

Power and majesty

On Wednesday this week, we enter the season of Lent. During Lent we follow Jesus' journey to the cross, and in the lead up to his crucifixion, we remember his trial before Pontius Pilate.

Famously, Pilate asked Jesus 'What is truth?' And that question was left hanging.

What is truth, do you think?

Today, truth is – despite the proliferation of information on offer - often difficult to come by. People say they 'speak their own truth' – and it turns out that one person's truth might be a bit different from another person's. The weight of public opinion, can, it seems, overrule truth.

Truth, it turns out, can be quite flexible.

But we, as followers of Jesus, shouldn't accept a flexible truth – because we have the words of Jesus himself, in John's gospel (John 14:6), we read "Jesus answered, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."

We often think about Jesus as 'the way' and about Jesus as 'the life' – but I don't think we often contemplate what Jesus being 'the truth' means for us. Our second reading today, addresses the truth of the message of Jesus – the gospel truth – and how we can know it as authentic and reliable.

At the beginning of this Peter's second letter, he reminds his readers that they had received life and godliness through their knowledge of Jesus (1: 3), and then he encourages them to grow in their knowledge and faith in order to be effective followers of Jesus. But then, as we've heard today, beginning at verse 16, he assures his readers that the message they have received – the gospel, is true, not just Peter's 'own truth,' but truth in the proper (or traditional, if you prefer) sense of being absolutely true – authentic and reliable.

When I say 'his readers', I mean his original readers – who were the churches of Asia Minor – and also us today. What Peter wrote all those years ago, is still for us today – because the truth doesn't change, if it is really truth.

Peter starts by assuring us that the gospel that he has shared is true, because he himself was an eyewitness. Peter was Jesus' disciple, and he begins, "For we did not follow cleverly devised stories when we told you about the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ in power, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty" (1:16)

Peter assures us that the message he proclaimed was not simply a story, but rather the eyewitness accounts of the disciples – including himself. He talks about the power of Jesus and the majesty of Jesus.

Our gospel reading for today came from Matthew chapter 17, and Peter (and Andrew and James and John) were called to follow Jesus in Matthew chapter 4 (Matthew 4:18-20) – and in between chapters 4 and 17, they were witness to Jesus' power in many ways...

Healing every disease and sickness (4:23), healing leprosy (8:3), calming the storm (8:26), casting out demons (8:32), healing a paralysed man (9:2), raising the dead (9:25), giving sight to the blind (9:29), feeding the multitudes (14:18-21, 15:38) and walking on water (14:25).

Peter, and the others, saw it all. Jesus' power over the natural order of things. Power that couldn't be explained away by trickery. Power that was truly supernatural.

But beyond Jesus' power, Peter also shares about Jesus' majesty – as he goes on to explain in the next verse: He received honour and glory from God the Father when the voice came to him from the Majestic Glory, saying, “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.” (1:17)

This is Peter's own account of the event we know as the transfiguration; that we heard of in full in our gospel reading today.

As we heard in that reading, it wasn't just Peter who witnessed it, Matthew, as well as Mark and Luke, tells us that as well as Peter, James and John were present.

The transfiguration is a strange event – certainly a supernatural one – and far beyond anything else the disciples had experienced at that time.

The change in Jesus' appearance – “His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light” (Matthew 17:2b) and the appearance of Moses and Elijah revealed Jesus' majesty – or his 'Majestic Glory', as Peter puts it.

The presence of Moses and Elijah point to Jesus as the fulfilment of the law and prophets.

And then, Matthew tells us, that those three disciples heard a voice from the cloud said, “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!” (Matthew 17:5b)

This is God the Father's testimony to who Jesus is. He is not simply a teacher or a healer or a prophet, but God's own Son.

What the voice from the cloud said might sound familiar, you might remember from near the beginning of Matthew's gospel, the story of Jesus being baptised by John in the Jordan River – and Matthew (3:16-17) tells us: “As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. ¹⁷And a voice from heaven said, “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.”

The same words. And now the voice adds, “Listen to him”.

Peter heard those words, he knows the truth that Jesus is the Son of God. He saw Jesus' power, he saw Jesus' majesty, and then, hearing that voice, he heard God's own testimony.

If we turn to John's first letter, written by another of the disciples present at the Transfiguration, he writes, “We accept human testimony, but God's testimony is greater because it is the testimony of God, which he has given about his Son.”

Peter assures us in verse 18 that, “We ourselves heard this voice that came from heaven when we were with him on the sacred mountain.”

