

The Spirit of Truth

THE DISCIPLES SEE the glory of the Lord and the witness of Moses and Elijah. Now they dare to come down the mountain and walk to Jerusalem. In today's gospel (Luke 9. 51 – 56) we see them on the way. They encounter the Samaritans who oppose them because they are going to Jerusalem. The immediate reaction of the disciples is the call down fire from heaven and destroy them. Well, they have just seen Elijah and this is what he did to the prophets of Ba'al! But the Lord rebukes them. They still have not understood the journey on which the Lord is leading them.

During the next three weeks, we may be tempted to call down fire from heaven on those with whom we disagree! Our society is filled with burning rage. The Lord summons us to banish such destructive urges from our meeting.

This pervasive rage springs from fear, but we need not be afraid. The Lord has promised the Holy Spirit who will guide us into all truth. On the night before he died, Jesus said,

'I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come.' (John 16: 12-13).

Whatever conflicts we have on the

way, we are sure of this: the Spirit of truth is leading us into all truth. But this will not be easy. Jesus warns the disciples: 'I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now.' Peter at Caesarea Philippi could not bear to hear that Jesus must suffer and die. On this last evening before the death of Jesus, Peter could not bear the truth that he would deny Jesus. Being led into the truth means hearing things that are unpalatable.

What are the truths we today find it hard to face? It has been deeply painful to face the extent of sexual abuse and corruption in the Church. It has seemed like a nightmare from which one hopes to awake. But if we dare to face this shameful truth, the truth will set us free. Jesus promises that 'you will have pain, but your pain will turn to joy' (v.20), as in the labour pains of a woman giving birth. These days of the Synod will sometimes be painful, but if we let ourselves be guided by the Spirit, these will be the birth pangs of a reborn Church.

This is our witness to a society that also flees from the truth. The poet T. S. Eliot said,

'Human Kind cannot bear very much reality.' [1]

We are careering towards an ecological catastrophe but our political leaders mostly pretend that nothing is happening. Our world is crucified by poverty and violence, but the wealthy countries do not want to see the millions of our

brothers and sisters who suffer and look for a home.

Western society is afraid to face the truth that we are vulnerable mortal beings, flesh and blood men and women. We flee the truth of our bodily existence, pretending that we can just self-identify as we wish, as if we were just minds. Cancellation culture means that people with whom we disagree must be silenced, no-platformed, just as the disciples wished to call down fire on the Samaritans who did not welcome Jesus. What are the painful truths which our brothers and sisters from the continents fear to face? It is not for me to say.

If we dare to be truthful about who we are, mortal vulnerable human beings, and brothers and sisters in a Church that has always been heroic and corrupt, we shall speak with authority to a world that still hungers for truth even when it fears it is unattainable. This requires courage, which for Aquinas was *fortitudo mentiis*, the strength of mind to see things as they are, to live in the real world. The poet Maya Angelou said:

‘Courage is the most important of all the virtues, because without courage you can’t practise any other virtue consistently.’[2]

When St Oscar Romero returned home to El Salvador, an immigration official said, ‘There goes the truth.’ He was truthful in the face of death. Sitting on a bench, he asked a friend, if he was afraid to die. The friend said

he was not. Romero replied, ‘But I am. I am afraid to die.’ It was this truthfulness which made his martyrdom so beautiful. Ever since he had looked at the mutilated body of his Jesuit friend Rutilio, he had known what awaited him. When he was martyred, his body was found to be covered with sweat. It seems that he had seen the man about to kill him, and he did not run away.

On that last night, Jesus warned his disciples that if they belong to him, the true vine, they shall be pruned that they may bear more fruit. In this synod, we may feel we are being pruned! It is so that we may bear more fruit. This may mean that we are pruned of illusions and prejudices that we have about each other, pruned of our fears and narrow ideologies. Pruned of our pride.

One of my young brethren encouraged me to speak personally at this point, though I hesitate to do so. A couple of years ago I had a massive operation for cancer of the jaw. It took seventeen hours. I was in hospital for five weeks, unable to eat or drink. Often confused as to where I was and who I was. I was stripped of dignity and completely dependent on other people for even the most basic needs. It was a terrible pruning. It was also a blessing. In this moment of helplessness, I could make no claims to importance, no achievements. I was just another ill person in a bed in the ward with nothing to give. I could not

even pray. Then my eyes were opened a bit more to the utter gratuitous, unmerited love of the Lord. I could do nothing to deserve it and it was marvellous that I did not have to do so.

