

SERMON – 19/6/22

Titus 1:10-16

“They must be silenced, because they are disrupting whole households by teaching things they ought not to teach – and that for the sake of dishonest gain.” (Titus 1:11)

So far in our studies in the Letter to Titus we have looked at what the apostle Paul has to say about by making the eternal Gospel known in the here and now, and at how Titus was to go on labouring to bring order to the community of faith that Paul had helped to establish on the island of Crete by appointing leaders who would, as Paul writes, 'hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught' (Titus 1:9) In a sense we are following on this morning from that thought that church leaders must 'encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it' as we reflect on today's reading which is about some of the challenges that Titus was going to face in his ministry in Crete.

The situation isn't very far removed from what we see around us in our society and in today's church, although perhaps the apostle doesn't mince his words quite as much as we tend to do in our time. He describes a context where there are 'many rebellious people, full of meaningless talk and deception' (v.10) – does that not ring bells for us as we look around us in our day? Paul describes how whole households in the church family in Crete are being disrupted by those who are 'teaching things they ought not to teach – and that for the sake of dishonest gain' (v.11) – could that not be said of many churches around the world and closer to home? He quotes someone in Crete as saying: 'Cretans are always liars, evil brutes, lazy gluttons' (v.12) – you would find similar descriptions of people in our culture in the columns of some newspapers or on social media any day. He speaks of people, presumably within the church in Crete, who are 'corrupted and do not believe... whose minds and consciences are corrupted,' (v.15) who 'claim to know God but by their actions deny Him,' (v.16) and he signs off with the conclusion, 'They are detestable, disobedient and unfit for doing anything good.' (v.16) How to win friends and influence people! I'm not aware of many

of my colleagues who use language like that to describe folks in their congregations, at least not in public.

Paul was specifically referring to those who belonged to what was known in the early Church as 'the circumcision party' – those who had come to faith in Christ from a Jewish background and who taught that anyone seeking to follow Jesus needed to become a Jew first before they could be admitted to the church. But the apostle also refers here to those who promote merely human commands, and there have been those in every generation of the church, our own included, who have elevated human ways and human traditions above the Gospel of Christ. Perhaps we need to be speaking as firmly of such things in our time as Paul did in his. Because it matters what is said and done in the life of the church.

When Jesus was on trial, He said to the Roman Governor that the reason He was born and came into the world was to testify to the truth and that everyone on the side of truth listens to Him.

Pontius Pilate famously replied to Him by asking the question 'What is truth?' (John 18:37) At a time when perhaps more than ever since the days of the Roman Empire and Greek civilisation people speak of 'what's true for me' and 'what's true for you' rather than simply 'what's true', maybe we need to focus our minds as followers of Jesus on the question of what constitutes truth.

It is said that the first casualty of war is truth and today in Moscow and in Kyiv leaders of two nations at war are standing proclaiming their version of the truth – as if what's true on one side of the border could be different from what's true on the other – and in their arsenal along with guns and bombs and missiles are propaganda machines that are designed to get their message out most effectively regardless of what is actually happening. For us who rely on what is supposed to be a free and independent news media, it is really important that we can trust that what we are being told is true. Whether we listen to the BBC or ITV or Channel 4 or Sky, whether we read the Scotsman or the Telegraph, the Daily Record or the Daily Mail, the Courier or the Perth Advertiser, whether we access the news from Google or Facebook or Twitter, the question we need to ask ourselves is this: Is it true?

It wouldn't happen in this country, though, would it? We are privileged to live in a constitutional monarchy, a parliamentary democracy, where checks and balances are in place to ensure that power is exercised responsibly and fair play is adjudicated by independent arbiters who are in nobody else's pocket, but who make their judgements on the basis of the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. But we need to recognise that although the vote is entrusted to each and every one of us, the majority may be swayed one way or the other not so much by what is true but by what appeals to our own particular prejudices, and any one of us may find ourselves misled by persuasive rhetoric that has more or less of a connection to the truth. We all have political inclinations that are based on our own particular experience of the world and on what we believe to be important but let the drawing of our conclusions and the casting of our vote always be done first and foremost on the basis of information that is objectively true. That is crucial, because if we shape our future in the midst of smoke and mirrors on the basis of the tub-thumping of one side or other in any debate then we may find ourselves waking up in a world we do not recognise.

And this also goes for what we hear from the pulpit in church on a Sunday. How many of us hanker after sermons that are first and foremost comforting, that reinforce those beliefs with which we are comfortable, and that never force us to re-evaluate the direction of our lives? How many of us, if truth be told, are quick to dismiss what we read in the Bible that does not suit us or that stands in opposition to what the world around us thinks? How many of us ask the preacher: Is it true? I know that I am not infallible and if ever I utter anything from here that is questionable in the light of what Scripture says, then I expect you to challenge me – in fact, let me be blunt, I demand it!

Is it true? Because if it *isn't*, then it has to be silenced, but if it *is*, then it has to challenge us and that may involve us in changing our ways, or changing our way of thinking or speaking or acting (or voting).

Paul writes to Titus about those in the Cretan church who are rebellious, full of meaningless talk and deception. He says that they have to be silenced because they are disrupting whole households by teaching things they ought not to teach, and that

for the sake of dishonest gain. Jesus spoke about the foolish builder building on the sand rather than on the rock, and about the consequences of that when the storm comes and the flood waters rise, and we have to take very seriously the fact that if untruth is allowed to hold sway whether in the church or in the nation, then ultimately there will be not only disruption of households as in Crete but there will be a fall with a great crash of the whole institution.

It is for that reason that Paul speaks with such force here against those who peddle untruths and myths and teachings of mere human invention in preference to the trustworthy message of the Gospel of Christ and indeed of the whole counsel of God.

"Silence those who teach what they ought not to teach," he says (v.11). That's a very strong statement indeed. Shut them up. And he goes on, "Rebuke them sharply, so that they will be sound in the faith." (v.13) He doesn't want those who have taken the wrong path to be lost, but rather that they find the right way.

We need to point the finger first at ourselves to examine our own motives and what it is that we are basing our faith and actions on, asking very seriously whether we are building our lives on the Rock. Because we need to be building on the foundation of Jesus who is the truth personified; we need to be allowing truth to issue forth in purity of life and we need to be speaking up in every context for what is true while silencing and rebuking those things which flow from untruth and which Paul highlights so forcefully in what he writes to Titus here. What is rebellious, meaningless, deceptive, disruptive, dishonest has to go; those who are liars, evil brutes, lazy gluttons have to be challenged; those who are corrupt, unbelieving, impure, detestable, disobedient and unfit for doing anything good have got to be rebuked and shown a better way, the way of truth.

Every time you listen to the news or read the paper, don't just swallow it, ask yourself this: Is it true? Every time you listen to a politician or anyone else who influences the shape of our society, don't just nod or cheer, ask: Is it true? Every time you read a post on social media or receive the latest bulletin from a friend or neighbour, don't just pass it on, ask yourself: Is this true? Check it out. Yes, every time you listen to a preacher, just ask yourself

this: Is it true? Is it the whole truth and is it nothing but the truth? And whether the answer is Yes or No, what are you going to do about it? If it's *not* true it needs to be silenced. If it *is* true then your thoughts and words and actions need to reflect it. The night before He faced Pontius Pilate, Jesus prayed to His Father in heaven for His disciples: 'Sanctify them by the truth. Your Word is truth.' May we pray that prayer for ourselves today and every day and may we be not only hearers of the Word but doers of it also.