

1st Sunday in Lent

Year B

The Good News Of The Covenant

At the beginning of Lent we renew our response to the Covenant, the pact of love that God made with each of us at our baptism. Imagine what good news it must have been to Noah, alone in a drowned world, when he learned that God's love had not abandoned, nor ever would abandon, the earth and its creatures.

(Readings: Genesis 9: 8-15. 1 Peter 3: 18-22. Mark 1: 12-15.)

Our Gospel reading today contains two very simple, but very powerful sentences; sentences which are stated so casually that their significance could easily be overlooked.

These sentences are;

‘After John had been arrested, Jesus went into Galilee.’

And;

‘There he proclaimed the Good News from God.’

On the surface these words appear to be nothing more than a simple historical statement, a statement in which St Mark dates the public ministry of Jesus, and identifies its beginning in Galilee, right after John had been imprisoned by Herod. But in reality, Mark's words are so very much more than a matter of mere historical record. He is teaching us a great truth; that ‘Truth’ itself cannot be silenced.

John the Baptist had pointed out to King Herod that it was wrong for him to have married his brother Philip's wife. In response Herod, partly out of embarrassment, but also out of sheer cussed temper, attempted to hide the truth about him self. And so he had John arrested, thrown in jail, and ultimately executed, on the whim of a devious, manipulating dancing girl.

I suppose in one sense Herod had succeeded in silencing John. But he couldn't silence the truth, for after John came Jesus, and when Herod heard about Jesus, he thought John had risen from the dead, that his nemesis had returned. Herod was tormented, moreover he was haunted by the truth, and his conscience just would not let him rest.

I'm sure there are times when we all wish we could lock the truth up and simply forget about it. We do this because truth can often disturb us. So we prefer not to face up to it, to keep it out of our thoughts altogether.

Some people are so good at hiding, or locking away uncomfortable truths, disturbing truths they'd prefer to forget – if good is the right word – one would be forgiven for thinking that they have somehow killed off their consciences altogether. These people know, full well, that there is something seriously wrong in, or with their lives. But they manage to convince themselves that they have neither worries nor regrets. And yet, in reality, one can never completely silence the voice of one's conscience; – truth is ever patient, and ever persistent.

To some extent, we can all ignore it for a while. We can lock it up for a time. And we can even drive it away, to push it out of our conscious life. But we can never kill it off altogether, 'once and for all'. It just keeps coming back, again and again.

Herod imprisoned John to silence him, but he found Jesus on the roads of Galilee spreading the self-same truth as John had. Even when Jesus was killed, and supposedly silenced, he was replaced by his friends, those who continue to 'tell' the truth.

Some are jailed, others are put to death. *All* are persecuted in some way or another. But it seems that every time they get rid of one of these 'friends of Jesus', two others take his or her place, until finally, their message shakes the very foundations of the Roman Empire, and indeed, the entire world.

Whatever we do, however much we try, all of the world's darkness, and all of its blind denial can never extinguish the light of the truth. The truth is just too powerful. All the deception, and all the duplicity that exists on earth, and there is a lot of that, can never silence or destroy it. One voice softly speaking the truth is infinitely more forceful than even thousands of voices shouting a lie.

As Christians we believe that Jesus is still with us – and so he is – still bearing witness to the truth, speaking to our consciences, again and again, and his voice *cannot, will not*, be silenced. The 'truth' he wants us to know is the 'Good News', that the kingdom of heaven is very close to us if only we will repent.

It is Jesus who makes us acknowledge our sins, and prompts us to make amends for the wrong we have done, and the good we have not done. And no matter what our sins may have been, once we have sincerely repented, our consciences will cease to trouble us. It is then, and only then, that we will be at peace.

And so, here we are, at the beginning of Lent, the time for honest reflection and introspection; a time to be true to ourselves. One of our primary concerns should be, 'where do we stand with regard to the truth'? Do we, like Herod, try to lock it away and deny its existence? Or do we face up to the truth about ourselves and constantly strive to better our lives?

What ever else we give up this Lent, let it not be the truth.