us and with us.

Third, that there is Truth as such, that this matters, and that Truth is being revealed to us by the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Truth. And that we should play our part in the Spirit's work not just by being truthful ourselves, but in being open to and prepared to wrestle our way towards the truth where it is not yet clear.

Amen.