

‘And Jesus said, ‘Beware you are not lead astray’.’ *Luke 21:8.*

Over in Britain they are now in the midst of a General Election Campaign. In the United States, quite apart from attempts to impeach the President, they too are gearing up for their elections this time next year. The outcomes of both of those campaigns are likely to have ramifications for years to come and an impact beyond the national boundaries of either of these countries.

These campaigns are going to be hard fought, which could be seen as code for bitter and ill tempered. The electorate is already being bombarded with promises and half-promises, truths and half truths and down right lies, be they in the form of distorted facts, distorted videos or whatever.

It was said by an American Senator as World War I drew to a close, that the first casualty of war is truth. With the advent of social media platforms, and the ability they give the combatants to completely bypass traditional media platforms; all this has had its impact on modern warfare and the reporting of modern warfare. Terrorist attacks, such as that on the Mosque in New Zealand, can be broadcast live on platforms such as Facebook. Extremist groups, be they far right or far left, can post racist, sectarian, homophobic, islamophobic material unchallenged – and as a consequence innocents can, and indeed have, suffered.

In our Gospel reading, we find Jesus and the disciples in Jerusalem. At that time Jerusalem was awash with expectation, with rumours. Periodically Messianic figures appeared with promises of God’s immediate return, the

overthrow of the Roman oppressor and the establishment of God's Kingdom on earth.

‘And Jesus said, ‘Beware you are not lead astray’.’

Whether we are talking about 1<sup>st</sup> century Jerusalem and its Messianic speculation or 21<sup>st</sup> century political campaigns, both raise issues of truth, discernment of truth and the importance of standing firm for truth.

In John's Gospel we read, as Jesus stood before Pilate, as the mob outside demanded his death, as Pilate sought to understand who was this strange character brought before him, he asks

“So you are a king?” Jesus answered, “You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.” Pilate asked him, “What is truth?” *John 18:37,38*

What is truth? That is a question not just for a cynical Roman governor, it is a question for all time. It is a question for us. What is truth? How do we separate truth from rumour, from inuendo, from falsehood, from deceit?

I suppose first of all, we need to be prepared to think for ourselves. We place a great emphasis on conscience, on freedom of conscience. But conscience is more than just gut reaction, more than just what my friends think. We have a duty to educate our conscience in reading, in reflection, in prayer. I often go back to a definition of prayer given to me when I was starting out in ministry by the late Billy Wynne, one time Vicar of St Ann's in Dublin, founder of

Samaritans in Ireland. ‘I’ve more and more come to see prayer in terms of thinking things through before God.’

As I thought on that this week, I found myself, as I do more and more these days, going to the Psalms, and references to truth.

Lead me in your truth, and teach me,  
for you are the God of my salvation;  
for you I wait all day long. *Psalm 25:5*

You desire truth in the inward being;  
therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart. *Ps 51:6*

Teach me your way, O Lord,  
that I may walk in your truth;  
give me an undivided heart to revere your name. *Ps 86:11*

In the Psalms I encounter a God who accompanies me through life; with me as I wrestle with problems, with me as I make mistakes in my judgement, calling me back to his side. This is reflected in Jesus’ promise to his disciples in the Upper Room on the night before he died. They will not be cast adrift, they will not be alone.

And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you. *John 14:16,17*

What is truth? We have thought of the importance of taking the trouble to think for ourselves; the importance of conscience, of educating our conscience, of thinking things through before God. With this process of search, which by definition is an ongoing process, comes a necessary humility. I seek the truth but I do not pretend to fully grasp the truth. So my convictions, even my strongest convictions, are expressed with humility.

Of course the place of truth, of standing up for truth is not always a comfortable place to be. Going back to Jesus before Pilate.

“You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.”

This is the vocation of the Church, the Body of Christ, to testify to the truth, to speak truth to power, to vested interests, to public opinion. It is not the role of the Church to get involved in politics, but it is the role of the Church to speak to politics, to address issues of justice, of reconciliation in our society. As Christians, as members of the body politic, we play our part in seeking truth, thinking through issues in the light of our Christian conviction and participating as citizens and as Christians in the political process.

To go back to the Psalms:

Teach me your way, O Lord,  
that I may walk in your truth; *Ps 86:11*