

The Way, the Truth, the Life

It's one of the most famous – and one of the most controversial - texts in the whole Bible. John 14:6: 'I am the way, the Truth and the Life; no-one comes to the Father except by me'. It's a text that lies at the very heart of the Christian Gospel, proclaiming Jesus Christ as the Way, the way to God and to God's dwelling place; and it proclaims Jesus Christ as the Truth: the one who reveals to us the truth about God and the world and ourselves; and it proclaims Jesus Christ as the life, for he is the key to life in all its fullness. And of course this is much contested in a multi-faith society and it raises all sorts of questions about the identity and uniqueness of Jesus Christ.

But I am not going to get into all today. Instead I want to pick up on the theme of journey in this passage. After all, in these verses Jesus is on a journey – a journey into Jerusalem which will lead eventually to a hill outside the city where he will die on a cross. But for Jesus that is part of a bigger journey that he has embarked upon in order to prepare for us a dwelling place with God: 'I go to prepare a place for you', says Jesus, 'so that where I am you may be also.' And his disciples do not understand this journey that he has set out on: 'Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?' asks Thomas. And it is in reply to that question that Jesus utters these majestic words, 'I am the Way, I am the Truth and the life'. And this morning I want to think of these words in relation to the journey of our lives. Prompted by the blessing earlier in the service of little Elise, I want to consider this saying of Jesus in relation to the journey that Elise has begun and that we are all on from infancy, to adulthood, to old age, and I want to consider how this verse might relate to different stages of that journey.

So let us think first about birth and infancy. Imagine holding a new-born baby in your arms as we held Elise earlier. You look at her and you imagine the life that lies before her. And you hope that she will have a fulfilled life, one that will bring joy. But as you hold her suddenly she seems very vulnerable. After all, this is a risky world, a dangerous world. And perhaps you find yourself worrying, if this child is your own, about how you are going to bring her up. It's a huge responsibility. The future

is an unknown. What kind of world will Elise be part of in her lifetime – and what dangers and perils will she face? Suddenly life seems a bit like the picture on our order of service - a forest with any number of paths that can be taken and some of them are well worn and wide and some of them are less trodden and narrow and how do you know which to choose? How do you help this child to find her way through? And that's not so very different to how the disciples were feeling here in this passage. Jesus was speaking of leaving them. He kept saying that he was going to go away from them and they would be left on their own. How would they negotiate this dangerous world without him with them? How could they be kept from going astray? And Jesus says, 'I am the Way'. And note that Jesus does not promise to show us the way or to teach us the way: he claims to be the way. In other words it is in a living relationship with him - yoked with him like oxen in harness or roped to him as to an experienced climber on a mountain – that's how we negotiate the minefield that is life in the world. And later on the early Christian movement became known as 'the Way' and to belong to 'the Way' was to be at odds with the ways of the ancient world and was considered to be crazy. And increasingly that is how it is today. The way of Christ is rejected and considered folly and yet the Christian church dares to proclaim that to set a child on the path that is Christ is to set her on the path to life.

But then you move on from infancy and you grow up into adulthood and you begin to ask questions – maybe awkward questions. What is the truth about the world? What is the truth about life? How can you live truthfully – in accordance with how things really are. And you may go through that phase where you question the version of truth that you have been given by your parents or by society because it does not fit your experience, and you feel at odds with the world you've grown up in. And just a few chapters further on in John's Gospel Jesus will stand on trial before Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor, and Pilate will ask that question that so troubles the human race and that demands an answer: what is truth? What is the truth about life and the world? And here Jesus makes this astonishing claim: 'I am the truth'.

And note what has happened to the whole notion of truth in recent times. While on holiday I read a book one of you gave me called

