

St Cuthbert's Colinton, 26.ii.17: Sunday before Lent

Readings: Ex 24: 12-18 2 Pet 1: 16-21 Mtt 17: 1-9

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be now and always acceptable in your sight, O Lord our strength and our Redeemer.

What interesting times we live in. I imagine that if I'd stood here a year ago and told you that within twelve months Britain would be leaving the EU and a reality TV star would be president of the United States, you'd have been wondering what they put in this glass by the lectern. Not only are these politically interesting times, they provide no end of opportunity for reflection, including theological reflection; and I'm afraid I'm not one to let such opportunities pass by.

I've been particularly struck by the new vocabulary that is being employed these days. Consider two expressions to which the new regime in the USA has introduced us: 'fake news' and 'alternative facts'. These have introduced a fluidity around concepts like 'truth' that many of us may find rather disturbing. Time was, you could open a paper or listen to the radio or watch the TV, and what you picked up in the news was the truth about the issues being covered. Couldn't you?

Well, of course, all reporting of the news, and all commentary on it, is coloured by its provenance: it always has been, and always will be. And people have always been subject to what's known as 'confirmation bias': we like to read and hear things that confirm us in the beliefs we already have. That's why some people choose to read the Daily Telegraph whilst others prefer the Guardian (though I think it can be bracing – even therapeutic – to check out sources less amenable to one's own views from time to time). The trouble at the moment, we may think, are that things are being taken increasingly towards extremes. Discourse about contentious matters has become so polarised, and those in positions of authority appear to be coming out with demonstrable falsehoods with such regularity, that it becomes difficult to know what, or who, to believe. Was Donald Trump actually right about there being a terrorist

attack in Sweden a few days ago, but the powers that be in that country covered it up? (I understand that there are those who believe this to be the case). Is it true that the Daily Mail now publishes so much falsehood that it can no longer be used as a reputable source by those contributing to Wikipedia? Or is that just something which the Guardian (where I read it) wants me to believe? Or is it something that I want to believe, which is why I read sources like the Guardian in the first place? If you reflect at all not only on the sources of the information you receive, but also on yourself as a receiver of that information, then it all rapidly gets bewildering. (For the record, though, I don't think there was a terrorist attack in Sweden, and I do think that the Daily Mail has been banned by Wikipedia.) All this is a problem, because what is steadily being eaten away by all this is trust. Who, and what, can we trust for meaningful information in the present climate? Instead of a climate of trust, a climate of suspicion comes to take hold. And that, I think, is very corrosive of our society.

We think of our age as radically different to those of the past – which in many ways it is, of course, not least in terms of the speed with which information and ideas can be circulated – and of ourselves as very different to people of past generations in terms of the ways we think and behave. We are much more sophisticated, somehow. Mustn't it have been nice to live in olden times, when such things were not an issue? In actual fact, though, I suspect that in many ways we're not so very different. People have always been bombarded with contradictory information from different sources, and have had to work out which ones to trust. And we can, I think, see this reflected in our readings this morning.

The Second Letter of Peter is generally thought of as one of the latest books of the New Testament. By the time it was written, all sorts of stories were no doubt circulating about Jesus, offering a variety of versions of who he was, what he had done, and what the significance of his life was. Some of these, no doubt, took the form of 'cleverly devised myths', of the sort that this writer insists he does not follow. Rather, he says, he was an eyewitness of Jesus' life, and specifically an eyewitness of that event we call the

Transfiguration: ‘we ourselves heard this voice come from heaven, while we were with him on the holy mountain’ – that is, the voice from heaven testifying to who Jesus was: ‘This is my son, my beloved, with whom I am well pleased’.

That event is told in more detail in our Gospel reading. That account is a rather richer one: it tells us that Peter, James and John all went up that mountain with Jesus, where in addition to hearing that voice they saw him transfigured before them. His face shone, his clothes glowed white, and he was seen talking to figures whom they identified as Moses and Elijah – the great Jewish lawgiver, and the prophet who had been carried up to heaven in a flaming chariot. It’s a remarkable story, it’s laden with theological resonances, and it’s one which many must have found difficult to take in, even when it was reported by eye-witnesses. I bet there were nay-sayers in the first century who would have dubbed accounts of it ‘fake news’, had the term been current then.

Turning to the theological resonances of this story, some of them are drawn out by the juxtaposition of this account of the Transfiguration with our first reading this morning, which was also about an individual going up a mountain, encountering God, and being transformed as a result. These are all aspects of the story the book of Exodus relates, of Moses receiving the stone tablets of the law during his stay on mount Sinai of forty days and forty nights (another immediate resonance with Jesus, of course, who similarly spent forty days and nights in the wilderness – a period of time we remember in the season of Lent, which will soon be upon us). We read elsewhere that after his encounter with God Moses’s face shone, in much the way that Jesus’s does during his transfiguration: it’s a beautiful notion, I think, that close proximity to the pure holiness of the One eternal God has the effect of making both Moses and Jesus shine in this way.

Well, since those ancient days many books have been written about Jesus, and in the last century or two in particular there has been a ‘Quest for the historical Jesus’ – a quest which might be thought of in terms of a desire to establish clearly the ‘real’ and the ‘fake’

news concerning him. I think that these writings are all important in helping us to understand more about this remarkable person. But you know, I think that the most important thing about Jesus transcends these kinds of categories. The truth about Jesus goes beyond ideas of ‘real news’ and ‘fake news’, because it is something else altogether: it is Good News. It is news which itself transfigures and transforms we who hear it. It impacts on us deeply, and changes our lives, and next to it all other kinds of news pale into insignificance.

And I think that the most powerful witness to the person of Jesus remains the personal testimony of those who have encountered him in their lives. By that I don’t mean just those like the writer of the second letter of Peter, who encountered him in the course of his earthly ministry and who wrote down the accounts of him we find in the New Testament. I mean all those who, down the centuries and right up to the present day, have had their lives transformed and transfigured by the man from Nazareth. The real Jesus is the one who still has the power to this day to bind up the broken-hearted, to restore the weary, to bring wholeness to the infirm, to bring freedom to the oppressed. Wherever prayers are effective, wherever lives are restored, we see the ‘real Jesus’ walking among us still. This is the God to whom the Church as a whole, and each of us as individuals, bear witness: this is the God who reveals himself to us, as he did to his earliest followers on the mountain; and this is the God whom we know to be real, and true, because of our own personal experience of his grace, and because of the great cloud of witnesses who surround us with their testimony.

The present political climate, with its talk of fake news and alternative facts, is a disturbing and unsettling place to inhabit. We need to engage with it, we need to point out its shortcomings when we can, and we need to question ourselves and our motivations as we interact with it. But we need to remember that there are things which can be trusted, which outlast and which run deeper than the shallow populisms of the day. When we turn to Jesus, we find news we can really trust: because when we turn to Jesus, we see Good News. For which, thanks be to God. Amen.