

Trust in God

Jeremiah 17. 5, 7 / 1 John 1 1-13 / Acts 4.32-35 / John 20.19-31

In today's reading from Jeremiah he divides people into two lots of people who trust – those who trust mere mortals, and those who trust in the Lord. So let's muse for a few minutes about 'trust'. Think about the sinking of the Titanic. She was regarded as being unsinkable, and therefore she didn't carry enough lifeboats to cater for all the passengers and crew. So 1514 of the 2,218 on board died. They shouldn't have trusted the so-called experts in ship design. There might have been fewer deaths if the radio operator on the nearest ship hadn't failed to pick up the distress call – that was because he was asleep at his post. They shouldn't have trusted people to be alert.

You often hear people saying 'You can't trust anyone these days'. I am not sure that is a fair statement. I don't think there have ever been days when everyone was trustworthy. Just inside my last church in Surrey is wonderful chest which dates from about 1250. It has three locks, with three different keys (which sadly the church doesn't have any more). The reason for three locks was that way back then, people didn't trust each other. It needed three different people with the three different keys to open it. No-one could take things on their own. It was the c13th century equivalent of a pin number – and probably rather more reliable.

In the Acts of the Apostles we learn that in those first days of the Christian community, there was a kind of religious communism, with everyone owning everything in common. They clearly trusted the Apostles to deal honestly with the money raised. But a couple called Ananias and Sapphira cheated the system, with dire consequences for themselves. Trust was tested right from the beginning.

In the first letter of John he writes to people who have been affected by some heretical Christians, and he is trying to make clear what the real truth is. Why should they trust him rather than these false teachers? He lays it out quite clearly; when he talks about Jesus he is talking about what he has heard, what he has seen with his own eyes and looked at, what he has touched with his own hands. He can be trusted because he is passing on things at first hand, not some twisted version that has changed like Chinese whispers – you know the kind of thing: the classic was 'send reinforcements we're going to advance' being transmuted into 'Send three and fourpence, we're going to a dance.' With John, you heard it from the horse's mouth. He was to be trusted therefore.

And then there is that Gospel story about a man who couldn't trust his best friends. The disciples were a close-knit group, who had stuck together through thick and thin – at least up to the time Jesus was arrested. Surely they would trust each other. But when the other ten tell Thomas they have seen Jesus, he won't have any of it. He simply doesn't trust them.

So who can we trust? Who in fact *do* we trust? People have to earn the label of being trustworthy. It takes a long time for that to be established, but it only takes a moment for it to be destroyed.

Trustworthiness is a very delicate flower. George MacDonald said that to be trustworthy is a greater compliment than to be loved. He had a point.

In religious terms, people find themselves putting their trust in things like the Bible and the Church. Both of those are laudable, but I think need to be taken with a pinch of salt. To say you put your trust in the Bible presumes various things. Just to take two: firstly it assumes that you have an accurate translation. Of course there have been the gross mistranslations, like the Adulterer's Bible in 1631, where the royal printers missed out just one word in Exodus 20.14 which therefore read 'Thou shalt commit adultery'. But other more accurate translations nonetheless can be misleading, because they don't accurately put into our language what the original writer intended. The older the translation you use, the more likely that is to be an issue. And secondly it presumes that you have a depth of knowledge of the Bible, and not just random verses that you happen to know. Whole edifices of very strange beliefs have been built on taking words from the Bible out of context. So we have trustworthy thing, but it has to be used properly, or its trustworthiness disappears into thin air.

Or take the church. We are the guardians of Christian tradition. But some Christian traditions are not necessarily the truth. The church has taught people at various times things that today we would see as laughable. And no doubt in a few hundred years, Christians will say the same about things we think are right today. The Church ought to be trustworthy, but you can't guarantee it. The three-legged stool on which the Church of England sits is the foundational one of scripture, but tested and balanced by reason and tradition. Together they should make for a greater sense of trustworthiness than they would separately.

In the end of the day, the only totally trustworthiness must belong to God. As it says in Proverbs 3 'Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not rely on your own insight.' That is easily said, and far from easily done. Again let's go back to how Thomas finds he can't trust. But he is not condemned by Jesus for that. Honest doubt is not a sin. In fact it can be a positive thing. I warm to what Tennyson wrote in 'In Memoriam: 'There lives more faith in honest doubt, Believe me, than in half the creeds. '

Blind faith is not strong faith. Strong faith comes from facing questions, accepting doubts and working with them until there is light instead of darkness, or half-darkness. That is what happened to Thomas, and what can happen to us when we are, in John Robinson's famous words 'Honest to God.' Total trust in God is what we all aim for. But we need to accept, as I believe God does, that we can't always have it. Nonetheless, it is the gold standard of faith.

So let me end with a hymn rarely sung today. It was written by a Scot, Norman Macleod, in the mid c.19th, and set to a rousing tune by no less than Sir Arthur Sullivan. It takes us back to whom we can trust, and who we can't and sets out that gold standard clearly for us to aim at.

Courage, brother! do not stumble, though thy path be dark as night;
there's a star to guide the humble; 'Trust in God, and do the right.'
Let the road be long and dreary, and its ending out of sight;
foot it bravely-strong or weary;'Trust in God, trust in God,
trust in God, and do the right.'

Perish policy and cunning, perish all that fears the light,
whether losing, whether winning, 'Trust in God, and do the right.'
Trust no forms of guilty passion, fiends can look like angels bright:
Trust no custom, school, or fashion, 'Trust in God, trust in God,
trust in God, and do the right.'

Trust no party, sect, or faction, trust no leaders in the fight,
but in every word and action 'Trust in God, and do the right.'
Some will hate thee, some will love thee, some will flatter, some will slight;
cease from man, and look above thee, 'Trust in God, trust in God,
trust in God, and do the right.'

Simple rule and safest guiding, inward peace and inward light,
star upon our path abiding,'Trust in God, and do the right.'
Courage, brother! do not stumble, though thy path be dark as night;
there's a star to guide the humble;'Trust in God, trust in God,
trust in God, and do the right.'