

Jumping Through Hoops

Today's reading from the Gospel of John comes from one of the most well-read and well-loved passages of the entire Bible. I have no idea why!

'If you love me you will obey what I command!'

'Whoever has my commands and obeys them, he is the one who loves me!'

'He who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I too will love him and show myself to them!'

What kind of God is this? Well, forgive me, but that sounds a little like a divine, almighty, and supernaturally manipulative version of eternally dishing out the dreaded silent treatment! I'll talk to you once you learn to comply with my demands! Do as you're told, and then I will love you! This is the God that John has portrayed, and it is a dreadful picture.

In fact, as a Father, maybe I am unusual – but my children do not always follow my commands! At the wedding yesterday, I think Hazel Beynon discovered that they don't always follow her commands either. And if the children don't do as they are told, does that mean that I cease to love them at that point? I would never dream of saying to them when they are naughty that this is because they do not love me!

When this is the kind of love that is on offer, when this is the kind of God that is in charge of the universe – it is little wonder that the disciples are then in need of a comforter. A counsellor to help us – little wonder that we need help when the love of our loving father is utterly conditional love.

But who is this counsellor? This person who is supposed to help us is known as none other than the Spirit of Truth! The Spirit of Truth! The Spiritual version of the Dickens character, Sir Thomas Gradgrind, a man of facts and calculations! *Hard Times* opens with his life-giving speech.

'Now, what I want is, Facts. Teach these boys and girls nothing but Facts. Facts alone are wanted in life. Plant nothing else, and root out everything else. You can only form the minds of reasoning animals upon Facts: nothing else will ever be of any service to them. This is the principle on which I bring up my own children, and this is the principle on which I bring up these children. Stick to Facts, sir!' - ... - in this life we want nothing but facts sir, nothing but facts.'

So there you go – obey my teaching, keep up the good work, and here is the Spirit of Truth: your guide to the correct facts relating to matters of faith and practice, a counsellor to give you the hidden truth that cannot be known to the rest of the world.

This is the picture of God given by many evangelistic endeavours, inviting people to learn the truth, to follow God's commands. At Cambridge this so-called Spirit of Truth would be seen on chapel noticeboards throughout the university, inviting people to events called 'Explaining Jesus', at which you would learn the cold, hard facts about Christianity. What God requires of you, how he will keep you alert to the correct facts about the universe, and – of course – we must not forget the facts of the fate that awaits you, should you fail to abide by the conditions of God's utterly conditional love.

I wish this were a caricature, a straw man. But anyone who has seen this world knows that it is not. Although you cannot blame the Christian Unions for promoting this view of God. It is utterly consistent with a strictly modernist reading of this text. We want people to know the truth, so that they may live in freedom and inherit eternal life – so the Spirit of Truth is employed to serve the very modern desire: in this life we want nothing but facts sir, nothing but facts.’

It is little wonder that countless students at the university, who had nothing whatsoever against Christianity when they arrived – students who were quite open to encounter new truth. But when they encounter the cold hard facts of God’s performance-related love, it is hardly surprising that they reject the Gospel, that often they become embittered towards it, and that sometimes they become evangelistically anti-Christian.

In his novel *Hard Times*, Dickens uses Gradgrind as a caricature of all that is worst about an oppressive education – which is a contradiction in terms. Strictly speaking, the educated someone is to liberate, to free them – which is why the truth sets us free. But Gradgrind embodies the spirit of oppressive truth – cold hard facts, measurable, predictable, calculable. And his students are only too keen to please their teacher by giving him his version of the right answer. Gradgrind’s version of truth had served him well, and brought him considerable success.

But it didn’t work. At Cambridge, the students are told that within a few years of leaving, most of them will no longer be living Christian lives. They will have rejected it outright, or become disillusioned with trying to please God as if they were students trying to please Mr Gradgrind. Or they will become like me – dodgy, phoney, pretend bible believers, who no longer deal in cold hard facts.

But in the novel, Thomas Gradgrind himself discovers that his view of the world does not work. The children whom he has so carefully brought up on facts, run themselves into ruin. His wife confesses an empty hole, that there is something enormous missing from their marriage. Eventually, Gradgrind comes to the point where, faced with these failures of his system, he admits, “The ground on which I stand has ceased to be solid under my feet.” His children’s problems teach him to feel love and sorrow, and Gradgrind becomes a wiser and humbler man, ultimately “making his facts and figures subservient to Faith, Hope and Charity.”

This is precisely what some sociologists might describe as a move from modern to postmodern – from the world of facts come first into the world where relationships come first. And similarly, there is another way of reading the passage from John that reveals a God whose love is not performance-related.

