

TRUTH AND LOVE

A Sermon for Good Friday 2017

The Very Rev. Ken Gray

St. Paul's Cathedral, Kamloops BC

With thanks to Robert Browning (A Death in the Desert)
and Rowan Williams (Anglican Identity)

It is a parchment, of my rolls the fifth,
Hath three skins glued together, is all Greek,
And goeth from Epsilon down to Mu:
Lies second in the surnamed Chosen Chest,
Stained and conserved with juice of terebinth,

I quote here (retaining the original exclusive language as and when necessary) from an extended poem by Robert Browning titled "A Death in the Desert." Penned in 1864 it is supposedly written by an ambiguous narrator named Pamphylax the Antiochene. (I have not met the man and neither have you) He tells the story of the Death of St. John whose passion we have just heard. Tradition says John was the last of Jesus' disciples turned apostle. As he nears death the age of living witnesses nears its end. The palliative care continues:

I said, "If one should wet his lips with wine,
"And slip the broadest plantain-leaf we find,
"Or else the lappet of a linen robe,
"Into the water-vessel, lay it right,
"And cool his forehead just above the eyes,
"The while a brother, kneeling either side,
"Should chafe each hand and try to make it warm,
— "He is not so far gone but he might speak."

The disciples of John care for the last living disciple of Christ. John has written his version of what the movies would centuries later describe as the *Greatest Story Ever Told*. It is different from earlier versions by Matthew, Mark and Luke. The text is poetic, at times vague, frustratingly abstract, difficult to grasp. Yet even at its most ponderous it describes a divine/human conflation rooted in the duties and delights of daily living. It does not describe *as a priority* other-worldly living or any sort of escapist fantasy. It portrays however an imaginative, compassionate and deeply engaged humanity inspired by and living within a transformed human existence. It is written by a human, inspired by the Source of All Being, for humans.

John's Passio takes us to all the expected places and stages in the last days of Jesus' earthly life--through Gethsemane, to various arraignments, to scenes of torture and ridicule, denial, resilience, to Golgotha and finally to the tomb. Amidst a stream of conversations we listen in to a dialogue between the Roman governor Pilate and Jesus about truth:

Pilate entered the headquarters. . . (He) summoned Jesus, and asked him, 'Are you the King of the Jews?' Jesus answered, 'Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?' Pilate replied, 'I am not a Jew, am I? Your own nation and the chief priests have handed you over to me. What have you done?' Jesus answered, 'My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here.' Pilate

asked him, 'So you are a king?' Jesus answered, '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. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.' Pilate asked him, 'What is truth?'

In our own day, truth seems elusive if not absent--from public discourse, political debate, sometimes between friends. If not wholly absent, possibly truth is so conditioned by external forces that it dissolves chameleon-like into the surrounding environment. The cost of its consideration let alone expression seems often too great, too difficult, and in the end unachievable. So we become cynical, or at least, the truth be told, I sometimes reach this point!

So the ancient administrator Pilate may be justified in his question "what is truth?" He is legitimately perplexed, unable to resolve a nagging problem. What to do? Who's is right? On what basis must I decide? We've all been there on occasion I am certain. Browning's John continues this particular conversation, amongst many others, about Truth . . . as he rests astride two worlds, between memory and expectation:

"And I am only he, your brother John,
"Who saw and heard, and could remember all.
"Remember all! It is not much to say.
"What if the truth broke on me from above
"As once and oft-times? Such might hap again:

Truth! A commodity apt for every age, equally elusive perhaps regardless of circumstance? Written in 1864 Browning's poem was conceived in an intellectual climate which doubted whether John actually existed and whether the Gospels could be treated as factual. With others Browning argues for reception of a Gospel-message which may lack historical detail but which bears and expresses truth—about God, life, humanity and love.

If Browning is concerned for the care of the intellect he is more concerned about the practice amongst us of compassion and its most obvious partner, love. *Truth, in Christ emerges via the practice of love.* Ideology partners with compassion or finds itself worthless. And as Christ has loved and continues to love, likewise John.

"I went, for many years, about the world,
"Saying 'It was so; so I heard and saw,'
"Speaking as the case asked: and men believed.
"I, for I *loved* them, answered, joyfully,
"Since I was there, and helpful in my age;

For John, Browning and others, love is already present in the world. Our challenge is to notice, possess, and share it all around us. To Pilate's question, Truth is present and available and portable and welcoming and welcomed.

"When such truth,
breaking bounds, o'erfloods my soul,
And, as I saw the sin and death, even so
"See I the need yet transiency of both,
"The good and glory consummated thence?

"I saw the power; *I see the Love, once weak,*
"*Resume the Power:* and in this word 'I see,'
"Lo, there is recognized the Spirit of both
"That moving o'er the spirit of man, *unblinds*
"*His eye and bids him look.*

A favourite theme, for myself and John, is that the blind see, regardless of circumstance in line with God's desire.
Ocular Sight and spiritual insight join hands:

"For life, with all it yields of joy and woe
"And hope and fear,—believe the aged friend,—
Is just our chance o' the prize of learning love,
"How love might be, hath been indeed, and is;

From this fictional John we receive a new vision for life itself:

"Our chance o' the prize of learning love"

As I often say at funerals, we all live and we all shall die. We are united in this experience. Our influence and our varied and unique response occurs between these two unalterable poles. We learn love in space as time affords; or we ignore the challenge and invitation. To answer Pilate's question, truth is love in action, tested, tried, repeated, corrected, amended . . . and most importantly attempted. Hard work, for sure.

"Who did not clasp the cross with a light laugh,
"Or wrap the burning robe round, thanking God?
"Well, was truth safe for ever, then? Not so.

"Already had begun the silent work
"Whereby truth, deadened of its absolute blaze,
"*Might need love's eye* to pierce the o'erstretched
doubt.

So from all this poetry and reflection I conclude with a simple prayer, that for myself and for all of us, that *love's eye* will be Christ's gift to us, to our community and to the earth this Good Friday. Amen.