

'Some Sadducees came and asked Jesus a question'(Luke 20, Remembrance Sunday 2019)

The setting of today's reading is the Temple. Jesus has just cleansed the Temple. He is in trouble. Who does he think he is? He has signed his own death warrant. The only question is, how is it going to play out? But I want to begin today with a reflection about lying. I wonder whether you agree that the Sadducees are lying to Jesus. They are taking a serious disputed question, 'Is there life after death', with the sole aim of catching him out. The Pharisees have the moment before asked him if we should pay taxes to the occupying emperor, Caesar. If he answers wrongly, he is done for. The questioners don't care about the question. They do care about nailing Jesus.

Do you agree that these types of questions can usefully be placed under the category of lying?

In this build up to a general election, we are being systematically lied to. We all know that. It's hardly a controversial thing to say. The best liars are going to be the likely winners. One of the forms lying takes is slogans. Mrs May's slogan, 'Brexit means Brexit' and Mr Johnson's slogan, 'Get Brexit done', might become truthful if they were more hesitant, and had subheadings like, 'How can Brexit get done in such a way that will not stir up war again in Ireland?' But we all know that such a complicated question would spoil the effect of the slogan.

The First World War was a war of lies much more than was the Second World War. We probably did have to fight the Germans in 1914, but we did not have to say that God was on our side, as was preached from pulpits up and down the country, most notably by the very popular and jingoistic Bishop of London, Arthur Winnington- Ingram. In 1939, 1940 and throughout the war, we did what we had to do. It was a modest war. We were lied to less than in the first war.

The question is, what do lies do to us, the ordinary people? One result of the lies of 1914-18, was to turn people off the Church of England. The soldiers in the trenches had a haunting sense of the presence of Christ down there with them, but not as mediated by the clergy, who were instructed to stay well behind the lines. The padres who disobeyed this instruction are still remembered today, like Woodbine Willie and Tubby Clayton. Post 1918 was a period when many people deserted the churches.

And what do lies do to us, the electors of Britain in 2019? Do they harden us, make us cynical? But aren't we already well involved in other untruths available to us every moment of the day on our smart phones, on Facebook and Twitter? Don't we too, in our own ways, live by slogans?

I believe that to preach the gospel of Jesus, is to refuse the world of slogans, including the slogans that the Church puts out.

I want to end with a question about the gospel. Jesus constantly throughout his life brought to the surface deep seated lies which even if they weren't spoken, poisoned everyone's lives, especially the lives of the most vulnerable. But who was Jesus against? Was he against Pilate? Was he against King Herod? The priests, the Pharisees and Sadducees? These were

all the people that revolutionary types thought Jesus was against, the authorities he appeared to be against right until the end. But he wasn't against them, only against how they were behaving. It was his extraordinary bringing everything to conflict and then doing nothing except allowing himself to be killed which is so perplexing.

So, who was he against? The answer is so disappointing that it may have been why Judas lost faith in him.

The answer is, he was against Satan. Satan was his word for what he was against. But we don't even believe in Satan!! Well this is what Satan is – that spiritual being who lives in and among us, who prefers cruelty to mercy, malicious gossip to kindness; who takes a slight momentary pleasure when we learn of the misfortune of another.

Satan is the father of the lie, and we all know him, whatever our philosophical beliefs are, whether we are politicians or private citizens. And Jesus came to cleanse the temple of our hearts so that they become places of gratitude, kindness, mercy and good works. We, temples of the Holy Spirit

On Remembrance Sunday, in a world where we know that even that small people like us contribute to the stirring up of new wars, at home, at work, and within and between nations, one of the prophetic contributions of the Christian is to reject the world of slogans, the language of the Father of Lies, Satan.

Telling the truth is difficult. Sometimes it involves admitting that we don't know what the truth is. But the people who deeply live by the truth and not by the lie are space of freedom and blessing for others. And they can be found in most, but perhaps not all, political parties, most churches, most families. Are they who we are? Spaces of safely and freedom for others? Amen.

Robert Wiggs