26 August 2018: Said Matins with Hymns
The Thirteenth Sunday after Trinity

Genesis 5: 1–4, 6: 9–14, 22; 1 John 4: 1–6

The Venerable Martin Gorick, Archdeacon of Oxford

‘The two most difficult things to get straight in life are love and God. More often than not the mess people make of their lives can be traced to failure or stupidity or meanness in one or both of these areas.’

So says Eugene Peterson in his introduction to the letters of John in the bible. He goes on,

‘The basic and biblical conviction is that love and God are intricately related. If we want to deal with God the right way, we have to learn to love the right way. If we want to learn to love the right way, we have to deal with God the right way. God and love cannot be separated.’

‘John’s three letters provide wonderfully explicit direction in how this works.’ And we have a passage from the first letter of John set for us today. ‘Jesus the Messiah is the focus. For John it is Jesus who provides the full and true understanding of God; Jesus shows us the mature working out of love. In Jesus God and love are linked accurately, intricately and indissolubly.’

In recent times we’ve heard a lot about Fake News. Donald Trump is often the purveyor of tweets and stories that at the very least twist the truth to suit his aims. But if any journalist or politician dares to attack him, he is quick to deny the story, writing FAKE NEWS in capital letters in his twitter post. How do we tell real news from fake news? Was the Chancellor giving a truthful warning about the dire effects of a no deal Brexit this week? Or was this just another round of Project Fear, the phrase Brexiter use for fake news. How do we tell truth from falsehood? It’s become a key issue for all of us in our public life, in our life together. My generation has always been distrustful of truth claims. We are trained to say, on the one hand this, but on the other hand that. That all truth is relative, as it depends on point of view. Religious views, political views are private and relative. If they work for you, that’s all that counts. Do your own thing, go your own
way, find your own truth. Relationships too are not absolute. That marriage is true... as long as it lasts. Into this world comes the unfiltered news world of the internet, where anything goes, and then sophisticated programmes that start sending you personally tailored adverts that will chime with your desires, and then new stories that will feed off your prejudices and point you to the kind of leaders that will set it to rights.

Pilate’s question, ‘What is Truth’, has never been more appropriate. Learning to test the stories, test the voices and influences that come at us from every side, finding trustworthy journalists, teachers and friends who can help us with this. This is now the stuff of life.

Our passage from John shows their own version of this. Inspiring, charismatic leaders were trying to take the early church away from its roots. Trying to lead it in a direction that would chime more easily with the prevailing pagan culture of its day. To an esoteric world of spiritual practice, where techniques and philosophy could transport the believer into an elevated world of the spirit. A Gnostic vision where secret knowledge and initiation would be granted to the chosen few. The writer of John thought this was basically Fake News. It was taking believers away from those twin poles of faith, God and Love. As we heard in our first reading from Genesis, God formed us from the earth. Male and female, we are made us God’s own likeness. Adam from Adamah. Humans from Humus. We are Children of Earth and should never forget it. No less than the trees and the stars we have a right to be here.

The Gnostics objected to the earthiness of Christianity. To the messy humanity of Jesus. To his flesh and blood existence. The spiritual bits they loved, that was the bit that worked for them. Can’t we just ditch the rest? John is clear that we can’t. ‘Every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God.’ That is the Jesus of eternity and of history. That is the flesh and blood Jesus who the disciples ‘had seen with their eyes and touched with their hands’, as John has said at the start of this letter. Christianity is rooted in a real person, who lived, died and rose again. It needs to stay rooted in him.

Taken in isolation this passage can make the writer seem dangerously arrogant. ‘Whoever knows God listens to us, and whoever is not from God does not listen to us.’ On its own that would be the worst and the weakest kind of truth test. Like the person who says this is true, and if you don’t believe me you must be a liar, or someone of no faith, or whatever. But read on in John and he gives us other tests. The next verse, 7, says,
‘Beloved let us love one another, because love comes from God. Whoever does not love does not love God because God is love.’

In other words, love and integrity of life will reveal where truth lies, just as surely as what a person says with their mouths or proclaims in their tweets.

In Jesus Christ time and eternity, humanity and divinity came together. Jesus reveals to us a human being fully alive, child of earth and citizen of heaven. This we proclaim with our lips and in our creeds. But, John says, unless we also proclaim that in our daily lives out there, in our words, and dealings, and actions, and everyday decisions. Unless we proclaim it in lives of integrity, in lives of disciplined love, in commandments inspired lives. Then our pious words have no meaning, no substance.

To end where we began.

The two most difficult things to get straight in life are love and God.

We need to keep them together.