Next, having demonstrated the truth, both through his own witness of Jesus' power and majesty, and through the testimony of God, he turns to truth of the gospel confirmed by the scriptures.

He says, “We also have the prophetic message as something completely reliable, and you will do well to pay attention to it, as to a light shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts.”

The truth of who Jesus is is confirmed in how the Old Testament prophecies are fulfilled and in and by Jesus – in his life, in his ministry and in his death and resurrection. We know that the Old

Testament scriptures can be referred to the Law and the Prophets (which links again to the appearance of Moses and Elijah at the Transfiguration).

I've commented before that sometimes Christians will say something like, "Well, we've got Jesus and the New Testament now, so why would we bother reading the Old?"

Paul writes in his second letter to Timothy (3:16), "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work." When Paul wrote that, he certainly had in mind the Law and the Prophets – the Old Testament.

The 'all scripture' that Paul writes about is the wholeness of scripture – we shouldn't take verses in isolation or out of context. At church council this week, Lawrence gave us a devotion on the longest and shortest verses of the bible – which are Esther 8:9 (with 80 words) and John 11:35 (with 2), which are simply "Jesus wept". But simply hearing the words "Jesus wept" doesn't tell us much – so Lawrence put that verse into context for us: Lazarus had died, and four days later, Jesus got there and comforted Mary and Martha, the sisters of Lazarus who were weeping... and Jesus wept too. We need the context. We need the wholeness of scripture.

What's more, Jesus said, at the beginning of his ministry, "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them." (Matthew 5:17)

The general consensus among those who study such things is that over 300 Old Testament prophecies are fulfilled in or by Jesus. Don't worry, I'm not going to go through all 300 now, just to get us thinking:

From Micah 5:2, "But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose coming forth is from of old, from ancient days."

From Zechariah 9:9, "Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem! Behold, your king is coming to you; righteous and having salvation is he, humble and mounted on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey."

From Amos 8:9 "And on that day, declares the Lord God, I will make the sun go down at noon and darken the earth in broad daylight."

From Psalm 22:6 and 18, "For dogs encompass me; a company of evildoers encircles me; they have pierced my hands and feet." And "They divide my garments among them, and for my clothing they cast lots."

And so many from Isaiah, from 7:15, "Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel."

From 53:3, "He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not."

From 53:7 "He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he opened not his mouth."

These and many, many other prophecies are what Peter tells us confirm the truth of Jesus.

But for us to know the truth of Jesus is not simply collecting the facts about Jesus. In the church we often talk about growing in the knowledge and love of God, and of his Son. The knowledge and the love go together. If we come to know Jesus as the truth, then that truth will change us. In John's gospel we read (8:31-36) "... Jesus said, "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free. [...] everyone who sins is a slave to sin.[...] if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed."

The good news of Jesus is a message that transforms, but for us to be transformed we need to turn to him in faith, and put our trust in him.

Peter ends this chapter by telling us "Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet's own interpretation of things. ²¹ For prophecy never had its origin in the human will, but prophets, though human, spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit."

The scriptures – and for us, not just the Old Testament, but also the New – are not simply faithful people writing about God. They were certainly faithful people writing what they believed was true about God, but Peter is saying that the scriptures are reliable because God was active in the writing process – that's what we mean we say that the scriptures are the 'inspired word of God'. God didn't dictate the scriptures to the writers, and I often reflect that even if you just read a few of the New Testament letters you get an understanding of the characters of the writers: The precision of Paul, the love that John shows, and the urgency and enthusiasm of Peter. The writings reflect the characters of those who we see in the gospels and Acts.

So what do we take from this passage today? I guess we could even ask what is the truth that we take from what Peter writes.

The truth is that we have the assurance of who Jesus is. The Son of God. Powerful and Majestic. As we read the gospel accounts of Jesus' life, it is easy to focus on Jesus' teaching and what moral lessons there are in that teaching for us, but beyond the lessons there is testimony to Jesus power – his supernatural power – and to his majesty – that he is not just a healer or teacher or sacrifice or messiah, but also that he is God the Son, who we should worship and glorify.

Our challenge, as people who know Jesus as the truth, is to continue to grow in our knowledge and love of God, and to allow ourselves to be changed by that knowledge and love. And we can be confident in knowing in the truth of Jesus, even if we're challenged by others.

Friends, Jesus is the way, the truth and the life. And the truth - the truth that is Jesus - will set us free.

Amen