



St James's
Church
Piccadilly

Sunday, 6 November 2022
The Third Sunday Before Advent
2 Thessalonians 2.1-5,13-end; Gospel of Luke 20.27-38
The Rev'd Dr Mariama Ifode-Blease
'The truth and dare of God'

**May I speak in the name of the triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.
Amen.**

During one of the more comical episodes at university, I went for dinner alone, visiting a lovely restaurant in one of the winding alleys of St Andrews that offered delicious Mediterranean cuisine. For reasons I cannot remember, I had decided to treat myself to dinner. This was the height of sophistication: well-dressed-me, on my student budget, with a broadsheet in hand, dining out. I sat alone, probably more deeply self-conscious than I would have ever confessed at the time, surrounded by couples in the dimly lit restaurant, opened the broadsheet, and focused my eyes intently on a supposedly interesting article.

Suddenly, there was fire and a hint of smoke. The edge of the broadsheet had caught the tip of the candle on the table and the fire was creeping up the newspaper towards my hands. So much for sophistication. My ego bruised, I hurriedly extinguished the small flame, folded the newspaper, placed it on the side of the table, with pieces of burnt paper falling empathically around my plate and cutlery. The truth or dare that I had been playing with myself was an epic fail. I had dared to go out and have dinner on my own only to realise the truth that I was lonely, and dining alone wasn't really what I wanted at all.

Truth or dare is a game filled with jeopardy and risk and enveloped in potential embarrassment and exposure. Thankfully, none of this applies to the relationship we have with our God. Because it's not truth or dare with God. It is truth *and* dare.

The truth and dare of God leads to the emboldened and illuminated reality of a God who loves us, no matter what and, as one friend put it, "whose grace and forgiveness can mess with our sense of what we think is fair."¹

It is perhaps in this context that we can see the readings today, because both, in their own way, deal with what life is all about and what being embodied in time and space means. In

¹ Rev'd J. Pick, *Sermon* on 17 January 2021.

the letter to the Thessalonians, we are called into a new way of being in which our encounters with the world are now representative of a bigger story:

Because God chose *us* as the first fruits for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and through belief in the truth. For this purpose, God called *us* through *our* proclamation of the good news, so that *we* may obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ (2 Thessalonians 2: 13 -14)

Written in the context of discussions about when Jesus would return, this letter determines that we are chosen to be, and do something based on being made, holy, through the Holy Spirit, and because we believe in truth. The truth that we are known and seen, and held in a cosmic net of love, and the dare to proclaim the good news based on this truth.

The truth and dare of God asks our consent to be loved and then to tell others that they are loved too, regardless of what the world is telling them.

The truth of the matter is that using the word ‘invasion’ to describe immigrants and asylum seekers arriving on our shores is as intentional as it is dangerous. The dare is for us to develop and put pressure on our government and statutory bodies to develop more compassionate and humane systems and practices. We must never underestimate the power of language to radicalise. It was reported this weekend that:

“The firebombing of a migrant centre in Dover had “an extreme right-wing motivation”, police have said.” The 66-year-old attacker died in the blast...Counter Terrorism Policing Southeast (CTPSE) said [yesterday] that evidence had been recovered that indicated the attack “was motivated by a terrorist ideology.”²

The truth and dare of God demands that we recognise our own prejudices and fears, and that we dare to name them, and that we dare to confront them, and that we dare to overcome them with words and acts that lean towards the light of social justice.

This week, two young men were jailed for life for a horrific knife crime. Teenager James Bascoe-Smith was an innocent bystander in a vicious gang attack that has left him with life changing injuries.

“I have been left in a wheelchair that is not electric” James said in court. “I rely on everyone to move me – I have no independence. I now have a brain injury because my heart stopped for nearly an hour. I don’t think I will ever be able to work or study again”.

“I did not deserve this. I had no issues with anyone ... I just want to know why they attacked me and if they feel bad for what they have done”.

² <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2022/nov/05/dover-firebomb-attack-motivated-by-terrorist-ideology-police-say>

He added: "I am grateful that the doctors saved my life, but living like this is hard. I miss my friends. I miss my old life. Every day I wake up knowing this is how I will be for ever."³

The truth and dare of God opens our eyes and ears to the stories of suffering and asks us to lay our hearts and imagination at the service of a better and safer world, especially for our children.

The truth and dare of God isn't easy to live with. Frankly, it is easier to hide from it because it is constantly challenging our self-perception and daring us to be known more deeply by God *and* by the people who love us the most.

