

## TRUTH IS A FOUR-LETTERED WORD

**PREACHER : Canon Neil Thompson, Precentor**

Sunday, April 11<sup>th</sup> 2010

**Easter 2**

10.30am

Rochester Cathedral

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Since Easter Day, we have found ourselves officially at the start of a British General Election campaign – and doubtless some people are already tired of the daily speeches, tours, briefings, spinning and discussions.

By contrast Easter is over for the world once the chocolate eggs and the school holidays are finished.

And then yesterday, our news headlines and our thoughts were changed out of the blue with the terrible air disaster killing Poland's president and scores of other senior Polish figures.

Nothing can prepare us human beings for such tragedies and this catastrophe leaves a nation and so many individuals asking questions to which there are no straightforward easy answers.

Sadly, as human beings we have to live with death, bereavement and the mystery of meaning that lies beyond that which we can physically see and verify.

Chocolate eggs and holidays are so much simpler to handle.

But if Easter is true, what kind of truth is it and what does it have to say to a nation plunged into grief and another embroiled in electioneering?

As Christians we must ask how Easter is to make an impact in 2010, and is today's world significantly different from past ages?

The answer I believe to both these questions lies in the area of the threshold of doubt which is particular to our age.

To illustrate this, I want to introduce you to the internet search engine in this sermon; yes, meet Mr Google.

For those of you who know nothing about computers, *Google* is the wonderful name of a process which searches and identifies the vast information banks of the internet for a word or phrase or subject that you may wish to feed in.

So I have taken three words to do with Easter and the truth of the resurrection namely:

- Easter
- truth and
- resurrection

to see how many 'hits', how many web sites, might be associated with those words.

The results were as follows:

- Easter ~ 110 million
- truth ~ 164 million and
- resurrection ~ 17.6 million

and those results give you some idea of the incredible information overload that exists for people today.

As so many people and especially the young sit in front of their computer screens daily, it is information technology that presents us with so many facts and opinions and allows us to choose and decide what to believe. In fact such choice is overwhelming and very dangerous

Is this data of equal value and reliability? The answer to that is quite clearly and categorically, NO!

So evidence, facts and an avalanche of opinion, interpretation, prejudice and madness are thrown in our direction ...and we have to accept or reject, choose and believe, doubt and deny.

It makes us very sceptical and very trusting in equal proportions.

Many things we are tempted to accept as given and generally held; other things we think that we can decide for ourselves even when we are being fed truth from an unknown and unverifiable source.

With so much information and a limited understanding into the inquiry of truth, the role of parents, schools and the Church has never been more critical.

And it is to this 21<sup>st</sup> century situation that God comes in his Easter power and glory.

Our Gospel passage is set on Easter evening in the upper room with the doors of the house firmly secured and bolted *for fear of the Jews*.

Yes it was fear that saw Jesus' disciples locked away not knowing what to think and to do after Jesus' death and burial.

And the presence of Jesus burst and broke open all that had been erected to keep out his truth, his life and the spiritual energy that was yet to be poured out on the Day of Pentecost.

And it is through these doors of embattlement that the risen Christ stands among them and says *Peace be with you*.

He does the same today.

The doors are different but our fears and limitations are the same.

And it is Thomas, of course, who fails to be with the others when Jesus breaks through the locked doors, and so Thomas' defences are still up.

And he says as we well know that he can't believe - except on his terms.

Yes, truth is a four-lettered word: and it spells either fear or love.

When Thomas sees Jesus in the flesh, his fear is turned to love – and Jesus says to him:

*Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.*

May our convictions be forged in the light of love rather than the murk of fear.

Yes, it is a very different way of ascertaining and living truth.

And it starts in building up trust, trust that is truthful and which is learnt by faith, by hope and by love.

This is the challenge to live with an open mind that can learn and change and grow because God loves us and in response we can love him and our neighbour as ourselves.

However, open-mindedness does not lack conviction and it is not a fence-sitting inability to choose and commit and risk.

We should remind ourselves of this when it comes to casting our vote and standing up and speaking out on kingdom issues.

Our Bible forbears make this clear.

In our reading from Acts this morning, Peter and the apostles defy the high priest and the council by saying *We must obey God rather than any human authority.*

For Christians today, as in the first century, this may well involve us in sedition and treason in the face of those who would silence the proclamation of God in Jesus and the reality of his risen life in the present moment.

And this in turn brings us back to seeing and believing.

Our culture and society may not outrightly forbid our Christian faith but there are attitudes and assumptions that increasingly blind people to that greater truth that is four-lettered and whose name is love.

We think that we can 'see' through information, verifiable evidence and fact but that is only to limit the absolute power of truth.

For example, you can't 'see' music and you cannot verify it in any rational way yet it most certainly conveys and mediates truth.

Music is not morally neutral yet its power and its truth lie in mystery and beyond words.

God inhabits music as much as our verbal concepts – and such an example places the Easter truth in a different category from anything that we identify in the filing cabinet of our minds or that of our computers.

Yes, *"Blessed are those who have not seen yet have believed."*

Belief is not an armchair or library-based decision but an impulse and a risk to choose God in the known **and** the unknown.

When I was a postgraduate student I had to visit a professor at Leicester University on the 18th floor of the Attenborough Building.

As well as lifts, the building boasts a device called a paternoster.

It is a seamless sequence of cabins that circulates vertically carrying people up and down (hence its name, 'paternoster').

It carries you on its terms, at its pace and not on yours.

Your only point of control is in getting in and getting out.

It never stops: you have to choose and to act in spite of all the doubts that you might miss the moment and miss the cabin or your exit.

For those prone to doubt and indecision, the paternoster can easily breed timidity and neurosis and the whole enterprise of ascending and descending becomes a nightmare or an impossibility!

But here in a limited but graphic way is the power of God, the resurrection faith, the spiritual energy of love.

You have to risk believing. You have to act. You have to trust. Doubt alone will leave you paralysed, going nowhere.

Yes, truth is a four-lettered word and it spells 'love'.

May this truth of the risen Christ bless us in our voting and bring hope and healing to the Polish people in their grief.

*"Blessed are those who have not seen yet have believed."*

R.S. Thomas put it like this in his poem, *The Answer*

**...There have been times  
when, after long on my knees  
in a cold chancel, a stone has rolled  
from my mind, and I have looked  
in and seen the old questions lie  
folded and in a place  
by themselves, like the piled  
graveclothes of love's risen body.**

**Amen.**