

**SERMON – 9/2/20****'Truth and Lies'**

John 8:31-41

“Jesus said to those who believed in Him, 'If you obey my teaching you are really my disciples; you will know the truth and the truth will set you free.' ...Jesus said to them, 'I am telling you the truth... If the Son sets you free, then you will be really free.'” (John 8:31-32,34,36)

What if you heard something that, if it was true, it would change your life, it would change the world? What would you do? What if it seemed too good to be true? Would you believe it? How would you decide whether or not to believe it? And if you decided it *was* true, if you decided to believe it, what would you do with the information?

As we take time on Sunday mornings over these few weeks to think about what our faith really means to us and whether or how we might share that faith with others, I want to think with you today about the question of truth and what stands against it – lies. If we believe that the Good News about Jesus Christ is true, what are we going to do about that, and if someone suggests that the Christian message is a lie or is based on lies, how are we going to refute those claims?

My mother has a very strong memory of being taken to the Meadows in Edinburgh as an 11-year-old on the evening of the day that the Second World War ended in Europe. Thousands of people cheering and celebrating the end of five and half years of unspeakable misery and hardship and suffering and death, and the dawn of a whole new era in Europe. VE Day meant the end of the threat of air-raids in British cities, and the sirens have never had to sound since. VE Day meant the beginning of the end of rationing, and the shops have rarely had to struggle to supply their customers since. VE Day meant that families separated by evacuation or military service could be re-united again, and people in this country have never had to become refugees or conscripts since. VE Day meant the taking away of power from those who had so horribly abused it, and as a result we have been able to live in freedom and peace for three quarters of a century. What good news – news that would change lives, news that would change the world, news that must have seemed too good to be true. Could it

be believed? Surely all these people in the Meadows and across the country couldn't be wrong. Was it true? How could you tell?

Almost exactly 10 years earlier, crowds had thronged a huge park in the German city of Nuremberg for the Rally of Freedom. “Freedom” referred to the reintroduction of compulsory military service and thus the German “liberation” from the Treaty of Versailles. What good news it must have seemed in a country that felt oppressed and humiliated – news that would change lives, news that would change their world, perhaps to some it must have seemed too good to be true. Could it be believed? Surely all these people cheering at a rally and mobilising across the country couldn't all be wrong. Was it true? How could you tell?

In our own time we hear voices raised to champion a whole variety of causes from Brexit to the NHS, from Scottish independence to minority rights – in each case arguments are put forward and crowds march to support or to oppose. Liberation, freedom, life-changing opportunities are held out, but are they true or are the crowds deluded into believing a lie? How can you tell? What am I, a rabble-rousing preacher or an apologist for the truth; what are we, an earnest campaign group or a deluded mob – if what we celebrate here week by week is true (and for the record I wouldn't be standing here if I wasn't absolutely convinced that the Gospel of Christ has the power to change lives and to transform the world) then what are we going to do to get that message out there? Where lies are being promulgated and mobs mobilised, what are we doing to speak out against them?

In this morning's reading John chapter 8 we hear about the children of Abraham and about the children of the Devil. We also hear about another group of people – the children of God, those who are categorised neither by their human ancestry nor by their slavery to sin, but by their relationship with Him.

A sense of belonging to the extended family of the children of Abraham is a very important aspect of Jewishness. Whilst a certain number of people become Jews by converting to Judaism, the overwhelming majority are born to it, and even if they give up practising their religion most still consider Jewishness to be an important part of their being. Interestingly enough, in a world where inheritance is more often than not received through the male line, what makes a person a Jew by descent is if their

*mother* was Jewish rather than their father. However, the significant thing to take note of is that just as the aged Abraham was promised descendants as numerous as the stars and as the grains of sand on the seashore, so those descendants of Abraham take very seriously and put confidence in the fact that there is a *physical* link between him and them. “God himself is the only Father we have,” they protest to Jesus, “and we are his true children.” for to suggest otherwise would not only be an insult, it would call into question the very basis of their confidence in God.

