

4th Sunday before Lent (6th February 2022)

President Vladimir Putin, President of Russia, has said – several times – that there are no plans to invade Ukraine. If *he* says it, it must be true, mustn't it? Those hundred-thousand well equipped Russian troops on that that long, long border – they must be there just for exercises; mustn't they?

I'm pretty confident that none of us is that naïve, and though we can hope for a civilized settlement, we can also feel justified in doubting the president's word. If only it were just in dictatorships that leaders could lie through their teeth and get away with it, not also in good democracies like ours. I'm thinking, of course, of you-know-who... Donald Trump, whose startling achievement has been to convince half the electorate of the USA that their last election was fraudulent. With no evidence, except that Trump himself says so, and had been saying so months before the election actually happened. Constructive criticism can't get very far in a set-up like that.

There is a great deal about truth in the Bible. In the earliest strands of the OT its meaning is not strictly defined. It can denote justice in a personal sense, and mean 'faithfulness' in relationships, especially those with God – God's, or the worshiper's faithfulness, can be 'truthful'. In the OT the command for truth can have a legal sense: 'thou shalt not bear false witness' in the Ten Commandments. From time of the prophets on, there was more of the modern sense, of words needing to correspond with the facts.

In the NT, the Greek word *altheia* basically meant 'reality'; and Christian tradition expects all speech to be in accordance with reality – reality of whatever kind. And more – our conversation should be in the context of Christ-like love; 'speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into Him who is the head – into Christ' (Ephesians, Ch. 4). The opposite, even if well meant, can have disastrous consequences. We've just been marking the 50th anniversary of Northern Ireland's Bloody Sunday. It was presumably intended to 'teach them a lesson', to stop when told to, to be shocked into obedience. But the results were to deepen the crisis, increase the acts of violence, boost recruitment for the IRA, and set back Northern Ireland policy and institutions.

And the bitterness has lingered on to the present, largely exacerbated by the opposite of speaking the truth in love, but secrecy, shifting the blame, official denial and lies about what happened; any apology taking decades to come, and actual punishment for those responsible avoided. Of course the whole affair and its context are very complex, but these unintended consequences are more likely when the truth is deliberately obscured. It's a stain on those who shot unarmed civilians, on those embittered by the loss and by the terrible lack of justice being done; resentment that no one has taken the blame, that the 'authorities' had been unhelpful, so reluctant to unearth the truth.

In contrast, John's Gospel shows Truth as a kind of core value, along with Light and Life. In the first chapter Jesus is shown to be God's Word made flesh, come to dwell among us; captive before Pontius Pilate, Jesus explains that his whole purpose is to bear witness to the truth, to which Pilate cynically asks 'What is truth?' Presumably

Jesus sees this will get nowhere, and maintains a dignified silence. As truth personalized, as the living Word of God, he is full of God's Truth – he actually *is* Truth embodied: 'I am the Way, the Truth and the Life.' This truth will make disciples free – free to be true to themselves, free to be true to God, true to what God can make them be. Free from guilt, free from fear of one's sins being found out, free from worry about where one is in life, rejoicing in the present time and place and welcoming what God has in store for us.

Questions about truth raise questions about morality, individual and social. They are part of the search for a vocation that's not merely *known*, or just *believed*, but to be *done*.

I am reminded of what the Quakers call their Testimonies. These are not the Evangelical kind of testimony – relating how one's life was totally changed by finding Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour. The first Quaker testimony is Truth and Integrity – clearly asking to be not merely known and believed, but also practised, *done*. That is a calling to everyone. Meanwhile, a lack of truth and integrity in leaders can be extremely harmful to those they are supposed to be leading.

Ever since my teen-age rebellious phase I'd been a half-hearted republican, and I've never fully left it behind. But I can now with total sincerity and enthusiasm say 'Thank God for our Queen!'

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