Now in the reading, Judas has picked up that an enormous distinction has been made between the disciples and the world! The world does not know the Spirit of Truth – he is revealed only to those who love God. But the love of God is not a performance-related love, offered exclusively to those who love him and obey his commands. Elsewhere in John’s Gospel we read that God so loved the world that he gave his only son – the whole world comes under God’s loving-care.

So what is this passage about. In many ways, it is a way of turning commandments on their head. The commandments do not sit there like cold hard objective laws requiring obedience.

Jesus says rather, love me first – and the commandments will look after themselves. It is very close to the Ethical principle attributed to Saint Augustine: Love, and do as you like! Love God, and do whatever else you like.

Because, if we really do love God – if we are in a living growing relationship with the living and personal God, then it means that the way we live will be pleasing to him anyway. The way that we live, cannot help but accidentally comply with the commandments of God. The commandments are then revealed by Jesus as being descriptive, rather than prescriptive: if we love God, then you almost don't need commands because you will be doing your best to please the one you love anyway. Not to say that commands are pointless, but it is to say that they are secondary, in just the same way that Thomas Gradgrind discovered that his all too precious facts are now subservient to Faith, Hope and Love.

The love of God is not performance related. We might instead discover that the love of God generates performance, it generates a way of life that can only be found in God himself. And here is where the Spirit of Truth surfaces. The Holy Spirit is the presence of Jesus here and now – the one who performs to truth of God the Father in our daily lives.

And here it is worth repeating what was said last week about Jesus as the Way, the Truth and the Life. That the way that we understand truth in the modern world tends to be one of correctness. Stick to the facts, the truth. Philosophers call this the 'correspondence' theory of truth – and it is one of several ways of encountering truth. But Truth in Scripture is something different. Not static facts, but dynamic – relational event. When we read of the Truth that will set us free it has nothing to do with the early Mr Gradgrind's world of facts. When King David sees that surely God desires truth in the inner parts – he is clearly not talking about Mr Gradgrind's facts. He is talking about relationship, faithfulness, openness to the work of God here and now.

The Spirit of Truth is the Spirit of God at work in our lives, forming us, transforming us, shaping us. One the great contributions of the charismatic movement, if we can for a moment overcome its all-too frequently negative characteristics, is that it has freed many Christians from the correspondence theory of truth, freeing us from belief in Christianity as a set of factual truths. Liberating us, to encounter the Spirit of Truth in ways that bring liberation for us and for the world around.

When We worship the Father, through the Son, in the Spirit, - we cannot help but manifest the character of God here and now. In other words – if you love me, you will obey my commands. Or perhaps I could risk a paraphrase – if you love me, you'll find yourself accidentally obeying my commands.

But for how many of us have our ethical lives got little to do with a dynamic relationship with God. We derive our so-called ethical values from somewhere – our views of economic fairness, of ecological righteousness, our sexual ethics, our moral compass. We derive these things from somewhere, and often we think, from the teaching of Scripture. But, time and again, the teaching of Scripture is not one of following these rules. The Old Testament prophets rather longed that the commandments would be written on the hearts of the people – and when the Spirit of Truth comes, that is precisely what happens!

Or on the subject of commandments, think of the ten commandments. But, inspired by the Spirit, Stephen recounts the story of the ten commandments – but he doesn't call them that –

he calls them living oracles. Because those who he was addressing supposed that they had locked God up in a book – and Stephen’s entire speech is designed to show that by locking God up in commandments and theories, they had distanced themselves from him. The 10 commandments, were never written as timeless truth – they form part of a story – and unless we enter into that story for ourselves, following the ten commandments is pointless, as Saint Paul discovered.

God’s love is not performance related love. Nor is it conditional. As though God were some distant dictator. No, today – we worship in the Spirit, today we encounter the Spirit of Truth who brings God’s word to life in our lives, who kindles a flame or love in our hearts and who then awakens within us a desire to please the one we worship.

Not a Spirit who teaches us the facts about God, nor who enables us to keep some divine rules.

The Spirit of Truth frees us to encounter God here and now, to engage with God now and always, to Worship God today and every day, to hear the God of love and justice speak in this place at this time.

And if love really is performance-related, then of course it is not love at all. If those who love God do it simply in order for their own ultimate well-being – this is not love. Of course, we believe that love for God results in our ultimate well being – but it is not out of solemn, fear-driven fulfilment of duty. What kind of relationship is that? Certainly not one that you could live with for long, never mind eternal life!