

Trinity 2 sermon 2020
Jeremiah 20:10-13, Romans 5:12-15, Matthew
10:26-33.

The heart of the matter.

“everything now covered will be uncovered and
everything now hidden will be made clear”

In the Gospel, Jesus is warning the disciples that his lot will be theirs – rejection isolation and death are indeed things we might rightly fear. And yet the most common refrain – thrice repeated in this passage alone is “do not be afraid.” Jesus is vindicated by the resurrection – **they** will be safe too in the Father’s hands in Heaven if they acknowledge him, preach the gospel and proclaim the kingdom in word and deed. Famously, the risen Lord Jesus pierces to the very heart and soul of Peter telling him he will be bound and taken, like a slave, where he would not wish to go. Yet by feeding the sheep in word and deed – being true to who he really was and who he was called to be – he would be set free in a way no chains could bind or execution expunge and become the true rock for the body of Christ – the Church.

Jesus who is **the way the truth and life** also tells them that the “truth will set them free.” In today’s Gospel: “Everything hidden will be made clear”. Truth and freedom - sounds like a very topical slogan and charter for the investigative journalist and dispassionate historian! What is hidden is often uncomfortable and the revealing thereof is often unwelcome.

The history of Christianity at its finest is often the history of persecution, the history of being counter cultural, the history of speaking truth to power and

popular opinion, of being deeply challenging as Jesus was. The history of Christianity at its worst is often the voice that merely echoes the words of power, the mob, or group think. Christian leadership that says little more than “wash your hands, stay at home and isn’t the current fall guy in government awful”, doesn’t seem to echo our finer times of history. It is often left to brave voices within the church like “Athanasius contra Mundum” to challenge the accepted norm that merely echoes society, the powerful, the mob, group think and fashion.

Such a pattern of the finest and the worst was revealed in the battle in the late 18th century and early 19th century for the abolition of the slave trade and then of slavery itself. Something that had always existed; in the ancient empires, across China, Arabia, Africa and the indigenous peoples of the Americas – often resulting from the spoils of war and in the building of great totemic human creations like the pyramids and temples. No doubt they will remain standing.

Always existing doesn’t make it right – like the profundity of sin Paul speaks of in his letter to the Christians at the very heart of empire in Rome. Sin existed before the law, it continued in spite of the law and often used the law for perverted motive. That is why Jesus tells us it is from the heart of a man that sin flows - not compliance or not with a law - useful though they might be. ***Jesus is not a law changer but a heart changer*** – his power lies in the heart open to the spirit of God and faithful to His image within.

Though they always existed, even sin and evil can be taken to new levels – as we remembered earlier

this year with the anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz. 3-400 years before that elevation of sin, the European colonial powers engaged in their own. They did not invent colonisation or slavery but used them as nations did before for their own gain and advantage. Indeed some nations are doing it right now as I speak for their gain and advantage – though we mostly turn an expedient blind eye.

In our history it took brave counter cultural Christians like Thomas Clarkson – a much maligned Deacon in the Church of England and his Quaker friends to challenge the acceptance of the evil of the slave trade in the 18th Century. Most know of William Wilberforce as the Evangelical powerhouse in parliament – but he didn't get beaten up in the dockyards and back alleys garnering the evidence, uncovering what was largely hidden. Clarkson, bruised and battered, shone daylight into the darkest and vilest of places. The ghastly transatlantic slave trade had taken the sin of slavery, accepted for millennia to a new level of depravity. Vessels of death with human cargo packed in like sardines – except they were alive and if not tipped over the side. Vessels never seen in our shores, and safely away from the mind. The uncovering and making clear only made possible because of the voice of Christ in their minds and hearts “fear not – carry on.”

Clarkson and his friends were driven, unlike Wilberforce, not by what the slaves could become but **by who they already were** – they were already human vessels as they put it, of the “divine spark” – they were already made in the image of God – worth more than any number of sparrows or any items of trade.

Of course minds were changed in the mixed and muddy compromises of the political arena and the power and levers of the “colonial” state, not least the Royal Navy, were converted to interdict and eradicate the evil of the slave trade, abolished in 1807 and of slavery in 1833, whether other nations liked it or not. A finer hour had come; but finer hours do not and should not cover the darker ones, for as Christ puts it – “everything is to be made clear”.

History and truth are never simple and replacing one simplistic version with another does not serve truth or real freedom. The human psyche and being is even more complex and people are never like statues frozen in time. St. Paul understands this from the inside – everyone has sinned. There are no clean hands. We are often both perpetrator and victim in our lives and sometimes at the same time. And let us remember that silence and inaction is a pernicious form of perpetration. Only the grace of God sets us free - granting divine forgiveness for our perpetration on the one hand; and healing embrace when victim of another’s sin and evil on the other. Thus the chains are broken, the door is flung open for us to become defined - neither by our sin nor by our victimhood, but by who we really are in God’s eye – that is real freedom.

History and truth are never complete and perfect in this life. Even some who supported dear eccentric Thomas Clarkson in his work didn’t care for his black friends when he brought them to his English home, the law had changed but their hearts lagged behind. But he didn’t care about their insults and arrows even if they were from bishops and archdeacons who just happened to bear the name of their Wilberforce father.

Fear not those who can destroy the body but not the soul. Only God can destroy both and in Christ we know his heart is set to quite the opposite - he desires life not death and pays everything to set us free - an eternal freedom that begins and ends in the fearless heart not the law.