

Epiphany 2 2020 – Thou Shalt Not Bear False Witness Against Thy Neighbour

Isaiah 49 vv 1-7, Psalm 49, I Corinthians 1 vv 1-9, John 1 vv 29-42

We have at last reached the ninth commandment, *Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbour*. The meaning is obvious enough and it does not take much sanctified imagination to extend it to a general prohibition against lying. We could debate whether there are circumstances in which it might be right to tell a lie – for example if the Gestapo were to ask you where the Jewish children are hiding – but, normally, we would all agree, we should tell the truth. *Tell the truth and shame the devil*.

Truth is, however, much more fundamental than that. There is more to being a person of integrity – a Christian – than avoiding telling lies. Truth is of the nature of God.

Last week we were talking about martyrdom. *Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends*. That is what Jesus did for us. We are His friends because He has made us His friends. Many Christians, many of Jesus' friends have laid down their lives for Him – *the noble army of martyrs*. Martyr is, of course, the Greek word for witness. Jesus said to His apostles – and to us through them – *ye are my witnesses*. He also said, *Take up thy cross and follow me*. There is no greater witness for Christ than to lay down your life for Him. Hence the saying, *The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church*. The Church grows precisely because outsiders see that this faith is so marvellous that it is worth dying for. It is a minority – though a substantial minority – of Christians who are called to lay down their lives for their faith, but, as we said last week, no lesser Christian commitment is required of those of us who are not called to be martyrs than is expected of those who are. *If anyone wishes to come after me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross daily and follow me*. So we say when we have commemorated Christ's Death in Holy Communion, *We offer you our souls and bodies to be a living sacrifice*. To bear witness to the Truth is to commit one's entire being to Him in perfect honesty and complete integrity. It is not merely about not telling lies; It is to pray for the grace to do what St Paul tells Christians to do in Romans 12¹: *And here we offer and present unto thee, O Lord, ourselves, our souls and bodies, to be a reasonable, holy, and lively sacrifice unto thee*.

When Christ stood before Pontius Pilate on trial for His life, the Roman governor asked Jesus, *What is truth?* The answer stood before Him. Jesus is the Way, the Truth and the Life.

In the Old Testament, God is consistently true to His people. God is faithful. He is trustworthy. *For the Lord is gracious, his mercy is everlasting : and his truth endureth from generation to generation*. It is of the very nature of God to be true. God is faithful and His people are called to be faithful and true. To be unfaithful to God is to commit adultery against Him because the Church is the Bride of Christ. The word *Amen* comes from the Hebrew for truth, for faithfulness, for steadfastness. God is true, faithful, steadfast, completely reliable. Our response to Him and to His love for us is to gaze into His wonderful face and to be transformed into His likeness, to become every day ever more like Him - people of truth, faith, steadfastness and dependability. Any image of God is false except for Jesus *Who is the image of the invisible God*, our teacher, our example, that we might be like Him. Worship God alone because you will become what you worship. Bear your Christian name, live your Christian life, in such a way that it brings honour to the Name of God, *that*

holy name by which ye are called. There remaineth therefore a rest for the people of God. We are His children. Let us honour our divine Parent by walking worthy of Him.

Jesus said, *If ye continue in my word, then are ye my disciples indeed; And ye shall know the truth and the truth shall set you free.* In contrast, He says, *the devil is a liar and the father of it.* Because the devil is the father of lies, he is a murderer from the beginning. Cain killed Abel after Satan had successfully deceived Eve and Adam in the Garden of Eden.

In the Old Testament all the gods which men worship apart from the LORD, the one true God, are false. They are lies. They are vanity. They are nothing. *They that make them are like unto them: and so are all such as put their trust in them.*

Covetousness is idolatry. To covet worldly things, to trust in false gods, is to worship a lie. Only Jesus is the true image of God. He is the Way, the Truth and the Life. Nothing less than Jesus can satisfy our most profound need.

Both Jesus and His servant James are adamant that Christians should never need to swear an oath to anything. True Christians are people of truth and they always speak the truth. Jesus says, *Again, ye have heard that it hath been said by them of old time, Thou shalt not forswear thyself, but shalt perform unto the Lord thine oaths: But I say unto you, Swear not at all; neither by heaven; for it is God's throne: Nor by the earth; for it is his footstool: neither by Jerusalem; for it is the city of the great King. Neither shalt thou swear by thy head, because thou canst not make one hair white or black. But let your communication be, Yea, yea; Nay, nay: for whatsoever is more than these cometh of evil.* And James writes, *But above all things, my brethren, swear not, neither by heaven, neither by the earth, neither by any other oath: but let your yea be yea; and your nay, nay; lest ye fall into condemnation.*

There is much more to the ninth commandment than avoiding telling lies. A true Christian is one who, in the words of S John, *walketh in the truth.* Jesus Christ is the Way, the Truth and the Life. *God is a Spirit: and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth.*