‘Fantasyland: How America Went Haywire’, written by a journalist, Kurt Andersen, and which tries to explain the extraordinary current state of affairs in the US. Andersen argues – and he is an American and I’m only quoting him – that Americans have a particular tendency to live in fantasy worlds, worlds which are at odds with reason and rationality: whether it’s the early pilgrims and puritans and the witch trials of Salem, or whether it’s other extreme forms of Christianity, or whether it’s Disneyland, or whether it’s the relatively high proportion of Americans who claim to have been abducted by aliens, or whether it’s conspiracy theories about global elites who are manipulating the world, or whether it is bizarre features of the current US administration, Anderson argues that Americans have a tendency to lose touch with reality and he is at something of a loss to explain why. Now any Americans here this morning may take strong exception to this and Andersen’s thesis may be flawed, but what interests me is his starting point. Andersen begins with the 16th century Reformation and the reformer Martin Luther’s protest that God does not need to be mediated to us through the church or through the priesthood for everyone has their own direct relationship with God and access to God. Everyone has access to ‘the Way’ that is Christ. Everyone has access to ‘the Truth’ that is Christ. And it has often been argued that this is a step towards individualism and the rights of conscience and of freedom of religion and freedom of speech. The downside, however, is that this leads eventually to the view that everyone is entitled to their own version of truth and ‘my truth’ and what works for me is every bit as valid as ‘your truth’ and what works for you, and so truth becomes increasingly subjective. So I was struck recently by a advertising campaign for Calvin Klein underwear which you may have seen. Various sultry models stand around in their underwear and the caption reads, ‘I speak my truth in my Calvins...’ So in other words if you are a seeker, uncertain of the truth about the universe and the meaning of life your problem is that you are wearing the wrong underpants – Calvin Kleins will enable you to speak your truth. Welcome to the modern world! This is where we’ve got to with regard to truth. We’ve given up. All we are left with is a billion subjective perspectives, all of them apparently equally valid.

And Christ tells us, 'I am the truth'. No, not 'I am the answer...': Christ does not give us easy answers to all life's questions and mysteries. But 'I am the Truth', a truth that is deep and rich and ultimately beyond our comprehension. And while such truth is so easily distorted and twisted and misrepresented, nevertheless for the Christian there is this one who embodies truth, who is full of grace and truth, and to be aligned with him, to be yoked with him, is to be aligned with the truth about all that is.

Then lastly, and more briefly we grow older. And of course what happens then? Well, in some ways life is diminished, isn't it? Maybe we lack the energy and the drive that we once had. We can no longer do things that we once enjoyed. The full spate of life that was ours when we were younger becomes a bit of a trickle. And there are those aches and pains and the forgetfulness and the losses and all the frustrations of age and decay. And it seems like our hold on life is slipping and the light is dying. And maybe it is then that these great words of Jesus bring special meaning, 'I am the Life'. Jesus after all in his life here on earth embodied life in all its fullness. Life flowed out from him. Wherever he met death and the forces of death he overcame them, and that is why the grave could not hold him. And to be in a relationship with Jesus is to be in relationship with Life that will never die, despite our failing bodies and minds.

So we read in our passage from Paul's 2nd Letter to the Corinthians, 'So we do not lose heart. Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day.' And while our earthly tent, our bodies, decay and implode we are daily getting closer to what Paul calls that house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens, the final dwelling place that Jesus spoke of going ahead to prepare for us in our reading from John . Outwardly we are wasting away but we are in touch with life, drawn ever closer to the light. And so ageing with Christ has its dignity, its poise, even in its frustrations and diminishments.

These, then, are three stages of life as we grow from infancy to adulthood to old age, and this is the journey that little Elise has embarked upon and that we celebrate today. Jesus promises to keep pace with her and with us through every stage and along every path, he who is the Way,

the Truth and the Life. And whatever stage of life's journey we are on this morning, this is good news. Amen.

O holy and gracious God,
eternal and sovereign one,
maker of all things in heaven and on earth:
we praise and bless your holy name.
we praise you who have come among us in Jesus Christ,
the Way, the Truth and the Life:
Christ the living Way to yourself;
Christ the Truth who reveals you to us;
Christ in and through whom we have life
in all its fullness:

we praise you, the one in whom we find our true home,
that dwelling place with its many mansions.

O God,
forgive us we pray that we have strayed from your Way;
forgive us that we have distorted and twisted your Truth;
forgive us that we have forfeited the Life that you yearn
for all our children.

O God, forgive us and have mercy upon us we pray.
And we praise and thank you that in Jesus you have come to us
with outstretched arms, to raise us up where we have fallen
and to lead us home.

Come now and reassure us of a love that triumphs,
unquenchable and unyielding,
and help us to live in that love and to show it to the world.
We pray in the name of Jesus Christ,
crucified and risen, and in whose name we pray, saying...