

**Sermon to be preached at Holy Trinity at Choral Evensong
on Sunday 24 November 2019 at 6 pm**

1 Samuel 8 v.4-20

John 18 v.33-38a

May I speak in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

‘To be or not to be; that is the question’. So Hamlet ponders the meaning of life, as do we all, but in his melancholy, he blanks out the gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ, the good news accomplished by Christmas, Good Friday and Easter. Hamlet fears the ‘undiscovered country from whose bourn * no traveller returns’, as do we all in the recesses of our being. But for him in his darkness there is no light of the world, nor any framework in which to set his life, no certain grounding, nor any intimation of an eternal life lived in a close relationship with a loving God. His melancholy has blanked out all sight of the numinous as surely as the rationality and the irrationality of our world has darkened our vision.

Yet reaching out, calling to all of us, is the commanding presence of the God who became flesh and lived among us. We are blessed when we hold that incredible dynamic close to our hearts.

In Jesus, God has come to his own people, and the struggle between acceptance and rejection begins. ‘The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.’ Hear the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ according to John, and we are never in any doubt as to who is in control throughout this cosmic and human drama.

There are great forces at work here, but they are often inverted so that the apparently weak have the authority and the apparently powerful become marooned in the complex compromises of our faltering humanity.

In the microcosm of an interrogation between a provincial governor of a great military power and a charismatic rabbi, the powerful Pilate struggles to understand Christ in the terms of national politics ‘So you are a king?’ only to be met with an answer of awe inspiring majesty ‘You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth.’ It makes you gasp. In the messiness of our lives we have a human being, so special, so endowed with the divine, that he changes the rules of engagement fundamentally. Compromise is cast aside, and a great radiant absolute, the truth, moves on to centre stage. This is what we are called to follow - the truth, in glory. Not an abstract from Greek philosophy, but the embodiment of God, full of grace and truth. The true and absolute Lord and King.

For listen to the supposedly weak prisoner as he issues his call to all of us, ‘Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.’ How do we respond? Do we listen? The powerful Pilate is brought to the brink of revelation, for the embodiment of truth is standing before him, and he is attracted. Should he plunge into this new world? Part of him wishes to acknowledge this other power. But he equivocates, as we often do, and comes out with the question resonant with our present world in its relativism, ‘what is truth?’

‘What is truth?’ In our post-modern age Pilate’s question may sound not so much as cynicism, or challenge, but as irrelevance. We would want to know the context, we would want to know the time scale. We delight in the fragmentary, the diverse, the relative. Not for us the absolutes. They are dictatorial, and deceiving in their over simplification. Albert Einstein bent Isaac Newton’s absolute straight lines with his theory of general relativity, Picasso and his fellow Cubists taught us to see the world from a multiplicity of simultaneous perspectives, composers explored musical sound not grounded in the certainties of the tonic scale. Rapid developments in society powered in part by technological advances, two world wars and bouts of financial and economic chaos destroyed old imperial certainties.

Pilate was given a precious moment to be in the presence of Jesus of Nazareth, and we can sense from the tense interrogation, Pilate of Jesus and Jesus of Pilate, that Pilate is plunging into an exploration which moves from identifying political power, what it is like to be an autocrat, a king like Herod or Caesar, to a deep understanding of eternal reality. Pilate is like someone who dives in deep into a limpid pool, but then takes fright and rather than plunge even deeper, strikes out for the safety of the familiar. The same is true for most of us. The demands of our everyday life could lead us to a greater awareness of Christ with us, the Emmanuel, the God with us, but often we are held back from such a revelation by our own urgings to be in control of our lives. Our desires, ambitions, responsibilities, fears and struggles define our vision and our awareness of the reality in which we live.

Christ is not seeking to take us out of this world, a world of his own creating, but he is seeking to lead us into an understanding of truth, that strange absolute quality which rises above the relative, that comes from outside of our world but is part of our world.

Pilate cannot take the discussion further, because his fears and his worldly responsibilities cannot allow him to plunge deeper into the meaning of truth, and because the time for words has ceased. Truth, the utter goodness of God embodied in Jesus of Nazareth, stands before Pilate, and Pilate fears to recognise him. And we must in all humility ask 'Which one of us would have recognised Emmanuel at that moment?'

Christ's absolute self-giving in the love and service of others is the definition of truth which comes from God, and is God, and is there for us to follow. So, ponder if you will, the compelling and enticing imperative set for us by Jesus in his life and death, to love and serve God in loving and serving others here with us in this world. The kingdom of God to which we are drawn and for which we strive is a glorious and powerful champagne explosion of self-denying love and service.

And then ponder, if you will, the joy of the promise of eternal life in the resurrection. In our journey of faith we strain to embrace a reality beyond that defined for us by the world, and yet is still part of that world. Jesus of Nazareth, Christ the King, is that reality, is Emmanuel, God with us, is truth.

Amen.