

un-concealing
a sermon preached on
pentecost sunday
24 May 2015
at
st john's
ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL
by fr david moore, vicar

Acts 2:1-21, Psalm 104:26-36, Romans 8:22-27, John 15:26-27, 16:4b-15

There is much that we cannot yet bear, truth that we cannot yet know – but into which the Pentecostal Spirit, the living presence of the resurrected Christ, is leading us. This fact alerts us to the error in all claims – including Christian claims – that truth has been revealed in its final form, that truth is static and fixed.

Even in the pre-Copernican, pre-evolution, pre-Quantum world of the 1st century Ancient Near East, Jesus' teaching already anticipates what we now know scientifically. Namely, that truth is not Plato's fixed form, but an unfolding-ongoing-dynamic revealing. There is always yet more. "I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, she will guide you into all the truth."¹

You'll notice the pronoun difference between the NRSV and the one I have just used. The rendering of the Holy Spirit in a masculine pronoun is deeply misleading – it could even be said, dangerously misleading. True, the Greek word is masculine – so in a narrow sense rendering the Spirit as 'he' is accurate. However, the thought world and language of Jesus was Hebrew and Aramaic, but the New Testament is the Hellenistic world overlay on top of that Hebrew structure.

In the Hebrew thought world the Spirit is feminine. She is the co-creative principle so closely aligned with Holy Wisdom. She is that one who completes the masculine one-sidedness: not so much a gale force wind as an oscillating movement 'like the fluttering of wings'.² She is the one whose activity is womb-like, unseen, the one who "works from the inside of the processes not only by startling [God's] creatures into awareness and recognition and luring them towards ever higher degrees of consciousness and personhood, but also creating the necessity for choice in one situation after another".³ "We can never be directly aware of the Spirit, since in every experience of meeting and recognition [she] is always the go-between who creates awareness".⁴

And when we reflect on our own experience, it's the gestating, fecund capacity of the feminine principle who gives birth to all that is new. It is the feminine principle who in every age transforms the patriarchal church. I venture to suggest that she is the one who has surprised all those great scientists who have confessed that their most important 'discoveries' came from they know not where. She is Einstein's 'fire in the equations'. She is the love whose fire and warmth dissolves all our hardness of heart.

John's Jesus declares that it is good for us that he go away – precisely so that we may be open to this fire in the equation of life's mystery. The continuing presence of the external, historical Jesus would amount to infantilism – a tragic reality which continues to beset Christianity, and Islam also, in its own way, one suspects.

¹ John 16:12-13

² John V Taylor **The Go-Between God: The Holy Spirit and the Christian Mission**, London: SCM, 1972, p26.

³ John V Taylor, p33.

⁴ John V Taylor, p43.

There are many things that in our beginning – in our spiritual infancy – we simply cannot bear. But bear them we must, sooner or later, for the sake of maturity, development, salvation, evolution – for the sake of love! The Greek word translated as ‘bear’ is the same word John uses to describe Jesus’ carrying of his cross.⁵ To bear truth amounts to the same as bearing the cross – it is a self-emptying suffering love-unto-life. Again, one thinks of the transformative honesty of an Einstein, who, finally, was willing to bear the suffering of accepting that he had been wrong about the cosmological constant.

When the Spirit comes she will guide us into all the truth. Not *some* of the truth – but *all* of the truth! The Greek word is a rendering of the Hebrew for that which is firm, solid, binding. This word shares a common feature with two other important words in our tradition. The eucharistic word we hear in English as ‘remember’ me – in the Greek original literally means *un-forget*. The word we hear in English as risen and raising up – in the Greek original literally means un-static, as in un-stuck from a fixed position. In like manner, this word we hear as truth – in the Greek literally means ‘un-concealment’.⁶ There is a realism here, about our propensity equally for forgetting, for getting stuck, and for concealing. So the truth into which the Holy Spirit leads us involves the undoing of our concealing: that which is concealed will be uncovered.

Just how much truth can we bear? T S Eliot observed: “humankind cannot bear very much reality”.⁷ Indeed, we tend to be frightened by truth – so much so that we prefer the anaesthesia of pleasant illusion and mass-minded entertainment. And worse, so often in the history of the church those who witness to the truth are driven out and silenced – by those who imagine they are offering worship to God.⁸

But the Spirit of truth’s eternal mission is un-concealing, the revealing of *all* truth: speaking not on her own but what she hears, declaring the eternal love which animates that which is to come.

And when she comes, much that we claim to be ‘final’ and ‘absolute’ will be proved to be wrong! When the church admits to being wrong – about the crusades, about Copernicus, about Galileo, about evolution, about Jews, about gypsies, about witches, about women, about divorce, about blacks, about slavery, about gays, and even about steam engines - then it comes closest to its self-emptying Lord. A marvellous book by James Alison which unpicks the violent and tragic knots Christianity has tied itself up in over ‘original sin’ is called ‘The Joy of Being Wrong’.⁹ By Love, all our certainties around ‘sin’ and ‘righteousness’ and ‘judgment’ will be proved to be wrong!¹⁰

So it is that this Creator, life-giving, go-between Spirit is leading us where we do not wish to go,¹¹ always going ahead of us,¹² leading us into the truth we cannot yet bear, the truth who overthrows all that is merely partial and incomplete. The Spirit is always calling us out, beckoning – and sometimes driving us – away from the comfort of the grave of that which we have attempted to set in concrete.

And, contrary to how the Eucharist may have been presented to us, this is precisely the essence of the sacrament: it is not a fixed and static thing, but a dynamic revealing of what is yet to come.

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⁵ **βασταζειν** *bastazein*, John 16:12, cf John 19:17.

⁶ **αναμνησις** *anamnēsis* is the opposite of amnesia. **αναστασις** *anastasis* is the opposite of being static, fixed. **αληθεια** *alētheia* is the opposite of concealment.

⁷ T S Eliot, ‘Burnt Norton’, in **Four Quartets**, Lond: Faber & Faber, 1944, p8.

⁸ John 16:2

⁹ James Alison, **The Joy of Being Wrong: Original Sin Through Easter Eyes**, New York: Crossroad, 1998.

¹⁰ John 16:8-11

¹¹ John 21:18

¹² Mark 16:7