Now it was in God’s plan of salvation to set apart a people for Himself to bear witness in the world to His light and love and if things had gone according to plan, all Abraham’s descendants would have inherited his faith along with his genes and by living their lives in fellowship with God they would have drawn all nations to Him in obedience and faith. But of course it didn’t work out that way – God rescued His people from Egypt; He gave them His Law; He established them in the Promised Land; He sent His prophets to show them the way; but it all went pear-shaped. And why? Well, for a start, the people were enslaved by sin – they were children of Abraham who was a descendant of Adam and because of that they (like all human beings) were fatally flawed from birth, from conception even, with an inbuilt inclination towards waywardness. And connected to that, as Jesus goes on to say in the next section, they were children of the Devil, which doesn’t mean to say they were conscious worshippers of Satan, but that they had been sucked in to believing the lies that the Devil portrayed as the truth. God wanted His people to put their faith in Him, but Satan gradually persuaded them that what was more important was that they were children of Abraham, the man of faith. It sounded quite plausible but it meant that as time went on the Jews began to put more energy into proving that they were descendants of Abraham than they put into trusting God, and ultimately it meant that they shut their ears to the teaching of God’s own Son and ultimately put Him to death.

Now, I am no student of history, and I couldn’t quote you chapter and verse on this, but it seems to me that the rise of Nazism in Germany during the 1930s was a classic example of Satan’s tactics. Adolf Hitler skilfully hoodwinked the German people, and not a few others, into believing that what he was proposing by way of a reconstruction plan for a defeated and demoralised people was entirely reasonable and necessary and, while some of his reform proposals were undoubtedly visionary, before people realised

what was happening they were living under a dictatorship that peddled the most immoral value-system imaginable and that had the country on a collision course with much of the rest of the world.

CS Lewis wrote in his masterful book *The Screwtape Letters* that ‘the safest road to Hell is the gradual one – the gentle slope, soft underfoot, without sudden turnings, without milestones, without signposts.’ Satan is rather like the Pied Piper who plays his alluring tune and the whole world begins to dance away, unaware that it is being led to its own ruin. And we are as liable to be hoodwinked as anyone else. Don’t let’s say that the rise of Adolf Hitler could never have happened in this country. Neville Chamberlain thought he had done an honourable deal with Herr Hitler on the eve of War – he, like many before him, found to his cost that he had been taken in. At a time when governments in Edinburgh and London and Washington DC are proclaiming a message that many think will bring transformation to people's lives, just reflect on how important it is to discern what is true and what may be a lie. Who was it who said, ‘All that it needs for evil to triumph is for good people to do nothing.’?

In the spiritual realm also, just like the Jews who put their hope in their ancestry, so we in the Church can begin to put more confidence in what we have inherited and in what we are familiar with than we do in the Saviour who is our only hope of receiving eternal life. How desperately we need to keep a look out for the Devil’s schemes; how well we need to know the Shepherd’s voice, that we may know straight away when it is an impostor who is calling and trying to lead us astray. And how urgently we need to take hold of the Gospel and proclaim what it is that is required for people to become children of God.

What kind of freedom is it that we enjoy because of victory of Nazism in Europe 75 years ago this year? Freedom to live in peace and without fear; freedom to vote in a democracy and to influence the leadership of our country; freedom to maintain our traditions or to change them; freedom to practise our faith. I’m sure we could all add to that list those things that we individually value about our society, but how easily we can allow those freedoms to be eroded, how easily we can repeat the mistakes of the past.

“Jesus said to those who believed in Him, ‘If you obey my teaching you are really my disciples; you will know the truth and the truth will set you free.’” As we celebrate hard-won worldly freedoms, we need to look to the deeper

and more lasting freedom that comes from knowing the truth that is in Jesus Christ and holding to His teaching, for Jesus said to them, 'I am telling you the truth... If the Son sets you free, then you will be really free.'" True freedom goes much deeper than anything we can enjoy as a society; true freedom endures not just through time but also through eternity.

Is that not a message that needs to be heard amidst the confusing voices that clamour for our attention? Lies need to be challenged; the truth needs to be proclaimed. "Know the truth and the truth will set you free."