The Spirit is in each of us, leading us together into all of the truth. I was ordained by the great Bishop Butler, the only person in the Second Vatican Council who spoke perfect Ciceronian Latin! He loved to say

‘Let us not fear that truth can endanger truth.’[3]

If what another says is indeed true, it cannot threaten the truth that I treasure. I must open my heart and mind to the spaciousness of the divine truth. If I believe that what the other says is not true, I must of course say so, with due humility. German has the lovely word *zwischenraum*. If I understand it, it means that the fullness of the truth is in the space between us as we talk. God’s mystery is always revealed in empty spaces, from the empty space between the wings of the cherubim on the ark of the covenant, to the empty tomb.

The clash of apparently incompatible truths can be painful and angry. Think of St Paul’s account of his conflict with St. Peter in Antioch as told in the Letter to the Galatians:

‘When Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face!’ (2:11).

But they gave each other the right hand of fellowship, and the Holy See

looks to both as founders! They were united in death as martyrs.

We must seek ways to speak the truth so that the other person can hear it without feeling demolished. Think of when Peter met Jesus on the beach, in John chapter 21. On the last evening before Jesus’ death, Peter had boasted that he loved the Lord more than all the others. But shortly afterwards he denied the Lord three times, the most shameful moment in his life. On the beach, Jesus does not hammer him with failure. He asks gently, perhaps with a smile, three times: ‘Do you love me more than these others? With infinite gentleness, he helps Peter three times to undo his threefold denial. He challenges him to face the truth with all of the tenderness of love. Can we challenge each other with such gentle truthfulness?

The American poet Emily Dickinson gives good advice:

Tell all the truth but tell it slant — Success
in Circuit lies

Forgive me for quoting poetry. It can be so hard to translate. Her point is that sometimes the truth is told most powerfully when it does so indirectly, so that the other can hear. If you tell someone that they are a patriarchal dinosaur, they probably will not be helped! Of course, it will still be painful sometimes. But Pope Francis said:

‘Speak the truth even if it is uncomfortable.’[4]

This will require of us all a certain loss of control. Jesus says to Peter,

‘Very truly, I tell you, when you were younger, you used to fasten your own belt and to go wherever you wished. But when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go. He said this to indicate the kind of death by which he would glorify God.’ (John 21.18)

If the Synod has the dynamics of prayer more than of a parliament, it will ask of us all a sort of letting go on control, even a sort of dying. Letting God be God. In *Evangelii Gaudium*, the Holy Father wrote:

‘There is no greater freedom than that of allowing oneself to be guided by the Holy Spirit, renouncing every attempt to plan and control everything to the last detail and instead letting him enlighten, guide and direct us, leading us wherever he wills.’ (280).

Letting go of control is not doing nothing! Because the Church has been so much a structure of control, sometimes strong interventions are needed to let the Holy Spirit take us here we had never thought of going.

We have a profound instinct to hang on to control, which is why the Synod is feared by many. At Pentecost, the Holy Spirit came powerfully upon the disciples who were sent to the ends of the earth. But instead, the apostles settled down in Jerusalem and did not want to leave. It took persecution to ease them out of the nest and send

them away from Jerusalem! Tough love! Above my office in Santa Sabina, every year kestrels build their nest. The time came when their parents kicked the young birds out of their nest, so that they had to fly or perish. Sitting at my desk, I could see them struggling to stay in the air! The Holy Spirit sometimes kicks us out of the nest and bids us fly! We flap in panic, but fly we will!

In Gethsemane, Jesus surrenders control over his life and entrusts it to the Father. Not as I will! When I was a young friar, a French Dominican, who had been a worker priest, stayed in the community. He was going to India to serve the poorest of the poor, and came to Oxford to learn Bengali. I asked him what he intended to do: ‘What is your plan?’ He replied: ‘How can I know until the poor tell me?’

As a young Provincial, I visited a Dominican monastery that was nearing the end. Only four ancient nuns were left. I was accompanied by the previous Provincial, Peter. When we said to the nuns that the future of the monastery seemed very uncertain, one of them said: ‘But Timothy, our dear Lord would not let our monastery die, would he?’ Peter immediately replied, ‘Sister, he let his son die.’ So we can let things die not in despair but in hope, to give a space for the new.

