

**ADVENT 1**  
**02/12/18**  
**St James the Great, Shirley**

**TRUTH IS A JOURNEY**

**OLD TESTAMENT READING Jeremiah 33.14-16**

*If you want God, and long for union with him, yet sometimes wonder what that means or whether it can mean anything at all, you are already walking with the God who comes. If you are at times so weary and involved with the struggle of living that you have no strength even to want him, yet are still dissatisfied that you don't, you are already keeping Advent in your life. If you have ever had an obscure intuition that the truth of things is somehow better, greater, more wonderful than you deserve or desire, that the touch of God in your life stills you by its gentleness, that there is a mercy beyond anything you could ever suspect, you are already drawn to the central mystery of salvation.*

*Your hope is not a mocking dream; God creates in human hearts a huge desire and a sense of need, because he wants to fill them with the gift of himself.*

Those words, published in 1982, were first pointed out to me by a priest colleague in the college where I was teaching, and they have stayed with me ever since. They were written by a Roman Catholic Benedictine nun called Maria Boulding, who was given to speaking of her relationship with God as a love affair – one that lasted until the end of her life.

Let me try to explain why those words continue to mean so much to me.

Recently, I have been involved in some very enjoyable and thought provoking conversations with year 11 students from a local school. We have covered many topics in these question and answer sessions – a sort of everything you wanted to know about Christianity, but were afraid to ask – but one issue that recurred was that of abortion. The students have been looking at a number of moral questions, but this one seems to have really got them thinking. So the question came, several times: what do you think about abortion?

I have to confess, that it was tempting to hide behind pious platitudes. But I didn't, because I'm not very good at them, because young people have an

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impressive ability to sniff out evasions and because, well, because I don't think that's what we should do when faced with difficult questions.

So instead I told them a story from the early years of my priestly ministry. A member of the congregation came to see me to tell me that her 14 year old daughter was pregnant. She and her husband were both very upset about this, as was their daughter. It became apparent that mum was looking for some kind of permission from me to go ahead with the termination that her husband was advocating forcefully. This permission I could not and would not give – not least because it simply wasn't mine to give, given the understanding I had then, and have now, about the sanctity of life. What I was able and willing to do was accompany the parishioner on a difficult journey, a journey made even more difficult by what I sensed was something troubling in the father's attitude: his daughter, his princess had lost her innocence; he had not been able to protect her and now he felt that somehow she had been ruined and he wanted it all to go away.

The fact was that whatever decision was made, this new reality would never go away. That family's lives would never be the same again and I still don't know whether I acted properly, or whether the termination that went ahead was the right thing, or was truly the daughter's free decision. And that is part of any consideration of questions like this. I really do believe in the sanctity of life. I also believe that throughout history men have claimed control over the lives of women in ways that have diminished and even denied their full humanity and that this has had - and continues to have - devastating consequences for countless women. I also know that when an Established Church in effect sides with the official thinking, then problems don't go away; they go underground and become even worse. Make no mistake, I believe that the taking of life can never be good in itself – but what happens when after careful thought the taking of life appears to be the least bad course of action in certain circumstances? This is why I am not a pacifist, and take seriously the Church's attempts to deal with the reality of armed conflict through the just war theory with its requirement of just cause and proper conduct between known combatants.

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Though I should add though that I have yet to think of any conflict in the modern era as coming anywhere near to fulfilling these requirements.

Crucially, though, while I believe that truth can be pointed to by a series of propositions and statements, I would also say that truth is always more than just yes or no answers to complex questions. It is, in my experience, more akin to a journey. This journey involves taking the broadest possible view of what is involved. There is always the immediate problem, often urgent and always compelling, like the case I mentioned a daughter who is pregnant. But there is also the question of who is in the best position to get their own way – and why they want a particular course of action.

But then there is what we know of Jesus and his response to difficult questions. For example, in the story of the woman taken in adultery, he doesn't pretend she has no responsibility for her actions. He doesn't ignore the customary sentence – death – for what she has done. What he does, though is stand beside her and he does this by asking the question: we all know the rules, but by what right do you claim the right to impose them? He takes her, and her accusers, on a journey that leads to them acknowledging that there is more to human conduct than pointing the finger. He stood beside her and she was able to make a journey that acknowledged where she had gone wrong, but in a way that enabled her to find a way to flourish.

In today's reading from Jeremiah, we are told that the Lord is our Righteousness and that he will raise up a messiah, a new King David who will establish righteousness and justice. The language, as always in Jeremiah, is vigorous. It is also puzzling. It is the product of a tradition of thinking and writing that is unfamiliar to us. The background of defeat and exile, of being wrenched from all that is familiar and plunged into the hands of others who will exercise complete control over life and death, is not familiar to most of us.

Or is it? Anyone who has been forced to flee their home because of violence, who has entered the wilderness of serious illness, bereavement, or faced the difficult decision to let a loved one go into the care of others will be all too

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familiar with what Jeremiah faced and may share the yearning of the prophet for a decisive, unequivocal answer to their questions.

But what Jeremiah points us to, in the end, is what Jesus reveals to us and what Maria Boulding tried to convey: that truth – God – is not just present in the answer based on tradition and authority, whether Church or state. Jesus was constantly making this point, and in this morning's reading from Luke really goes to town on what would have been some pretty familiar expectations. Over and over again, Jesus takes us on a journey, so that we might not simply know what is right and wrong according to ancient formulae, but live in the truth of our fragile humanity without ever losing hope, without ever losing the assurance of being loved.

Put another way, the truth of the bible is not summed up in any one passage, but in the powerful effect of reading stories, almost all of them concerning journeys and in Jesus' case his journey to the cross and beyond. It isn't an easy journey, either for him or for us. But it is in the journey that God comes to us in our moments of deepest need and offers the deepest reality of love. It is in this journey we encounter the God of Advent, the God who comes and in coming to us will never abandon us.