I wonder what truth God has been revealing to you this past week. What dare has God has set at your feet? Both truth and dare shift our gaze and bring us to new realities.

It is to both the gaze and the new reality that Jesus refers, when he addresses the limiting and limited imagination of the Sadducees. Jesus, in essence, asks them to reorientate their gaze, citing Moses's encounter with the burning bush in Exodus 3:1-6, and presenting a reality that *their* world view does not comprehend.

And the angel of the LORD appeared unto him in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush: and he looked, and, behold, the bush burned with fire, and the bush was not consumed.

And Moses said, I will now turn aside, and see this great sight, why the bush is not burnt (Exodus 3: 2-3).

Moses's gaze, turned towards the burning bush, moves him towards the new reality of his calling.

And this is the thing about God. God is consensual in relationship making. The transformation that allows us to accept more of the truth and dare of God is born out of this co-creative process. We are *not* going to be forced to believe. We have to get there ourselves, in fellowship, in community, through love, and epic adventure, and failure and disappointment, and anger, and resentment, through betrayal and self-doubt, and deep loneliness and resurrection courage, through the valley of the shadow of death, and unquestionable grief, and through whispering joy.

The truth and dare of God is unshakeable. The truth is that God is alive. Love transcends death. The dead are alive, and we are part of that story. The dare is to believe.

³ <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2022/nov/04/james-bascoe-smith-men-who-left-teenager-for-dead-jailed-for-life>

The Sadducees want to catch Jesus out. I mean frankly, don't we all at one point or another in our lives try to catch Jesus out?

Jesus responds to their questioning of the resurrection, and who is what and where, and who does what, and with whom. Yet, in the words of Pope Francis:

“What will happen is quite the opposite of what the Sadducees expected. It is not this life that will serve as a reference point for eternity, for the other life that awaits us; rather, it is eternity — *that life* — which illumines and gives hope to the earthly life of each one of us!

If we look at things from only a human perspective, we tend to say that man's journey moves from life to death. This is what we see! But this is only so if we look at things from a human perspective. Jesus turns this perspective upside down and states that our pilgrimage goes from death to life: the fullness of life!

We are on a journey, on a pilgrimage toward the fullness of life, and that fullness of life is what illumines our journey! Therefore, death stands behind us, not before us. Before us is the God of the living, the God of the covenant, the God who bears my name, our names stand before us, as God said: “I am the God of Abraham, of Isaac, of Jacob”, and also the God with my name, with your name..., with our names. The God of the living!”⁴

We cannot, of course, nor ever must we say to those facing death in this life that death is behind them. In these contexts, the statement lacks compassion and understanding. Rather what Pope Francis's words highlight again is the change of perspective and the realignment of our lives in and with eternity. We are not waiting to get there, because *there* is also here, in the breaking of bread, in the drinking of wine, in our gathering at the table, in the truth and dare of God.

The truth and dare of God tells us that God bears our name in love, and that God bears our name within the communion of saints.

And God keeps calling our name, a bit too much sometimes, if I am honest, in the hope that we will accept the dare. The dare to trust in the God, who knows who and what we are, and is excited by the possibilities within us.

Last week, “more than 200 young people aged between 11 to 18 gathered in Westminster to participate in debate sessions of the UK Youth Parliament. This is the first time they've met like this since 2019; their morning session was chaired by speaker Sir Lindsay Hoyle. In a

⁴ Pope Francis, 'Angelus', Saint Peter's Square, Sunday, 10 November 2013
https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/angelus/2013/documents/papa-francesco_angelus_20131110.html

first for the event, young representatives from British Overseas Territories were also invited to share their experiences.”⁵

These are the words of Ruby, Member of the UK Youth Parliament:

“We have this fire in us to create change. I think that we are seeing instability constantly. Our optimism and idealism isn’t just shiny. It’s meaningful and I think that should hopefully transpire into when we’re people making decisions.”⁶

Our God can sometimes be presented as all glitter and no gold, of burning bush against the 40 years of roaming in the wilderness, of not really being there when the going gets tough and the sand hits the fan and gets in our eyes.

Yet the truth and dare of God is that our God is one of consistent and constant meaningful encounter. The truth and dare of God makes us more, not less, of who we are, and connects us to a transformed reality, to a promise of dignity and recognition and to the work to reconnect and bring others into this unfolding story. This is the work of the communion of saints of which we are a part.

Now may our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Maker, who loved us and through grace gave us eternal comfort and good hope, comfort our hearts and strengthen them in every good work and word (2 Thessalonians 2: 16 – 17).

Amen.

⁵ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/uk-politics-63520778>

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