St Dominic tried to hand over control of the Order to the brethren because each of them had received the Holy

Spirit. So being led by the Holy Spirit means being liberated from the culture of control. In our society leadership is all about keeping one's hands on the leavers of power. Pope St John XXIII joked that he said to God each night: 'The Pope must go to sleep now, and so you, God, must look after the Church for a few hours.' As he understood so well, leadership is sometimes about letting go of control.

The *Instrumentum Laboris* calls us to make

'the preferential option for the young'
(e.g. B.2.1.).

Every year we remember that God came to us as a child, new-born. Confidence in the young is an intrinsic part of Christian leadership. The young are not here to take the places of us old people but to do what we cannot imagine. When St Dominic sent out his young novices out to preach, some monks warned him that he would lose them. Dominic replied,

'I know for certain that my young men will go out and come back, will be sent out and will return; but your young men will be kept locked up and will still go out.' [5]

Being led by the Spirit into all truth means letting go of the present, trusting that the Spirit will beget new institutions, new forms of Christian living, new ministries. Throughout the last two millennia, the Holy Spirit has been at work in creating new ways of being Church, from the desert fathers and mothers to the orders of friars in

the thirteenth century, even the Jesuits during the Counter-Reformation! The new ecclesial movements in the last century. We must let the Holy Spirit work creatively in our midst with new ways of being Church that now we cannot imagine, but perhaps the young can! Listen to him, said the voice on the mountain. That includes listening to the young in whom the Lord lives and speaks (Matthew 11:28).

Being led into the truth is not, as we have seen, just a matter of rational argument. We are not just brains. We open who we are, our vulnerable humanity, to each other. St Thomas Aquinas loved a saying of Aristotle, that

'*Anima est quodammodo omnia*':
'The soul is, in a way, everything'.

We know deeply by opening our being to what is other. We let ourselves be touched and changed by encounter with each other. The fulness of truth into which the Holy Spirit is leading us is not dispassionate knowledge which inspects from a distance. It is more than propositional knowledge. It is inseparable from transformative love (II A.1 27). The Dominican way is that through knowing we come to love. The Franciscan way is to say that through loving, we come to know. Both are right.

The mystery into which we are being led is of a love that is totally without rivalry. All that the Father has is given to the Son and to the Holy Spirit.

Even equality. To share in the divine life is to be liberated from all rivalry and competition. It is this same divine love, freed from all rivalry, with which we should love each other during this Synod. St John wrote,

‘Those who say, “I love God,” and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen.’ (1 John 4:20)

The journey into the fullness of truth is inseparable from learning to love. Profound change will come about only if the search to understand the Lord’s will is entwined in the double helix of learning to love those whom we find difficult. This will be hard to communicate to people who are not here. Have all these people really come all this way, at great expense, just to love each other? Practical decisions are of course unavoidable and necessary. But they must spring from the personal and communal transformation of who we are, otherwise they are mere administration.

Imagine the joy of being liberated from all competition with each other so that the more voice the laity have does not mean that the bishops have left, or the more that women are granted authority does not mean that the men have less, or the more recognition that our African brothers and sisters receive does not diminish the authority of the Church in Asia or the West.

This asks of each of us a profound humility as we wait confidently for the gifts of God.

Simone Weil was a French Jewish mystic who died in 1943, who on his journey to the truth came to say

‘I believe in God, the Trinity, Redemption, the Eucharist, and the teachings of the Gospel.’[6]

She wrote that

‘we do not obtain the most precious gifts by going in search of them but by waiting for them...This way of looking is, in the first place, attentive. The soul empties itself of all its own contents in order to receive the human being it is looking at, just as he or she is, in all their truth.’[7]

If we let ourselves be guided by the Spirit of truth, we shall doubtless argue. It will sometimes be painful. There will be truths we would rather not face. But we shall be led a little deeper into the mystery of divine love and we shall know such joy that people will be envious of us for being here, and will long to attend the next session of the Synod!

[1] ‘Burnt Norton’, *The Four Quartets*

[2] *Convocation*, Conrwell, May 24th 2008

[3] ‘Ne timeamus quod veritas veritati noceat’

[4] January 25th 2023

[5] ed. Simon Tugwell *OP Early Dominicans: selected writings*, Ramsey N.J., 1982, p.91

[6] S. Petrement, *La vita di Simone Weil*, Adelphi, Milano 2010, p. 646

[7] *Waiting on God*, trans. Emma Crauford, London 1959, p.169